I'm Not Who You Think I Am Short Guide

I'm Not Who You Think I Am by Peg Kehret

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

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Overview

I'm Not Who You Think I Am, published in 1999, is a suspense novel in which Ginger Shaw, a thirteen-year-old, is stalked by a strange woman who claims to be her biological mother. Ginger, whose parents have always entertained her with stories of her birth, had never before considered the possibility of being adopted. However, the woman's persistence causes Ginger to doubt her own identity and, finally, to fear for her life. The novel's parallel story concerns the town's most prominent citizen's vendetta against the girls' basketball coach, a much beloved teacher and Ginger's mentor. Suspense is interwoven with issues of loyalty and honor. The two stories converge at a climactic school board hearing, as Ginger discovers through this compelling and suspense-filled novel some important truths about who she is and what values she holds dear.

About the Author

Peg Kehret (pronounced "carrot") is an award-winning author of children's books which often appear on recommended lists from the International Reading Association and the American Library Association. Kehret began her writing career by publishing plays. She attributes her interest in becoming a playwright to the "theater bug" that bit her when she was cast as a hillbilly granny in a ninth-grade production. She tried out for every subsequent school play, and if she did not get cast, she worked backstage. As an adult, she produced plays and acted in a touring company, but she soon discovered that she preferred the outlet of writing to performing. A highlight of her theater career was winning both the Forest Roberts Playwriting Award and the Pioneer Drama Service Playwriting Award for her play Spirit!

She began writing monologues from a young person's point of view so that youthful aspiring actors would have more accessible material to use in honing their craft. At this point, however, Kehret found a new voice and a new career. "As soon as I tried writing from a youthful point of view, I knew I had found my place in the writing world," she says. Kehret's own childhood experiences became the foundation for her highly successful children's novels, each with a character around the age of thirteen, a pivotal year in the author's own life.

Kehret was born in Wisconsin in 1937, but she grew up in a comfortable and stable home in Minnesota. Her parents, Arthur and Elizabeth Schulze, were devoted to Peg and her much older brother, and Kehret remembers an ideal childhood, a carefree life of playing outdoors with numerous family pets. Her life took a dramatic turn in 1949, however. On a September day when her greatest worry was whether the class float would win the Homecoming parade, Kehret became gravely ill. She was diagnosed with three kinds of polio, and she was so sick her life was in danger. Paralyzed from the neck down and helped to breath by the dreaded iron lung, she spent the next year of her life in isolation from her loving family in a special hospital or in rehabilitation with other young polio sufferers. Kehret tells the story of her long, slow recovery and her feelings about this terrifying time in her autobiography, Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio, which won the Golden Kite Award from the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, and the PEN Center USA West Award for Children's Literature.

Kehret believes that this period in her life molded her personality and shaped the way she views the world and the way she writes her novels. Many of her protagonists are ordinary young people in that period between childhood and adolescence who unexpectedly face some terrifying ordeal and must summon their own wit and courage to solve their problems. Kehret still vividly remembers a cruel nurse who refused to turn her over, as she lay helpless in an oxygen tent. She vowed that if she ever beat polio, she would expose adults who were so mean that they would not help a paralyzed child turn over in bed. Her novels frequently feature a cruel adult who serves as a foil for a more heroic adult character. Kehret developed a crush on the kind doctor whose confidence in her recovery strengthened her resolve to withstand the painful and seemingly never-ending physical therapy sessions that eventually allowed her to walk

again. She claims her writing career began as she composed jokes to amuse him. Like this doctor, kind, supportive adults who take the time to help young people reach their full potential are often found in Kehret's novels. And her joke writing continues as well; most of her books contain humor as well as suspense and mystery.

After recovering from polio, her hospital dreams of becoming a writer never faded.

She had considered a career as a veterinarian before her illness, and she satisfied this longing by becoming a dedicated volunteer for the Humane Society. All of her novels feature animals of some kind, and she takes her own cats and dogs all over the country with her as she travels to talk to children at schools and conferences.

She married Carl Kehret, a player-piano restorer (the occupation of Ginger's father in I'm Not Who You Think I Am) and they live in an eighty-year-old house on five acres of orchards and gardens near Mt. Rainier National Park in Washington State. They have a son and a daughter and are now grandparents of four. Kehret, author of thirty books, claims that writing from the perspective of a twelve- or thirteen-year-old is her favorite activity, perhaps because that time in her own life is still so vivid in her memory. Unfortunately, she has begun to suffer from post-polio syndrome, but aided by aspirin, special exercises and increased rest, she has summoned all her determination to continue to battle this crippling disease.

Setting

Kehret takes care to create a setting that could be anywhere in small-town, middleclass contemporary America. The novel opens in a theme restaurant where waiters and family sing together to salute Ginger's thirteenth birthday, a scene most readers could picture in similar chain restaurants in their own neighborhoods. It is the very ordinariness of the home and school scenes that allow Kehret to develop the suspense of the story, as overtones of evil invade these very comfortable and familiar places.

The stalker confronts Ginger in the most banal settings: her own mailbox, the school bus stop, in the school parking lot. The cover art, showing a typical middle-schooler opening the school door, shadowed by a figure in a white compact car, emphasizes the fact that once-safe settings become places of fear in this novel.

Many scenes take place in Ginger's chaotic suburban home where she lives with two loving parents, an older sister who is helping to pay her college expenses by running a catering business out of the home, a wise-cracking younger brother, and a pet rabbit. However, both parents are called out of town on believable work crises, leaving Ginger in the care of her sister Laura and her brother in the care of friends. It is the absence of parents in this ordinary home that allows Kehret to create so much tension and suspense in the story. Ginger is forced to confront the stalking situation on her own, without parental guidance, because she is unwilling to jeopardize her parents' careers by admitting that she needs them to abandon their business responsibilities to help her.

It is also critical to the plot that the story is set in a tightly-knit community where many of the adults' business interests are intertwined. Mrs. Vaughn, the parent who instigates the vendetta against Mr. Wren, the basketball coach, is the wife of the area's most prominent businessman. The Vaughns' company is so large and powerful that they control the fortunes of nearly every other parent in the community. For example, Ginger's mother, a party planner, owes a significant portion of her business to the Vaughns' company-entertaining. Advertising, banking and even Laura's catering are also dependent on the Vaughns' largesse.

Kehret skillfully uses this detail to build suspense in the alternate storyline concerning the coach's fight to retain his position.

Social Sensitivity

The key issues in this novel are mental illness and the effect that losing a child can have on a mother. Even though Joyce is presented as a villain, Kehret is careful to build a reasonable explanation as to why she is behaving so obsessively. We learn that Joyce's own child died at birth, a fact that she was never willing to accept. Kehret does not excuse Joyce's actions, but she does show sensitivity toward those who develop mental illnesses.

On the other hand, Mrs. Vaughn's character flaws, her insistence on control and her love of power, are treated with no mercy.

Mrs. Vaughn actually becomes more of a villain than Joyce, because she has no excuses for her behavior. The battle between Mrs. Vaughn and the rest of the school community over Mr. Wren's coaching philosophy allows the author to explore the important social question of the dangers of teaching children to win at all costs. Kehret effectively highlights the importance of minimizing athletic competition among children in early adolescence so that everyone has a chance to develop physical coordination and to learn to enjoy playing a team sport.

Literary Qualities

This novel is a compact 154-page suspense story, yet Kehret employs several literary techniques such as the structural techniques of foreshadowing and the use of dual points of view—all geared toward heightening the tension between Ginger and her stalker. Other literary techniques found in the story are flashbacks and liberal doses of comic relief.

The most evident technique is Kehret's use of the omniscient narrator who veers from Ginger's point of view to Joyce's. In the opening chapter, readers see Ginger's pleasure at her thirteenth birthday party: opening presents, celebrating with her best friends, and basking in her parents' retelling of the familiar stories of her birth. Immediately, however, a shadow darkens the scene in the form of Joyce, who stares unblinkingly at Ginger's table. "A chill of apprehension prickled the hair on Ginger's neck. She knows who I am, Ginger thought, but I don't know her." Readers share her worries as the uneasy feelings persist and grow stronger as she notices the woman writing down their license plate as the family drives off.

Kehret invokes the suspense-building power of dramatic irony before the first chapter ends, however, by allowing the reader access to Joyce's thoughts. "Joyce Enderly could hardly believe her good fortune. After years of searching, the girl showed up right under her nose. The girl had changed a lot since that Saturday in Montana, Joyce thought. Her face was rounder and her hair a darker shade. But all kids change in three years' time." By the end of Joyce's segment of Chapter One, readers know quite a bit about Joyce that Ginger is unaware of. Joyce and her husband had abducted a young girl three years earlier, and Joyce had escaped arrest when she fled from a rest stop as the child screamed successfully for help. Joyce's husband is still in prison, but Joyce has lost forty pounds and gotten contact lenses since that incident.

The narrative in Joyce' point of view ends the chapter with her vowing to talk to Ginger and win her confidence. "I'll tell her who I am and then she'll want to come with me and I won't have to use force like we did last time." Ginger's prickle of apprehension combined with the reference to the prior use of force foreshadow important events later in the novel.

A story takes the shape its author has given it, a shape governed for us primarily by the point of view through which the characters and events are filtered. Kehret takes maximum advantage of the opportunities to create tension that arise from the dual points of view. At the opening of the novel, we see nearly all the action through Ginger, with only glimpses into Joyce's perception. However, as the novel progresses and as Joyce and Ginger's "relationship" grows, Kehret allows readers to see more through Joyce's point of view. It is the only way readers can judge how much more obsessive she is becoming, and how fragile her hold on reality is. It also allows readers to experience the jolt of dramatic irony, that sense that we as readers know more than the characters do. In the climactic scenes of the novel, readers understand just how serious

the threat to Ginger is, while she remains unaware of her fate. Kehret uses this technique skillfully to build to a climactic suspense scene.

Kehret uses flashbacks in an unusual way in this novel. Because Ginger's parents are not present for most of the action, and because Mr. Wren is featured in only one key scene, readers have to learn about them primarily through Ginger's reflections as she ponders the ethical dilemma she faces in the alternate plot line. Readers see Mr. Wren in action on the basketball court, but through Ginger's recollections, they get to know him as a caring, considerate teacher as well. Similarly, Ginger flashes back to scenes in her own home in which her parents both modeled ethical behavior and insisted upon it from all their children.

Kehret builds the adult characters through these flashbacks as she simultaneously allows Ginger to ponder whether it is best for her to offer evidence supporting Mr. Wren at the hearing or to remain silent and allow her family to continue to thrive financially.

The author allows the readers frequent breaks in the tension by providing significant comic relief in the form of Ginger's younger brother Tipper and his friend Marcus. These six-year-olds revel in silliness, as exemplified by their money-making dream of offering burping lessons to their friends.

However, even though the children offer comic relief, they too become embroiled in the tension during the climactic scenes.

Kehret's title is a metaphor for all the searching that Ginger must do during the novel. Ginger must face her own doubts about her identity after Joyce claims that she is Ginger's real mother. She ponders the fact that she does not look like anyone else in her immediate family, and she confides other worries to her friend Karie. "I'm so different from Mom, Dad, and Laura. They don't care at all about sports. Mom and Laura love fancy parties; I hate getting dressed up. I'm not mechanical like Dad, either." Later, when Ginger realizes Joyce is wrong, the title becomes a plea to the disturbed woman to leave her alone: "I'm not who you think I am." And finally, Ginger realizes that she is not the person she thought she was, as she makes her final decision about speaking at the school board hearing.

Themes and Characters

Ginger Shaw, a sensible young adolescent, is the admirable protagonist of this novel. Although the suspense story is significantly plot driven, there are two key themes that Kehret develops through Ginger's actions and internal monologues.

The most accessible theme is the importance of internal character strength, of a young person's ability to summon personal resources to combat a formidable enemy— in the absence of adult assistance. Because Ginger is unwilling to share her mounting panic about the stalking, she has to reach deep within herself for the will to face Joyce's increasingly overt attempts to meet with her. Although Ginger does confide some details of the problem to her friend Karie and her sister Laura, readers see her dealing with the fear and confusion on her own. Some of her actions are a bit less than sensible, as exemplified by Ginger's chopping off most of her long brown hair, hoping that perhaps a change in appearance will foil the stalker. As Ginger's younger brother Tipper, always available for comic relief, explains, the new two-inch spiky cut makes her look like "one of those girls with rings in her navel." After committing this uncharacteristically silly maneuver, however, Ginger approaches the problem seriously and thoughtfully. "I want to find out why she thinks she's my mother," Ginger thinks. "Even if the woman is a real nut case, what does it hurt to listen to her story?

And if—if—the woman is telling the truth, then I should ask her for medical information." Ginger imagines that this dramatic event in her life is the, stuff movies are made of, but she is practical enough not to get carried away with the drama. Although Ginger takes a serious risk in the climactic scene in the novel> readers see that circumstances dictated no options. Ginger's attempts to outwit the stalker on her own create a strong, believable character who can solve her serious problems.

The novel's concurrent theme is exemplified by the poster that Ginger's parents give her for her thirteenth birthday. Hanging on Ginger's bedroom wall, the poster reminds her to "Live with purpose and honor." The message was not well received at first. "When I first saw this," Ginger said, "I thought, yuck, another of my parents' inspirational mottos." However, the words give Ginger cause for reflection on the values her mother and father have instilled in her, and even though her parents are not present during this difficult time in her life, the motto gives her courage.

She needs courage to solve her moral dilemma over the attempted firing of her favorite teacher and mentor, Mr. Wren. He is in danger of losing his coaching job due to false accusations from an angry parent.

Ginger discovers she has evidence that could help Mr. Wren, but if she presents it, her self-employed mother and sister will lose their most important customer, along with much-needed income. Kehret builds this theme through contrasts between Mr. Wren, the exemplary teacher who desperately needs his job to support his family, and Mrs. Vaughn, the town's most powerful, and least ethical, woman, nicknamed "Queen Victoria" by Ginger's family. Months earlier Mr. Wren had taught Ginger's class the

importance of taking a stand: "If you don't speak out against something that is wrong, you imply by your silence that it's right."

Ginger is later reminded of the importance of this value in her own home as she flashes back to a moment at a family dinner in which her younger brother brags about not laughing at a cruel joke. "But did you speak up?" Mr. Shaw had asked. Tipper admitted he had not. "Then you might as well have laughed. By keeping still, you implied it's okay to tell nasty jokes," their father had said. Despite remembering these lessons, Ginger still finds it difficult to take a stand against Mrs. Vaughn that she believes could devastate her family's finances.

Mrs. Vaughn serves as the antithesis of good values, berating the coach publicly and blackmailing townspeople to sign a petition against the man she believes has not given her daughter Polly enough playing time. Mrs. Vaughn is such a one-dimensional villain that even Polly lines up against her. Kehret paints Mrs. Vaughn a bit too broadly, but the dramatic school controversy is believable, and the two characters at either end of the ethical spectrum help Ginger and readers understand that "living with purpose and honor" is not an empty slogan; it is a difficult, yet rewarding, way to lead one's life.

Topics for Discussion

1. Characterize Ginger's life before Joyce came into it and after. How is Ginger changed by this experience?

2. Examine the steps that led to Joyce's ultimate act of threatened violence.

When and how did her obsession intensify?

3. Why did Ginger not share her fears with her parents? Is that realistic? Would you have reacted the same way?

4. Discuss ways the plot would have changed had Ginger's parents not been away.

5. Cite some of the reasons Ginger is torn about testifying in person at the hearing.

6. Discuss the reasons why evidence presented anonymously lacks credibility.

7. Even though Ginger's parents are not present for most of the action in the novel, their values are represented. Discuss scenes in the novel in which Ginger flashes back to important lessons her parents have taught her.

8. Trace the way Kehret divides the text between Ginger and Joyce's perspectives. Does the proportion change? Why?

9. How does the author use the characters of Tipper and Marcus? What purposes do they serve in the novel?

10. Poll your classmates or discussion group to discover how they feel about the issue of letting everyone on a team have equal playing time, even if it means losing some games. What are the reasons that your classmates give for supporting their opinions?

11. Discuss times when you and your classmates or group members have had to choose between two very difficult choices, as Ginger did when she had to decide whether to testify. What values can you cite that helped you make the decision?

12. Ginger begins to see ways in which she is very different from her other family members when she considers that she may be adopted. Discuss ways in which you differ from others in your family.

13. What is the significance of the book's title? 14. Find places in the text in which Kehret uses foreshadowing to intensify the suspense.

15. Mr. Wren appears only briefly in one scene in the novel, yet he is a highly significant character. Examine how the author builds this character through others. Why do you think she does this?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Since Peg Kehret attributes so much of her inspiration for writing to her experiences with polio, find out what you can about the polio epidemics of the 1940s and early 1950s.

2. What are the Sister Kenny treatments for polio?

3. Are some mental illnesses triggered by the loss of a child?

4. What constitutes stalking? Find out about legislation in your state regarding stalking.

5. Ginger's father restores player pianos.

Find out what they are and how they work.

6. Ginger hopes to be a sportscaster some day. Research what preparation a sportscaster must have. Interview a sportscaster at your local TV or radio station and write a profile of him or her.

7. Find out what your school's coaches feel about full participation in sports programs at the middle-school level.

Ask if they have had problems with parents who were more concerned with winning than building a team.

8. Ginger feels herself pulled between loyalty and honor. Think of times in your own life in which you have had similar conflicts and write a narrative about the events. Research real people you are studying in your history or social studies classes to discover similar situations they found themselves in. What would have been the consequences of their choices if they had chosen differently?

For Further Reference

Kehret, Peg. Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio.

Morton Grove, Illinois: Albert Whitman & Company, 1996. This award-winning autobiography has special appeal for young readers. The very easy to read 179-page book gives readers significant scientific information about the polio epidemic as well as a moving story about the feelings young people have when facing such a serious fate.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Readers who enjoyed this suspense-filled novel will want to read many of Kehret's other titles. In Deadly Stranger Katie's new friend is kidnapped and, without realizing it, Katie has crucial evidence. This novel received numerous book awards, and Kirkus Reviews recommended it as a "real cliffhanger! Both girls are courageous and resourceful—no passive victims here." Earthquake Terror has a similar plot with a male protagonist. Jonathan and Abby are alone in the island campground when an earthquake strikes, destroying the campground and threatening to flood the island. With no food, supplies, or means of contacting help, Jonathan must save his sister, himself, and his dog. This title won numerous awards as well and exemplified that heroic character that lies within ordinary children.

Cages, a Kehret novel that features a less fortunate and somewhat older protagonist, also emphasizes the importance of building character through adversity. Kit, a fifteenyear-old from an alcoholic family, is caught shoplifting and sentenced to community service at the local Humane Society. Kit's character and her distress are simply drawn but believable, and the novel builds to Kehret's usual dramatic concluding release.

A strict and caring teacher provides much needed guidance to this teen trying to escape the "cages" of her problems.

Caroline Cooney's The Face on the Milk Carton shares some plot similarities with I'm Not Who You Think I Am and is highly regarded by young adult readers. Fifteenyear-old Janie, sitting in her familiar school cafeteria, recognizes the face of a kidnapped child on the back of her milk carton as her own. The advertisement claims that the child had been kidnapped twelve years earlier, and Janie is forced to doubt the loving parents that she has always taken for granted. Horn Book's review claims that "a reasonably believable plot, lots of action, romance, and sufficient tension combine to make a fast-paced suspense tale."

Young readers who are drawn to the combination of suspense and ethical standards that Kehret writes so well may also enjoy the Jennie McGrady mystery novels by Patricia Rushford. This series of adventures of twelve-year-old Jennie McGrady read somewhat like contemporary Nancy Drew stories, yet Rushford writes for the Christian youth fiction market, so every novel matches true-to-life family and school struggles with perilous adventures. Abandoned (1999) is a title in this series Kehret readers would enjoy. When a mysterious article in the school paper claims that a healthy baby was found in a dumpster sixteen years ago, Gavin Winslow, a reporter, enlists Jennie to solve the mystery.

The mystery takes a strange twist when they discover that the baby found so long ago is their classmate, Annie Phillips. Jennie encounters danger as she attempts to uncover the past.

Related Web Sites

"Introducing Peg Kehret: Playwright." http://www.pioneerdrama.com/playwrights/pk.html. This site offers an overview of the writing Kehret has done for the theater.

Kehret, Peg. "A Comprehensive Book Talk: Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio. Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award 1998." http://www.mps.kl2.vt.us/msms/def/small.html. This site offers an abbreviated version of the printed autobiography.

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