

God's Radar Short Guide

God's Radar by Fran Arrick

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Overview

God's Radar is a novel about the changes that affect the life of a teenage girl when her parents join a strict, fundamentalist church. However, this is not a book about religion itself, or its different aspects. It deals with the subtle yet successful efforts of a church to capture and change the ideas, attitudes, and eventually the entire life of its members. Since family values have become a political as well as a religious issue, this novel is very timely and topical, and the reader gains an insight into the mindset and workings of organized fundamental religion and control fundamentalist churches exercise over their members. Arrick does not support or condemn the Stafford Hill Baptist Church, or Roxie's parents who long for a simple time and simple faith in a complicated world. Rather, the final judgment of whether fifteen-year-old Roxie is right in joining her family, or wrong by betraying her rebellious boyfriend, is left to the reader.

In spite of the obvious underlying theme, Fran Arrick has created much more than just a "topical" novel—her characters are flesh and blood, and the story line keeps the reader interested.

About the Author

Fran Arrick is the pseudonym of an unidentified author who has written a number of novels for young adults. Most deal with sensitive subjects such as AIDS, gun control, teen suicide and anti-Semitism. *Steffie Can't Come Out to Play*, *Tunnel Vision*, and *Cod's Radar* are all American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults.



Setting

The story takes place in a small southern town. Roxie's father has just been transferred there from New York, and while Roxie is not happy about the move, her parents welcome the wholesome atmosphere of the small town, and the friendliness of their new neighbors. Roxie's mother finds new interests by getting involved in the church activities of Mrs. Preger next door, but Roxie is bored and longs for her friends back home. What is worse, her parents suddenly develop strange ideas about her friends she is beginning to make in school, the dates she is allowed to have, and the school she attends. Against her wishes, she is enrolled in the Stafford Hill Academy, a church-associated private school with very strict rules: Movies and rock music are sinful, and girls are not allowed to date.

Social Sensitivity

As in most of this author's novels, the topic is sensitive. Fundamentalist religion is considered by many people to be a positive moral force; indeed, if it were not for the overall tone, the story could be read as an endorsement of clean Christian living and the beneficial effects of a strict moral upbringing and family code. The author never openly criticizes the good people of the Stafford Hill church, although some of the characters of the novel do. Yet these latter figures are rebels like Jarrell and Glenna who by example might actually serve to reinforce the teachings of their elders about worldly influences.

Only the inevitable step-by-step progression of the Cable family towards submitting, and the subtle but relentless psychological pressure that sets the tone for the novel, are indicators of the author's own position. And when Roxie turns her back on Jarrell and joins her family on their trip to church, the process seems to have come to its inevitable conclusion.

Literary Qualities

As in any novel dealing with specific contemporary issues, the theme is overt, but the author avoids being didactic by not creating any stereotypes.

Dr. Caraman is probably the closest to one, being the charismatic leader, but even he had enough personality to avoid being merely a one-dimensional preacher. The Preger family, Joe, Cynthia, and Bess, the neighbors who first befriend Roxie, Frank, and Marian are ordinary, likable people, and as the story progresses, the reader is given a glimpse at their reason for searching for a safer life through religion. Even Jarrell, the impatient, restless rebel who tries to break out of the confines of his strict upbringing, reveals the reason for his anger.

Roxie is the most complex character.

She seems to see both sides of the religious issue and hesitates to commit herself fully to the teachings of Stafford Hill. The plot gradually and rather effectively builds up to a climax as Roxie sees her parents beginning to change more and more in their lifestyle and values. The climax is reached when one of the young people, possibly Jarrell, has committed a prank, and Roxie suddenly must make a choice which has been building up throughout the story—will she join her parents or escape with Jarrell? In an open-ended but forceful conclusion, Roxie gives up her struggle for independence. "There was a flash of a second in which she saw herself tearing down the walk, running as fast as she could, running to make up the time she'd lost. But she followed her father towards the open car door."

Generally, the novel is realistic and the style straightforward, but the author uses one symbol to underscore the questionable nature of the church's teachings: the radio-television tower.

This structure is the first thing the Cables notice on their arrival, and it becomes an emblem of the contradictions that exist within a church which preaches simplicity and a turning away from the sinfulness of the modern world, and yet uses the most modern technology to achieve its own purpose.

This paradox also furnishes the underlying idea for the ironic title of the book.



Themes and Characters

The characters in the book may be grouped into those who are ordinary and not "saved," and those who belong to the Stafford Hill Baptist Church community. At first, Roxie's family is part of the former group. There is Francis, Roxie's father, a businessman from Syracuse, New York who is easygoing, not very strict with his two daughters, and not particularly interested in religious or community matters. Marian, his wife, is somewhat bored and lost at home, now that one of her daughters has gone to college and the other one is in high school. She is looking for a purpose, and welcomes it when her neighbor, Mrs. Preger, invites her to participate in church functions and charities. And there is the main character, Roxie, a normal teenager who likes rock music, dances, and has friends from school. She is a good student and has never given her parents cause to worry. She is therefore surprised when her dating and friends suddenly come under scrutiny, and is a bit resentful when her parents put certain curbs on her social life. When they enroll her in the Stafford Hill Academy, she is angry but allows herself to join the many youth activities of her new classmates. She enjoys working with them, even though they are more "religious" than she.

Among the members of the Stafford Hill church, Roxie's neighbors, the Pregers, are the most important to the story, because they introduce her parents into the church. Bess, their daughter, befriends Roxie, trying her best to convert her. They seem to be the ideal Christian family, although Roxie discovers that not all is well behind the cheerful family facade. The most famous member of the Stafford Hill church is Dr. Caraman, a charismatic TV preacher and evangelist. Roxie's mother falls totally under his spell, and even skeptical Roxie is impressed by him.

The only member who does not fit into the smooth framework of the church is sixteen-year-old Jarrell, a rebel to whom Roxie is strongly attracted. Jarrell denounces the rules and practices of the school and church as hypocrisy, and he longs to get away.

The theme of the novel develops gradually. There is the longing of people to return to order, simplicity, and faith in an increasingly complex and disturbing world. Roxie's parents are happy in the thought that their daughter will not be drawn to drugs or promiscuity while she attends the academy. Marian enjoys immersing herself in the many activities that fill her otherwise empty days. The author paints a sympathetic picture of the members of the Baptist congregation—they are kind, pious, and charitable, and value family and home. Dr. Caraman is friendly and concerned about everyone in spite of his national fame. And yet the novel conveys a sense of unease.

There are hints of problems: There is Glenna, Roxie's older, college-bound sister who warns her, there is the rebellious Jarrell, but most of all, there is the almost insidious pressure that is exerted on the members, and especially Roxie and her parents, to submit and conform. Without denouncing anyone, the author manages to give the story an almost sinister feeling, as step by step, Roxie and her family are drawn closer and closer into the congregation. The coercion is not as obvious as it would be in a religious cult, but it is there nonetheless.



Topics for Discussion

1. The very first sentence of the novel supplies a description of the radio-television transmission tower that belongs to the Stafford Hill Church.

What is its significance, and why is the novel titled *God's Radar*? What are the special qualities of radar, and who uses it most often? Is the title symbolic?

2. The "conversion" of the Cable family takes a number of steps, each designed to bring them closer into the church, and at the same time, gradually change their lifestyle. What are some significant steps, and what does each accomplish?

3. What are Frank and Marian's first reactions to Dr. Caraman's sermon?

What attracts them? They are sophisticated city people, and laugh at some of the practices, yet both agree that they were not bored. Why?

4. At first, Roxie finds the girls from the academy somewhat silly, and their talk about religion embarrassing. Yet like her parents, she is gradually attracted to them. What are the means by which the church and school start winning her over? Is she aware of what is happening to her?

5. The goals and purposes of the Stafford Hill church—clean living, family values, charity—are all positive, yet in the context of the novel they take on a sinister undertone. How does the author suggest that they may just be a facade hiding some dark secrets?

6. Even though the Stafford Hill community stresses the value of the family, the relationship between Roxie and her parents worsens as they become more involved in the church.

Why do they suddenly distrust their daughter who had always been a wellbehaved girl? Is this distrust a symptom of the changes that are happening in their lives? Why?

7. When Roxie starts meeting with Jarrell, she decides to keep their friendship a secret from her classmates. She also keeps secrets from her parents.

"Try as she might, Roxie could not shake the feeling of guilt. In her heart she felt that her actions were in no way sinful. A year before, she would have told her parents not only about going to a party, but about having drunk too much. . . Now she couldn't tell them anything." What is happening to Roxie? Why does she suddenly feel guilty, and what is the reason for her guilt and secrecy?

8. What does Roxie's decision to go to church with her parents instead of running away with Jarrell mean? For her, it is a turning point, but the author ends the story here. Why? What do you think will happen to Roxie now? Is the ending happy or sad?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Discuss what is meant by religious fundamentalism? What is its history and philosophy? What does the term "moral majority" mean?
2. Although the writer does not say it directly, the novel is critical of certain religious groups and their ideas.

Do you think the author is fair in her portrayal of fundamental religious ideas?

3. Make a list of all the positive and another of all the negative things about the Stafford Hill church. How do they compare? What qualities are missing?

For Further Reference

"Fran Arrick." In *The Best in Children's Books*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979-1984: 26. A brief summary and review of the novel.

"God's Radar." In *Junior High School Library Catalogue*. 4th ed. New York: H. Williams, 1984. p. 46. This is a short critical review of the novel.

Woolridge, C. Nordhielm. "God's Radar." *School Library Journal* 29 (August 1983): 72. This is a concise but interesting evaluation of both the strong and weak points of the novel.

Zoiring, Stephanie. "God's Radar." In *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol.

30. Detroit: Gale Research, 1984: 19.

A brief critical evaluation of the novel.

Related Titles

What I Really Think of You by M. E. Kerr (1982) explores the feelings and experiences of two young people, Opal Ringer, the daughter of an impoverished Fundamentalist preacher, and Jesse Pegler, the son of an affluent television minister. Both Opal and Jesse are identified as PKs. In Opal's opinion, this is their one common characteristic. The fact is that Opal and Jesse share many other commonalities, many of which are not unique to PKs. Many young people, regardless of their religious beliefs or family affiliations experience difficulties related to family relationships, peer relationships, sibling rivalry, and frustrations of their hopes and aspirations.



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