

# **IOU's Short Guide**

## **IOU's by Ouida Sebestyen**

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## Overview

IOU's is a novel about how Stowe and Annie come to terms with their personal and family conflicts. The Garretts are a poor, hard-working mother and son who have a strong, loving relationship. Stowe's conflicts involve his dying grandfather's request to see him, but not Annie, and his inner struggle to be better to his mother than his father or grandfather. Annie's conflicts include her struggle to be an independent divorced parent and to resolve her differences with her father. Their plight is sympathetically portrayed as the novel describes the embarrassment of not having enough money at the grocery checkout, the excitement of the cave accident during the campout, Stowe's loss of his hundred dollar bill, the planning for the war on Karla, and the unexpected trip to Annie's hometown.

## About the Author

Ouida Sebestyen was born on February 13, 1924, in Vernon, Texas, to James Etheridge and Byrd Lantrip Dockery, teachers. She attended the University of Colorado and held jobs in such diverse places as a church nursery and a preliminary training school for aviation cadets. On December 22, 1960, she married Adam Sebestyen, a Hungarian refugee who had been her pen pal. They had one son, Corbin, and were divorced in 1966. Sebestyen now lives in Boulder, Colorado.

This author uses the pseudonym Ingen Sebestyen for short stories and anthologies; her young adult novels are published under the name of Ouida Sebestyen. Sebestyen has been writing since she was twenty, but her work was not published until thirty-five years later. That long apprenticeship honed her talent and skill. She has said that she hopes the story of her persistence will keep other unpublished writers from getting discouraged.

IOU's, *Far from Home*, and *Words by Heart* have all been nominated for numerous honors and ranked on several "best books" lists. The most wellknown of these, *Words by Heart*, received the International Reading Association Children's Book Award in 1980, the American Book Award in 1982, and the Texas Institute of Letters Children's Book Award in 1983. *Far from Home* won the Netherlands's Zilveren Griffel (Silver Pencil) Award as the best translated children's book of 1984.

# Setting

*Louisa* takes place in the present with most of the action occurring where Stowe and Annie live—a Colorado town at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. They drive Horseless, their old clunker truck, to Maydell, Oklahoma, Annie's hometown, and back.

The settings, though, are not a dominant element in this story; these two characters, their thoughts, and the events which change them are the significant ingredients.

# Social Sensitivity

There are no controversial cultural and sociological issues included in this novel. In IOU's, Sebestyen has presented the thoughts and feeling of Stowe and Annie in a very personal and sensitive manner. Their problems do not give parents and teachers cause for concern.

# Literary Qualities

The vivid narrative and well-developed characters make IOU's a touching, credible story. The narrative is enhanced by Sebestyen's wit, understanding, and compassion. The contemporary, conversational dialogue is convincing and these interactions make the reader care about the characters. In her humorous and sensitive style, the writer has captured their feelings and has conveyed a hopeful tone.



## Themes and Characters

The themes of this young adult novel are survival, the search for identity, and family ties, specifically the parentchild relationship. Through the action and the various primary and secondary characters, Sebestyen reveals these universal themes in a multilevel story.

Stowe Garrett is the central, most well-developed character. The only son of an independent mother and an absent father, this teen-ager is responsible and resourceful. He makes money for his family by delivering newspapers and mowing lawns. Stowe also has a "dreamer" side—he enters every sweepstakes contest he can find and yearns for the freedom to act on whims. Stowe's mother, Annie Garrett, is the other main character. She is an unconventional single parent who takes pride in her independence. She earns very little money, but has chosen her jobs as baby sitter and crafts maker so that she can stay at home to raise her son. Annie is kind and patient and understanding. Brownie, Stowe's best friend is also an important, although secondary, character. He is a fun-loving, carefree fellow who does not have much family life and loves to spend time with the Garretts.





# Topics for Discussion

1. What is the significance of the title, IOU's, in the story?
2. Describe Stowe's feelings about his mother. What do you think of Annie as a mother? What influences your opinion? Illustrate with specific examples in the book.

3. Stowe and Brownie are best friends. In what ways are they alike?

How are they different? Do you share any of their traits?

4. Stowe and Brownie have fun creating their own adventures. Which adventure appealed to you the most? Tell about some fun adventures that you and one of your friends had.

5. Describe the attitudes of the characters (Stowe, Brownie, Karla, Annie, Mrs. McWhitty, and Karla's grandfather) toward the war against Karla.

Do those of the teen-agers differ from those of the adults? How?

6. Humor is one of the devices Sebestyen uses to make the reader appreciate the characters in the story.

What are some of the humorous aspects? How do they make you feel about the characters involved?

7. Why do Stowe and Annie travel to Oklahoma? Why did Annie leave Oklahoma when she was young? Do you think that she achieved her goal?

8. Compare and contrast Stowe and Annie's feelings toward their fathers.

Do each of them change their opinions during the course of the story? How?

Why?

9. Imagine what the Garretts visit to Oklahoma would have been like if Annie's father had been there. What do you think his reaction would be to Annie? To Stowe? What would be their reaction to him?

10. There are several parent-child relationships in this book. What is your opinion of each? Using these relationships, give specific examples of positive and negative traits of the parents.



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. One critic has written that "a price must be paid" is a major, recurring theme in Sebastyen's works. The critic states: "Everything has its price. To gain something, you must lose something. And the dearer the prize, the greater the cost." Write a paper on how this correlates to the plot in *IOU's*.

2. In the beginning of this story, Stowe wants to win a sweepstakes.

Research articles which describe the results of people winning lotteries or sweepstakes. Write a paper on the immediate and long term gains or losses for these people.

3. When Horseless loses its mirror in the grocery store parking lot, Annie says, "We get the message. Never look back, right?" Discuss this idea as it applies to the various characters in the novel's end.

4. Read another of Sebastyen's works: *Words by Heart* or *Far from Home*.

Discuss the author's use of humor, realistic dialogue, or character development in her novels.

5. Read the author's article entitled "Family Matters." Discuss the issues she addresses with some adults and your friends. Write a paper discussing any differences in the views of the young people and the adults.

6. *The Girl in the Box* is a change from the other books written by Ouida Sebastyen. Which approach do you prefer? Why?

## For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something About the Author*. Vol. 39. Detroit: Gale Research, 1985: 187-189. This article includes a short biographical sketch, a list of writings, and autobiographical comments by the author.

Haley, B. "Words by Ouida Sebestyen."

*The ALAN Review* 10,3 (1983): 3-4, 6, 13. This article discusses common themes in Sebestyen's books.

Holtze, S. H., ed. *Fifth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983: 279-280. This short article is made up of an autobiographical sketch and a brief listing of the author's awards and books.

Sebestyen, Ouida. "Family Matters."

*The ALAN Review* 11,3 (1984): 1-3. In this article the author reveals interesting, intimate ideas about the responsibilities of writers and parents to young people.

———. *Something About the Author Autobiography Series*. Vol. 10. Edited by J. Nakamura. Detroit: Gale, 1990: 289-303. The personal anecdotes related in this autobiography, with photographs and a list of works, provide insight into Sebestyen's personality.

Senick, G. J., ed. *Children's Literature Review*. Detroit: Gale, 1989: 82-92.

This lengthy article offers commentary by Sebestyen on her career and writings, as well as general commentary on her by other writers.

Stine, J. C., and Marowski, D. G., eds.

*Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Detroit: Gale, 1984: 345-351. Fifteen writers examine Sebestyen's style and works.

## Related Titles

Each of the author's books has a young adult protagonist who struggles to make sense of problems in his or her life. In *Words by Heart*, Lena must find a way to cope with prejudice, violence, and injustice against black people.

Salty, in *Far from Home*, must accept the limitations set on his relationship with his father. In *On Fire*, Sammy must make his own decisions about his brother and Tater's hatred of blacks. In *The Girl in the Box*, Jackie must bear the frustration of living alone in darkness and wondering who her captor is.



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