

Holding Me Here Short Guide

Holding Me Here by Pam Conrad

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Overview

In *Holding Me Here*, fourteen-year-old Robin Lewis's life isn't nearly as exciting as that of the heroines in her fantasies. Her parents are divorced, but their parting was amiable and civilized. She lives with her understanding, hip mother, and regularly visits her father, a professor of paleontology, who is equally kind and supportive.

But when Robin's mother takes in a boarder, Mary Walker, Robin's life is transformed into a cross between a fairy tale and a detective novel—and Robin sees herself as the heroine who will expose the mystery that surrounds Mary's life.

Robin's well-intentioned efforts, which end in pain for everyone involved, will cause readers to examine their own standards of behavior when issues of personal privacy are concerned. Mary Walker seems to be a kind nurse with no family and no past.

But Robin's lurid imagination endows this polite, reclusive woman with a secret melodramatic life. Overcome with curiosity, Robin snoops through Mary's room and finds and reads Mary's diary. Upon learning that Mary, a loving mother, has "deserted" her husband and children, Robin resolves to remedy this unhappy situation by bringing about a surprise reunion between Mary and her daughter Leslie.

Naively, Robin fails to realize that such a reunion would expose the vulnerable Mary to her abusive, alcoholic husband, Ted.

As Robin continues to meddle secretly in the lives of the miserable Walker family, she is forced to confront her own repressed sorrow and anger over her parents' divorce. Her "everything is fine" facade disappears. She is especially distressed to learn that her mother has begun dating. She senses that she is drifting apart from her father. Worse yet, she realizes that she is powerless to "fix" unhappy family situations.

By exploring the causes and effects of separation and divorce in two quite different families, Conrad, herself a divorced mother, doubles the impact of her book. She does not oversimplify the complexities of divorce and its emotional fallout. Nor does she offer pat, moralistic solutions to the problems that arise when a family dissolves. Instead, Conrad suggests that divorce, even under the best of circumstances, is a painful process and that its victims—children, adolescents and adults—must learn to accept the realities that accompany it. Although divorce and its effects are treated frequently in many other young adult novels, *Holding Me Here* is among the most thoughtful and sympathetic of these books.

About the Author

Pam Conrad was born June 18, 1947, in New York City, to Robert and Doris Stampf. She has two brothers, David and Jonathan, and a younger sister, Missy. Conrad began writing when she was seven and ill with the chicken pox. Her mother gave her colored pencils and paper for drawing, but Conrad wrote poetry instead. Although she continued to write poetry and fiction throughout her childhood and adolescence, Conrad's real aspiration was to become a dancer. To this end, she enrolled in New York City's High School of Performing Arts. Her marriage to Robert Conrad in 1967, one year after high school graduation, and the birth of two daughters, Johanna (1971) and Sarah (1974), placed her creative energies on hold for the next few years.

When Sarah was three-and-one-half years old, Conrad decided to go to college, initially at Hofstra University, and finally at the New School for Social Research in New York, where she earned a B.A. in 1984. While in college, Conrad's urge to write returned; her first children's book, *I Don't Live Here*, was published in 1981. Since then, Conrad has become a very prolific, much-acclaimed author of books for both children and young adults. Her range is wide, including picture books, fantasy, contemporary realism and historical fiction. Although young people are the main characters in all of her novels, it is a disservice to categorize Conrad as a children/young adult author. The best of her works appeal to an audience that cuts across all age lines. This is not surprising since Conrad says she does not write with children or a young adult audience in mind: "I don't write for any child, but from the child that I am." Furthermore, her intensely personal work is rooted in her real life. She, or at least some aspect of her personality, always appears in the characters she's writing about: "Each book is like a dream for me because, as in a dream, each character is an aspect of myself." She describes herself as "a spiritual person," but adds that she doesn't "follow any particular religion."

Conrad lives in Rockville Centre, New York, with her pet pug, Balki. In addition to writing, she also teaches writing courses at Queens College.

Although her projected novel, *Pumpkin Moon*, is targeted for adult readers, she plans to continue writing books for children and adolescents.

Conrad's power as a writer has earned her numerous awards, but few of them have been for her novels of contemporary realism. *Holding Me Here* was a 1987 American Library Association (ALA) Recommended Book for the Reluctant Young Adult Reader and it was listed as a 1988 Young Adult Choices selection by the International Reading Association. *What I Did for Roman* was noted as a 1987 ALA Best Books for Young Adults.

Prairie Songs, Conrad's most popular novel, has received numerous awards.

In 1985 it was named an ALA Best Book for Young Adults; it received the Western Heritage Award, as well as the Spur Award for Best Western Juvenile (Western Writers of America); the Society of Children's Book Writers named it their Golden Kite Honor

Book. In 1986, it was a Boston Globe-Horn Book Fiction Award Honor Book; it received the Society of Midland Authors Award; the International Reading Association gave it their Children's Book Award.

Finally, Booklist included it in the "Best of the 80's" Books for Children.

My Daniel also received great critical acclaim. In 1989, it was an ALA Best Books for Young Adults winner; it was a Booklist Children's Editor Choice; the Western Writers of America gave it the Spur Award for Best Western Juvenile and the National Council for the Social Studies/Children's Book Council listed it as a Notable Children's Trade Book in Social Studies.

Stonewords, a ghost story which shifts between present and past, was a Boston Globe-Horn Book Fiction Award Honor Book in 1990, and cited by the National Council of Teachers of English as a Notable Trade Book for Language Arts in 1990. In 1991, the Mystery Writers of America named it the Best Juvenile Mystery.

Setting

Robin and her mother live in a spacious, old house in a middle-class suburb of New York City. This seemingly simple setting is very important to understanding Robin and her responses to life. Conrad says that her young adult novels "begin with settings," and that the Lewis house is, in fact, the house she was living in when she was writing the book. She also acknowledges that the town in which the novel is set is the town in which she presently lives: "a nice suburban place where kids ride bicycles, take trains, and sell holiday paper." Because Robin has grown up in such a sheltered, secure environment, she is ill-equipped to understand or deal with Mary's problems. She has no first-hand experience with alcoholism, brutal fathers, or mothers who abandon their children.

Robin doesn't even know, until the end of the novel, that the area has a jail.

Certainly, violence can and does take place in quiet, peaceful neighborhoods; after all, the Walkers live in a similar setting not far from Robin's house. But typically in middle-class suburban settings, family problems are private, not public. Even the people next door don't know why Mary had left her husband.

Perhaps Robin's ignorance of the seamy underside of life may seem a bit unrealistic, but Conrad's careful development of setting does lend credibility to her heroine's innocence and naivete.

Setting is also important because it underscores Robin's misery as well as establishing some of the differences which lead to the breakup of her parents' marriage. The house where Robin Holding Me Here 3329 lives with her mother Janet is informal and disorganized. Meals are irregular and dirty dishes collect in the sink.

Pans and dishes are piled around the kitchen and windows are not always latched. Nevertheless, life in this house is comfortable and inviting.

In contrast, Len, Robin's father, lives in a spartan, uncluttered New York City apartment where life is regular and organized. Robin, doesn't feel at home there; in fact, she no longer feels a part of her father's life. Although she is aware that the apartment suits her meticulous father, she nevertheless tries to make it more "homey" by rearranging the furniture and closets. In so doing, Robin seems to be acting out a desire to rearrange her relationship with her father. And in her reluctance to let go of the past, she tries to recreate the suburban home Len left when he and Robin's mother divorced.

The allusions to music and film stars (which include Madonna, Prince, Quiet Riot and Sylvester Stallone) place the novel in the 1980s. Although these allusions provide a concrete time frame for the novel, they may limit its appeal to future young adult readers who relate more readily to the entertainment idols of the moment.



Social Sensitivity

Conrad treats the controversial issues of spouse abuse, divorce and alcoholism with honesty and sensitivity.

She distances readers from the worst of the violence—Ted Walker's beating of his wife Mary—by having Mary report it in her diary. Furthermore, the diary entries focus primarily on the emotional, rather than the physical damage of the attacks.

Admittedly, Ted Walker's drunken invasion of the Lewis house and his pursuit of Robin is an ugly, frightening episode. Walker, while on his destructive rampage, behaves like a maddened, brutal animal. Although terrorized by the event, Robin escapes with only a bruised ankle, a small price to pay for a powerful picture of the denial, violence, and personality changes common to many alcoholics. Conrad's purpose in creating this episode is not didactic, but it may be an eye-opener for readers who have never witnessed such a behavior first-hand and who are unaware of the dangers of extensive drinking. And it may heighten the sensitivity of readers having friends and acquaintances who live daily with this nightmare.

Some profanity is used by both children and adults throughout the novel.

But such usage is infrequent and not gratuitous. Most of it appears in Ted Walker's drunken dialogue when he breaks into the Lewis house. In this context, his language is appropriate, given his inebriated state. Evidence elsewhere in the novel indicates he would not speak this way when sober.



Literary Qualities

Although *Holding Me Here* is not Conrad's best novel, it nevertheless displays her virtuosity as an author. In addition to her gift for creating highly individualized characters, she also is a superb storyteller. All of her novels are characterized by fast-paced, action-filled plots that build power as they speed to their climax. *Holding Me Here* is no exception.

Organized as a flashback, the novel opens with Robin's musing over the traumatic events that occurred in an unidentified November and December and what she learned from them: "Who ever said life was simple? Not me. Not anymore, that's for sure." Immediately, the reader is hooked and jumps on the roller-coaster narrative that cuts back in time for a chronological unfolding of the events Robin has so cryptically alluded to in the opening paragraph of the novel. The plot of *Holding Me Here* covers only two months in Robin's life, but those two months are filled with mounting suspense as Robin carries out her increasingly risky detective work.

Will she be caught snooping in Mary's room? Will she be able to maintain her cover as she works her way through the Walker neighborhood selling Christmas wrap? Will she be able to lure Mary home for the surprise reunion with Leslie? And most importantly, will Robin be able to resolve her pain over her parents' divorce?

Conrad exhibits her craftsmanship as a storyteller by carefully working out a cause-and-effect chain of events which accounts for the final resolution of the plot. Readers may, like Robin, hope for a happy-ever-after ending. However, given the characters and their situations, such an ending is not possible; Conrad has carefully planted clues that, if followed to their logical conclusion, make a happy ending implausible. Because of the entries in Mary's journal, readers should not be surprised by Mary's displeasure at the reunion Robin has engineered. Because Leslie is a young, impressionable child who desperately wants her mother to return, readers should anticipate that 3332 *Holding Me Here* she will give her father the Lewis address, and that he will eventually come there in a drunken state. And given that Len and Janet have established satisfying lives after their divorce, it is not surprising that they will not be reconciled.

Much of the effectiveness of *Holding Me Here* stems from Conrad's choice of first person point of view. Because Robin narrates the story, the reader directly experiences her pain and bewilderment. Simultaneously, the inclusion of selected entries from Mary Walker's diary allows the reader to see events from Mary's perspective—a perspective which, incidentally, Robin doesn't understand. The contrast between these two points of views creates increasing tension as the reader realizes that Robin is unwittingly becoming involved in a potentially dangerous situation that she is not prepared to deal with. Conrad's management of point of view is sophisticated and well done, but she fails to establish the amount of time that has transpired between the events Robin experienced and her later retelling of them. Readers can only guess at the age of the older, maturer Robin who narrates the story.



The development of Robin's character is enhanced by Conrad's use of symbolism and allusions. Len often affectionately refers to his daughter as "Bird." In many respects Robin is like a young bird who is flying, but not yet ready to leave the nest. As a result, she wants the love and stability that will prevent her from falling or flying away completely.

Robin's frequent references to fairy tales, particularly "Hansel and Gretel," emphasize her tendency to retreat into fantasy when confronting unpleasant situations. In real life she has little power to change things; in her imaginary life, she is a fairy godmother, who can work magic and save Mary, whom she likens to Gretel, lost in the woods.

As her reunion scheme approaches fruition and she begins to doubt the rightness of her actions, Robin also sees herself as a lost child who has no trail to lead her out of the woods.

Through the use of such references, Conrad emphasizes the pain of growing up and the need to realize that happy endings are not always possible in the adult world.

Because the plot of *Holding Me Here* is so involving, most readers probably will not notice Conrad's sophisticated use of point of view, narrative technique, allusions and symbolism. However, these elements add another dimension to the story which leads not only to a better understanding of it, but also to an appreciation of Conrad's skill as an author.



Themes and Characters

In commenting on the autobiographical elements in her fiction, Conrad says: "I write my own life over and over again—whether I'm writing about nineteenth-century Nebraska as in *My Daniel and Prairie Songs*, or the porcelain edge of a bathtub, in *Tub People*.

It's my life. The main theme that runs through my books, as well as through my life, is acceptance—acceptance of self, sickness, divorce, a place to live, death, and even old age"

Acceptance is very much at the heart of *Holding Me Here*. Robin cannot accept the changes in her life after her parents' divorce. Instead of adapting and maturing, she longs for her childhood three years before when her dad was grilling in the back yard and her mother was in the kitchen preparing macaroni salad. Even though she has not used her playroom in a number of years, she resents giving it up to serve the family's more immediate financial needs. She is indignant that her mother has started dating, and she cannot understand how her father could have calmly and politely moved out if he really loved her. She entertains fantasies that her parents can be reunited if they go into marriage counselling, because, after all—"you and Ma didn't have a bad marriage." Because Robin cannot accept the changes in her life, she is determined to change the lives of others, namely those of the Walker family: "Maybe it was too late for some families to pull themselves together, but it wasn't too late for everyone."

By the end of the book, however, Robin has changed. Reluctantly, and painfully, she comes to realize that parents can fall out of love and that all stories do not have happy endings. She understands that life is not simple and human relationships are far more complex than she had supposed. In short, Robin has begun to grow into adulthood.

In mapping out Robin's painful struggle toward understanding and acceptance, Conrad creates a multifaceted character who is more complex than she initially appears. Despite her strong moral sense, Robin yields to curiosity by entering Mary's room. Although good at heart, Robin is quite skillful in rationalizing her sometimes unacceptable behavior. Readers will sympathize with her resentment of Tom, her mother's boyfriend, while realizing that she is being unrealistic and a bit selfish in not wanting her mom to date. Although she entertains some doubts about the "rightness" of interfering in the lives of the Walker family, she is stubbornly resolute in carrying out her scheme. Because of her pride she can't admit, as her father observes, that she doesn't "know everything."

An idealist, Robin reverts to fantasy as a way of coping with reality. Most of her fantasy scenarios can be explained by her reading or the movies and TV programs she watches. However, in Chapters 15 and 16, her identification with Queequeg may be puzzling to readers unfamiliar with *Moby Dick*. (Queequeg is a pagan harpooner on the *Pequod*, a nineteenth century whaling boat, who believes that man can will himself to live or die. Robin, rather melodramatically and—unsuccessfully—likewise wills herself to die after Mary exposes her meddling.)



Conrad may be drawing on her own childhood here, for she says that as a child, she remembers falling asleep listening to her father read *Moby Dick* to her mother. But there is no evidence in the novel to explain why Robin should be familiar with this important, but very difficult book, especially since she has a limited vocabulary, as is evidenced by her confusion of the meaning of such words as "eclectic," "exotic," and "eccentric." Curiously, Robin has no friends, which may be understandable, given her private nature following the divorce. But Conrad offers no explanation for Robin's friendless state, an omission which doesn't tally with the lives of most teenagers.

Overall, however, Conrad has succeeded admirably in creating a sympathetic, well-realized heroine whose thoughts and actions ring true to experience.

The other characters in the story are equally well-developed. Janet Lewis and Mary Walker, the two mothers in the story, offer an interesting contrast in their responses to divorce. Janet is the thoroughly modern mom who believes that openness and communication will ease the pain of the transition.

She has read "lots of books about the best things to do for kids when a marriage is breaking up," and she methodically tries to apply them. She means well, but as Robin herself observes, her mother "could have passed for a fourteen-year-old anywhere, and I wasn't so sure I liked it." Janet is genuinely concerned about her daughter, but she is simplistic in thinking that pizza, a poster of Sylvester Stallone on the refrigerator, and earnest confessions will shore up Robin's insecurity. Curiously, she displays no bitterness or anger toward her ex-husband Len. She seems to have emerged from the divorce relatively unscathed and is so involved in getting on with her life that she is blind to what's going on in her daughter's. Nevertheless, Janet is likable and many adolescent girls will probably wish their mothers were more like her.

Mary Walker, in contrast, has communicated nothing about her disappearance to her children, Leslie and Timmy. Although she says little, she suffers much. A victim of spouse abuse, she has gone underground until she can create a new life for herself and gain legal custody of her children.

Mary's diary entries are poignant, especially her description of her children's responses to the violence they are witnessing. Superficially, Mary's desertion may seem selfish and *Holding Me Here* 3331 unfeeling, but the careful reader will realize she is motivated by love and the hope for a better future.

Len, Robin's father, is a gentle, introspective man who finds quiet satisfaction in his teaching and his archeological research. Unlike Janet, he finds it difficult to express intense personal feelings. As a result, Robin wrongly concludes that her father's love for her has lessened. At the end of the novel, when he explains the pain he endured but kept to himself after the divorce, he emerges as one of Conrad's most sympathetic characters.

In the hands of a less skillful writer, Ted Walker would have been reduced to a stereotypical villain. Although Conrad does not minimize the damage Ted has done to



himself and his family, she nevertheless treats him with compassion, even when he breaks into the Lewis house. As he curses and smashes and destroys everything in his path, he also reveals the pain and despair of his life. When he cries out for Mary and begs her forgiveness, readers will understand, if not sympathize with his seemingly hopeless situation. Even Mary admits that when sober, Walker is—or was—a good man who loved his home and family. After the police have carted Ted away, Robin herself feels no hatred for this man; she only hopes that he will find help in a drug treatment center.



Topics for Discussion

1. Was Robin justified in entering Mary's room? Once in the room should she have read Mary's journal? Why do you think Robin snooped in Mary's room? (Give two to three reasons.)

Were you surprised by Robin's behavior? (Note that earlier she had also snooped in both her mother's and her father's personal things.) Does she feel guilty for her actions? Have you ever meddled in your parents' private papers or those of your siblings or peers?

Why did you do it? Are parents ever justified in snooping in their children's personal belongings? If so, when?

2. Robin, who ultimately discovers that she has been horribly hurt by her parents' amicable divorce, says on p.

133 that parents should never, ever leave their children. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

3. Mary is trapped in a nightmare situation. Aside from leaving her husband and children, what other options might she have considered? (Murder is not an acceptable option, although it might generate some interesting class discussion.) Does she, in fact, have other options? Because Ted Walker is an abusive alcoholic, should Mary have left Timmy and Leslie with him? Why or why not?

4. In many respects, *Holding Me Here* has two climaxes. The first includes the disastrous Mary-Leslie reunion and its aftermath. The second occurs when Ted Walker invades the Lewis house. Aside from adding excitement and suspense to the novel, what function does the Ted Walker episode serve? (Several reviewers suggested that the novel would have been stronger if it were omitted.) What do you think? Does Robin attain any new insights into herself as a result of this encounter? Or has she learned all that she will learn after the confrontation between herself, her mother, and Mary Walker?

5. Discuss the behavior of Leslie and Timmy. Why might they behave as they do?

6. In the first paragraph of the book, Robin says that she's discovered that life isn't simple. Was there a simpler, less painful way for her to reach this conclusion?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Often authors select the names of characters for thematic or symbolic purposes. Write a paper in which you discuss the connection between Robin's name and the title of the book. In your discussion, give special attention to the following pages: 57,107,108, and especially pages 143-144.

2. *Holding Me Here* takes place during the Christmas season. For Christians, this period is a time of rejoicing and good will which celebrates the birth of Christ and offers the hope for a new life. Most of the events in *Holding Me Here* are depressing. Why, then, do you think Conrad chose Christmas a backdrop for her novel? Ultimately, will any of the characters enjoy a new life?

How do the references to Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* underscore this motif?

3. On page 146, Robin's father says: "I know you think you can read minds, and change the world and make everybody do what they should do, but you don't know everything. Can you accept that?" Robin, of course, can't accept her father's diagnosis—at least at this point in the novel. Cite evidence from earlier passages which demonstrate that Robin wants to rearrange both lives and possessions. Consider, for example, her determination to rearrange the furniture in her father's apartment, as well as her attempt to reorder Mary's life.

What are Robin's motives? On page 149, why is it significant that she is reluctant to rearrange her father's apartment, even when he gives her permission to?

4. Why does Robin identify so strongly with Leslie and want to help her? Why is she so protective of Leslie?

In your answer consider Robin's own selfish motives (her ego will be boosted by the gratitude of all the happy participants at the reunion that she believes will take place) as well as her genuinely unselfish motives (she wants to help Leslie and lift Mary's sadness).

5. Who is the better mother? Janet Lewis or Mary Walker? Explain your judgment. Is it possible that both women are good mothers?

6. Robin refers to her mother's boyfriend, Tom as Romeo. Is she merely being sarcastic? Does she want this romance to end in tragedy as in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*? Trace her responses to Tom throughout the novel. Does she finally accept him at the end?



For Further Reference

"My Daniel by Pam Conrad." Booklist 87 (1990) 845-851. Although the focus of the article is on My Daniel and related books for teachers and librarians to use with it, the autobiographical comments quoted at the beginning of the article give insights into Conrad and her work which are relevant to all of her novels.

"Pam Conrad," Sixth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators. New York: Wilson, 1989. 64-66. A general overview of Conrad's life and approaches to writing, much of it written by her.

Raymond, Allen. "Pam Conrad: She Said to Herself, 'Now, What?'"

Teaching K-8 21,3 (1990): 39-40. Raymond, having interviewed Conrad, discusses her personality, life and writings.

Related Titles

Paula Danziger's *The Divorce Express* (1982) deals with the emotions fifteenyear old Phoebe experiences when her parents divorce and live in spearate places. Her mother lives in New York City and her father in Woodstock, New York. The overriding theme is the effects of divorce as experienced by its obvious victims, the children involved.

The fact that it is very much a continuous experience, a process which must be constantly worked upon, is emphasized. Phoebe has managed to pass through the first stages of anger and denial, by accepting the differences between her parents. But the technical problems their separation causes are examined minutely. Although there are many differences between Robin's and Phoebe's situations, Robin would have benefitted greatly had she read *The Divorce Express*.



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