

Him She Loves? Short Guide

Him She Loves? by M. E. Kerr (Marijane Meaker)

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Overview

Him She Loves? should be read mostly for enjoyment—the clever dialogue, the jokes, and the improbable story. It can also be enjoyed as a teen love story in which the boy wins the father and loses the girl. There are some important issues in the story at times, such as Al Kiss's attitude toward females and prejudices held by Jews and Germans.



About the Author

Marijane Meaker, whose pen name is M. E. Kerr, was born May 27, 1927, in Auburn, New York. A dominant influence in her life was her father, Ellis, whose initials were the foundation for one of her pseudonyms, Eric Ranthram McKay. He was an extremely strict father who took his children to the basement and whipped them with a rope for misconduct, and he had strict rules on dating. One boyfriend called him Attila the Hun. She used the term "battered child" to describe herself because of the rage and violence her father displayed; nevertheless, he was a positive influence in her life. The Meaker home was filled with books, and her father was always researching something.

He owned a mayonnaise factory which, during World War II, dehydrated onions for the armed forces.

Different from other fathers, he wore a beret and rode a bicycle through town.

Her mother was extremely interested in gossip and what was going on in other people's lives, which may have influenced the careful observation of other people which can be seen in Kerr's books. Her mother pushed her to do socially acceptable things like ballroom dancing. She did not adjust well to her daughter's becoming a writer or to the fact that she did not marry and produce grandchildren.

She spent a turbulent childhood.

Racial prejudice was a part of her early environment. World War II and her life in boarding school further fragmented the family. Her older brother attended military school and became an ensign in a torpedo bomber squad during the war. She was twelve years old when her younger brother was born. She felt that all the attention went to her two brothers. Therefore, she never used them as bases for characters in a book which might be her "way of crossing them out."

The best source of information about M. E. Kerr is her autobiographical book, *Me Me Me Me Me: Not a Novel*. By telling about the people who were important in her life, she reveals the story of her own life. Many people in her past were made into characters in her stories. She just brought them into more modern times: knew I could interest today's kids in yesterday's kids, because they're the same kids. I probably wouldn't set a novel in 1941, but I wouldn't hesitate to write about a kid from the forties, and make him or her a kid in the eighties. . .

What's going on in the world is secondary to what's going on in high school, for in those vulnerable teen years high school is the world. There, a kid begins to get the first real feelings of being on his/her own, there, the idea of winning and losing starts taking shape, of being in or out, part of the crowd, or an outsider



There, adults other than parents become role models or enemies or objects of ridicule And with all that going on, there are changes going on at home, as kids Him She Loves?

begin to see things they hadn't noticed before: the way their parents get along, or don't, the way their own brothers and sisters are coping.

In her autobiography she calls herself a bad kid. At Stuart Hall she was "disruptive." She cut the bell rope, put clear nail polish on the seniors' soap, put Alka-Seltzer in the inkwells, organized an atheists' club that sang the hymns in chapel backward, and joined the Communist Party. Eventually, she was expelled for throwing darts at pictures of the teachers, but her parents were able to get her back in school so that she could graduate. *Is That You, Miss Blue?* came from her boarding school experience.

Eventually, she went on to Vermont Junior College and the University of Missouri. She worked as a telephone operator, an assistant file clerk for the publishing company D. P. Dutton, and as a free-lance writer. She taught writing at Commercial Manhattan Central High. Besides using the name M. E. Kerr, which is a play on her own name, she has written adult and adventure books under different names such as M. J. Meaker, Ann Aldrich, and Vin Packer. She now lives in East Hampton, New York.

Setting

As the story begins, the Schiller family has just moved to the tip of Long Island to set up a German restaurant.

Peter Schiller, the father, had recently been shot and killed in a hold-up. Most of the action takes place in the restaurant where Henry helps his two older brothers, at school where he is humiliated by the sadistic Mr. Peddle in Health and Human Behavior Class, and at Valerie Kissenwiser's home.



Social Sensitivity

This book deals with assumptions that create prejudice. Jody tells Henry Him She Loves?

that the way to make an impression on her father is to tell him he wants to become something impressive like a physicist or an architect. When she finds that Henry has not made a decision, she says, "Jewish boys always know what they want to be when they are as old as you."

Given the time that has passed since the end of World War II and the fact that these teen-agers were not even alive at that time, the prejudice seems overdone in a 1984 book. When Henry goes to pick up Lena, her father calls him Adolph and shouts "Heil!"

He's German. He's got Deutschland uber Alles' coming out of his brain on a secret wavelength, and I smell sauerkraut oozing out of his pores, and I see swastikas in his eyes. He's Bache, honeybunch.

This novel provides an opportunity for discussion and possible change of attitudes.



Literary Qualities

This is a first-person narrative by Henry Schiller. He tells about his love affair with Valerie and how he had to win over her father. In the process, Al Kiss becomes the most developed character. Because he is a professional comedian, the book is filled with many short jokes; however, since he is older and has learned from experience, he gives Henry advice such as "a fool takes two steps where a wise man takes none."

Direct quotations are used throughout. Incidental conversation is included. Sometimes it is teasing, and sometimes it is clever. For example: "Would you like a table?" "We don't have room for it in the car. ... " "Do you want to keep your coat?" "Why don't you keep it?" she said. "It likes diamonds and penthouses and all the things kept coats like."

Figurative language is used to enhance descriptions and characterization. For instance: "my whole body turned to stone one second, the second after, fire"; "It was another white dress—my mother lived in a white dream: dresses were white, rugs were, furniture was, drapes, even her piano downstairs in the restaurant"; "All week we'd get little fires like that started, then stamp them out before they raged. I could feel a fire smoking deep inside me."

There is a subplot which involves a sadistic teacher who makes everyone assume the identity of a person with a societal problem. Henry is assigned the character of an unwed, pregnant school girl. He has to report to the class when he feels movement, what he is doing about diet, and what he plans to do with the baby. His overweight friend is assigned the character of Anna Remy, and he must tell about food, vomiting, and laxatives.

Themes and Characters

This book deals with teen-agers in love and the lengths they go to make a relationship work when everything is against it. Ingenuity makes the impossible happen.

The person who falls in love at first sight is seventeen-year-old Henry Schiller who can hardly remember talking to his deceased father about anything except cooking for the restaurant.

He has a void in his life which causes him to get into serious crushes with girls. He needs to be a "two" instead of a "one." The girl who manipulates him is the beautiful senior, Valerie Kissenwiser. She is the daughter of Al Kiss, a stand-up comedian who adores her, and she becomes entangled in a triangle with Henry and her father.

Al Kiss is really the most important character. Through his dealings with Henry he reveals his own insecurity, his lack of formal education, his love and awe for his father, his love of books, his wish for a son to connect the generations, his difficult relationship with his mother-in-law, and his lifeless marriage. There is a strong parallel between the way he used to be and the way Henry is at the time.

There are some other minor characters. His mother who feels that she is in some way responsible for Henry's irrational infatuation, her boyfriend who makes stupid commercials, the older brother whose marriage starves to death, his other brother who tells him how to manipulate women, Valerie's disengaged mother, and her strong-willed grandmother. None of these is well developed.

Him She Loves? is a cleverly written, amusing book which should be read more for enjoyment than for deep and abiding themes. It explores young love and the foolish, ridiculous lengths it drives people to. Is it real love or a substitute for other needs? Are Henry and Valerie in love with each other or in love with the romantic idea of being in love?

Another theme deals with how prejudice controls the way people deal with each other. In this case, it is German/Jewish prejudice which may seem somewhat outdated; however, there has been a recent resurgence of the Nazi party both in the United States and in Germany.

Relationships between fathers and sons and fathers and daughters are explored along with what happens when the father/son connection is never established or is broken. The love affair brings all kinds of people together with different viewpoints and shows how they interact.



Topics for Discussion

1. A review in The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Literature says the book is "very funny" and also that it has "zesty humor." (Book Review Digest: 856). Is this book funny as a whole?

Ernie says that Al Kiss's "jokes should be collecting social security." Did his jokes really get funnier after he started making his Heinrich jokes?

2. Why does Henry always seem to need to be in a close relationship with a girl? Does it have anything to do with his loss of his father? What reason did Earl T. Farr give for this behavior?

Was he right?

3. Were Henry and Valerie really in love with each other or were they in love with a romantic vision of love?

List the romantic rituals they engaged in such as the torn dollar. What did Henry find out later about it?

4. World War II took place in the early 1940s before these teen-agers were born. Al Kiss, of course, was alive during the war and he knew about the German persecution of Jews. List evidences of prejudice between Jews and Germans in the book. Is this hostility still common? Give examples.

5. What happened to Fred's marriage and to Al Kiss's marriage? Is there a parallel between the two? Does the status of Al Kiss's marriage have anything to do with the extremely close relationship he has with his daughter?

Page 198 provides more insight.

6. What advice did Ernie give Henry for dealing with women? Was it good advice? Explain this sentence: "Traveling is the best part, Henry. Arriving can be a little disappointing."

7. Explain Al Kiss's gambling problem. Why did he gamble and what were the long-term effects?

8. Discuss Mrs. Trump's statement, "There's no standards anymore

Standards went out the window." Is that bad or are there advantages? Ask older people how social standards have changed in their lifetimes.

9. Why did Al Kiss bring up the following question?: "A young boy dreams he's on a ship at sea . . . and the ship has begun to sink. It's possible to save himself and one other



person, either his mother or his father. But not both. What should he do, Henry?" The book gives Henry's answer, but what would Al Kiss's answer have been?

10. Discuss the following verse: When I met him, I liked him.

When I liked him, I loved him.

When I loved him, I let him.

When I let him, I lost him.

11. Point out examples of songs and movies that are mentioned in the book.

Why does Kerr bring them into the story?

12. One of Al Kiss's objections to Henry is that his father is dead. He has a set idea of what a family should consist of and the importance of a father in that family. Explain his thinking. Many families do not fit his pattern for a family. How does the absence of a father affect children?

13. Ann A. Flowers criticized the book by saying, "At times Henry appears so impressionable as to be ridiculous, and many of the other characters are almost caricatures," and Sharon Freeman called it an "improbable romance." (Book Review Digest: 856). Is it reasonable to believe that anybody would go to the lengths Henry did to win over Al Kiss? Tell what he did and evaluate his actions.

14. Al Kiss has some ideas about the sexes that have fallen out of favor.

Why did he think it was so important to have a son? Why did he not think the same thing about having girls? Discuss his comment, "Many daughters, many troubles. Many sons, many honors."

15. Explain this statement, ". . . an ignoramus dances through life wearing lead shoes." Explain what Al Kiss meant when he said, "I was a feather that didn't know I was on a bird. I thought I was flying all by myself."

16. Henry changes as the book progresses. For instance, he hated the restaurant business at the beginning, but his attitude changed toward the end.

Are there any other evidences of change in his character? Are there any changes that he should have made but did not after his experience with Valerie?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. There is a parallel between the lives of Al Kiss and Henry Schiller, and they are alike in some ways. Al Kiss takes a real interest in Henry and tries to give him advice, the kind of advice a father would give. Analyze the relationship between Al and Henry.
2. Research the lifestyle and beliefs of Jews in America.
3. Many comedians have been Jewish. Research the careers of a few and discuss any common characteristics with Kiss.
4. Read *Me Me Me Me Me: Not a Novel* and report on how Kerr's early life influenced her writing.
5. Read any other M. E. Kerr book and compare its quality and depth to *Him She Loves?*
6. Since Louise Fitzhugh was an important friend and influence on Kerr, reading *Harriet the Spy* (1964) can add to understanding Kerr. Compare Harriet with the young Marijane in *Me Me Me Me Me*.

Him She Loves?

For Further Reference

Bryfonski, Dedria, ed. "M. E. Kerr." In *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol.

12. Detroit: Gale, 1980: 296-303. Presents extracts from reviews of Kerr's books. Seeing how different reviewers write up their opinions of the books could help students in writing their own book reports.

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something About the Author*. Vol. 20. Detroit: Gale, 1980: 124-127. One page is devoted to giving the facts about the author such as a list of places she has worked and another list of her writings, and the second page is an autobiographical statement which includes her philosophy of writing.

Marowski, Daniel G., ed. "Meaker, Marijane." In *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 35. Detroit: Gale, 1985: 247-252. This is a one-column overview of Kerr's work which mentions the kinds of work she does and notes recurring themes. There are brief statements about some of the books.

Mooney, Martha T., ed. *Book Review Digest 1985*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1986: 856. Presents extracts from book reviews, noting their original sources so that readers can obtain the complete reviews if they care to.

Nasso, Christine, ed. "Meeker, Marijane." In *Contemporary Authors*. Vol.

107. Detroit: Gale, 1983: 332-336.

Along with the coverage of the facts of the author's life, career, and writings, this presents a transcription of an interview with Meeker which provides insights into her life as a child and how she goes about writing.

Related Titles

Kerr's *Me Me Me Me Me: Not a Novel* is written with humor. Many of the episodes and characters in her novels came from her own real life. If students read other of Kerr's books along with her autobiography, they can see how her past life affected her writing.

If readers enjoy the humor and repartee of the characters in *Him She Loves?*, they will enjoy other books that Kerr has written such as *If I Love You, Am I Trapped Forever?* and *I'll Love You When You're More Like Me*. *Dinky Hooker Shoots Smack* is a more serious book about an overweight girl who needs parental understanding and help and how she finally breaks through their insensitivity. It also shows her interaction with people her own age.

Readers who enjoyed the love story in *Him She Loves?* will also enjoy *Lovers' Games* by Barbara Cohen (1983) and Avi's *Romeo and Juliet Together (& Alive) at Last* (1987), which is about rewriting *Romeo and Juliet* as a way of getting two shy students who really like each other together.



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