

# **It's an Aardvark-Eat-Turtle World Short Guide**

## **It's an Aardvark-Eat-Turtle World by Paula Danziger**

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## Overview

More than anything else, fourteen-year-old Rosie Wilson, biracial daughter of a mixed marriage, wants to be part of a family, all living happily under one roof. At first it seems she will get her wish when her mother and the father of Rosie's best friend fall in love and move in together, taking Rosie and Phoebe with them.

The euphoric fantasy of a "happily ever after" family and the ceremony of commitment they make to each other lasts only one day, until Mindy admonishes Phoebe about her public display of affection (making out in a parked car in front of the house with her boyfriend). Phoebe explodes in anger and stops talking to the rest of the family, except for Rosie, who is the only family member to whom everyone is talking.

Rosie's idealistic view of what she wants a family to be is taxed as she is forced to see people as they are, with their shortcomings and their own conception of how family members should relate to each other. Rosie feels she is the one who must always cope with relationships and wishes the adults would solve the problems instead of leaving them for her to deal with. After a very large blow up, a family council is called and the four of them try to talk through the problems in their relationships. Some apologies and promises are made, and the family is back on tentatively good footing. Phoebe's earlier invitation to Rosie to go to Toronto with her and her mother and stepfather is renewed and Rosie accepts.

The trip to Toronto turns out to be fantastic for Rosie when she meets Phoebe's new cousin, Jason, nephew of her step-father, and they really like each other. Beyond what Rosie even dreamed of in a Prince Charming, she discovers she and Jason have many things in common, including their love of puns. Phoebe, who insists she has invited Rosie to keep her company, is offended and becomes angry again.

Phoebe spends time with her mother during the Toronto trip, and at breakfast the day they leave for New York, she drops a bombshell on everyone.

She has decided to move back to New York with her mother. With Phoebe gone, Rosie takes over their room, cleans it up, removes Phoebe's posters and re-arranges her own and leaves one drawer empty for Phoebe when she visits. On one of Phoebe's visits, Rosie demonstrates her maturity when she is able to talk through the family's and Phoebe's problems with Phoebe. She begins to "realize that being a family doesn't mean that everything goes smoothly." It means families and friendships change and grow, and they takes a great deal of work to succeed.

## About the Author

Paula Danziger was born in Washington, D.C. on August 18, 1944, to Samuel and Carolyn Danziger. Her growing up years were spent in various towns, including Arlington, Virginia and Metuchen, New Jersey. In those years, she always knew she wanted to be a writer. She studied for teaching at Montclair State College, where she met John Ciardi and became a frequent baby sitter for his children. He encouraged her in her studies, helped her understand poetry, and gave her a sense of language structure.

After earning a B.A. in English in 1967, she began working as a substitute teacher, which led to full-time teaching at the junior high level. Three years later she returned to school for a master's degree, but her studies were interrupted by a car accident which left her with a whiplash. A couple of days later as her mother was taking her to the doctor, they were hit head-on by a drunken driver. Danziger hit the windshield and suffered temporary brain damage which left her unable to read.

As part of her "coming back" from the accident, she started writing her first book, *The Cat Ate My Gynsuit*. She suffered nightmares about her accident which made it very hard for her to function. Her feelings of helplessness and terror brought back bad memories from her childhood and she needed therapy. She took the finished pages of her writing to many of her therapy appointments. Partly as a consequence, *The Cat Ate My Gynsuit* is her most autobiographical book. She was very much like Marcy: a fat kid who hated her father and was frustrated by her mother. The book was published in 1974 and dedicated to John Ciardi. *The Pistachio Prescription* followed in 1978.

The success of her next books enabled her to leave teaching and write full time in 1978.

She says of herself in *Something About the Author*, "All writers write from deep experience. For me, that is childhood. From it flow feelings of vulnerability , compassion , and strength. Perhaps it would be better to say that I write 'of' young people rather than 'for' or 'to' them. Writers tell the best stories we possibly can, hopefully in ways that others will like. . . .

I do 'sense memory' work as a preparation for writing. I imagine what a character's closet might look like. For me stories begin with character rather than plot, so for a book to hang together, the characters must be fully imagined."

Teaching influenced her writing as she listened intently to the conversations of her students' concerns about appearance, divorce, fighting in the family, dating, and school pressures.

Her characters reflect her students. To stay relevant to young people, Danziger spends much time in classrooms, talking to kids and listening to them.



Danziger cares about kids, books, and creativity. She enjoys working with teachers who work with kids.

Ideas for books come easily to her, but she says she must live with an idea for quite a while before she begins writing.

She bounces her ideas and writing off a small circle of good friends and reads them to kids, all of whom react to her writing and critique for her.

Danziger is a voracious reader, and among her favorite writers for children and young adults are Judy Blume, E. L. Konigsburg, Francine Pascal, and Lois Lowry. She says of herself in *Something About the Author*, "My major ability as a writer, hopefully, is to tell a good honest story and let people laugh when it is appropriate."

Danziger's books have received a number of awards and honors: *The Cat Ate My Gynsuit* received the New Jersey Institute of Technology Award, 1976; a Young Reader Medal Nomination from the California Reading Association, 1977; the Massachusetts Children's Book Award, first runner-up, 1979; the Nene Award from the Hawaii Association of School Librarians and the Hawaii Library Association, 1980; and Children's Choice award from the International Reading Association and the Children's Book Council, 1980. *The Pistachio Prescription* received the Child Study Association of America's Children's Book of the Year award, 1978; the Massachusetts Children's Book Award from the Education Department of Salem State College, 1979; the Nene Award, 1979; the Children's Choice award from the International Reading Association and the Children's Book Council, 1979; the California Young Reader Medal Nomination, 1981; and the Arizona Young Reader Award, 1983. *Can You Sue Your Parents for Malpractice?* received the Children's Choice award from the International Reading Association and the Children's Book Council, 1980. *There's a Bat in Bunk Five* received the Children's Choice award from the International Reading Association and the Children's Book Council, 1981; the CRABery Award from Prince George's County Memorial Library System (Maryland), 1982; and the Young Readers Medal, 1984. *The Divorce Express* received the Children's Choice from the International Reading Association and the Children's Book Council, 1983, and the South Carolina Young Adult Book Award from the South Carolina Association of School Librarians, 1985. *It's an Aardvark-EatTurtle World* won the 1985, Parents' Choice Award for Literature from the Parents' Choice Foundation, 1985; it was exhibited at the Bologna International Children's Book Fair, 1985, and was selected one of the Child Study Association of America's Children's Books of the Year, 1985.

## Setting

It's an Aardvark-Eat-Turtle World takes place in Woodstock, New York, a small community whose population swells to nearly 15,000 with summer tourists, near the end of summer. Woodstock was the location of the Woodstock Music Festival in 1969 which helped mold the lifestyle of Rosie's mother, Mindy, and her boyfriend, Jim, who were youths during that period. Mindy still dresses in a "Woodstock" style, and the young protagonist, Rosie, has learned a love of folk music from her father and her collections of folk music and black literature form a picture of a sensitive and loving young lady.



# Social Sensitivity

Danziger presents real issues and real problems in *It's an Aardvark-EatTurtie-World*. It may be a commentary on today's society that many people ignore the dangers of sleeping around and moving in together, cohabitating.

The insecurity for children is the real possibility of this arrangement splitting up, too, when problems crop up and it gets tough. It is probably safe to say that everyone wants to be secure in and certain of the love of parents.

Another issue for Rosie is her biracial heritage. Most classrooms are racially mixed and biracial children have to learn to deal with their "uniqueness," perhaps work to fit in, struggling with not being all black or all white and the problems that may cause in friendships and extended family relationships. Young people tend to be idealists, even as Rosie is, looking for the "perfect" family and must learn that families and other relationships are never free of problems, as Danziger's novel suggests.

Teen-agers may think and sometimes behave with a degree of sophistication in the area of sex, but they may have the same uneasy, "weird" feelings about parents involved in sexual activity that Rosie has about her mother and Jim. Sexual intimacies crop up throughout the book, although there is never anything explicitly presented or in poor taste. In Chapter 10, Rosie is frustrated with Phoebe's refusal to give in to make amends with her father and Mindy, and an epithet springs to Rosie's mind. It is not offensive and has not been used for shock value by Danziger.

## Literary Qualities

Some critics have characterized Danziger's writing as superficial, light reading, but young people gobble her up. Her writing has a natural flow and breezy style with much humor and conversation. Readers can say, "I know that feeling" and identify with it in Danziger's characters.





## Themes and Characters

Rosie Wilson is the fourteen-year-old protagonist in *It's an Aardvark-Eat-Turtle World*. She is the daughter of a white Jewish mother, Mindy, and a black Protestant father and is striving to keep track of the black part of her heritage. She is a very neat person who keeps things in their proper places, and who loves mornings, folk music, and puns. She fantasizes about a Prince Charming and the "happily ever after" kind of life found in fairy tales.

She and her mother have been living alone in Woodstock, New York, since the divorce of her parents, traveling *The Divorce Express*, a bus, to New York City on weekends to visit with her father and his second wife and step children. Although she and her mother enjoy a very close relationship, the divorce has created a deep longing for normalcy and yearning for a feeling of belonging in a family in Rosie.

Rosie's mother, Mindy, is a product of the 1960s and Woodstock; she is a free spirit who marched in demonstrations against actions by the government in Vietnam. Unlike Rosie, she is messy, describing it as "creative disorder." She is a quiet, caring person who works hard at maintaining a close relationship with Rosie. She is a writer working on a children's book and waitressing to help pay the bills.

Phoebe is Rosie's best friend. They are opposites in several ways: Phoebe is messy, is a night person, loves to shop, has a boyfriend, is close to her father but has a very poor relationship with her mother, is self-centered, and has a seething anger building up inside her.

Jim, Phoebe's father, is also a product of the 1960s. He is an artist, sensitive and caring, and loves Phoebe dearly. He is trying to stay true and faithful in his responsibilities to Phoebe, yet walk a fine line of commitment to Mindy and Rosie. He tries hard to please everyone.

The universal themes of family and belonging are strong themes in *It's An Aardvark-Eat-Turtle World*. Rosie's thoughts in the second paragraph of the story make her feelings quite clear, "What I really want more than anything is to be part of a family, all living happily under one roof." Young people seeking the normalcy and security that a family can provide in the tumultuous years of adolescence will identify with Rosie's desires.

Relationships is a strong theme whether it is the drive to be popular or get along with your best friend. Rosie reflects that desire to get along with her family and friends and would like to be popular enough to have a boyfriend, someone special, her own Prince Charming.

Sometimes being different can be anathema to teen-agers. Rosie is definitely different. She realizes that her biracial heritage places a burden on her in relationships with others. She realizes her parents no longer have to deal with it since the divorce. Young people in general want to be liked and accepted by their peers for who they are.

They are likely to recognize and identify with Rosie's situation.



## Topics for Discussion

1. How does the title, *It's an Aardvark-Eat-Turtle World*, foreshadow the story?
2. *It's an Aardvark-Eat Turtle World* is a story about family relationships. If you could choose your own circumstances, what kind of family would you be a part of?
3. Read Chapter 1 and react to Rosie's deepest desire to "be part of a family, all living happily under one roof." Is that possible? What kind of family would or could fulfill this wish?
4. Mindy is uncertain about the permanence of their new living arrangement and it slips out unbidden.

Jim makes the statement to Rosie, "Honey, I know that it's hard to be certain of many relationships . . ." Do you agree with Jim's statement? Why?

5. How do you feel about their ceremony making themselves a family? Is it really a commitment they will feel compelled to keep and not walk out when the going gets tough? Would a legal marriage ceremony be a better commitment? Why? What is a family?
6. Rosie is uncomfortable about the intimacy between her mother and Phoebe's father. Why is she uncomfortable? Would you be uncomfortable if you were in her place?
7. Does Mindy have the right to tell Phoebe not to park in front of the house with Dave and "make out"?

Why? What does Phoebe mean by the statement, "How can you tell me what's right when you and my father live together and aren't even married?"

and "Who do you think you are to tell me what I should and shouldn't do?

"You're not my mother." What point is Phoebe trying to make? Is she right?

Why?

8. What do you think a proper relationship should be like between young men and women at fourteen years of age?
9. Rosie has mixed religious and racial parentage, a black Protestant father and a white Jewish mother. How does this affect how she feels about herself?

How much of a problem is her mixed heritage?



10. Rosie is on the receiving end of harassment because of her skin color and treated shabbily by a man in Toronto. Do you think Rosie handled the situation properly? What would you do in a similar situation?

11. After the confrontation on the waterfront, Jason says he has been brought up to be a pacifist, and yet he wanted to kill the guy who said the hateful and disgusting words to Rosie.

Why are these concepts incongruous?

12. Rosie believes that a person should never have to choose between a best friend and a boyfriend or girlfriend; and that a person should never have to choose between a best friend and her or his own mother or father.

Do you agree?

13. Rosie calls her mother "Mindy".

Does this seem strange to you? How would your parents feel if you called them by their first names instead of Mom or Dad?

14. When Mindy sells her book, Jim suggests that the money be used for the family, because he still considered them a family, "sort of." What has happened to the commitment he made at the beginning of the story?

15. Explain Mindy's statement on perfection in marriage, "Honey, don't expect perfection. It'll only cause trouble."

16. What does Rosie mean by the last sentence in Chapter 23, "I'm also very glad that she's brought me up the way she has"?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Woodstock, New York, is a real place. Use library resources and find Woodstock on a map. Find out as much as you can about it. Perhaps your local travel agency would have some information on it. Bring in whatever materials you can find and make a bulletin board display to share with your classmates.

2. The music festival referred to took place in the summer of 1969. Research the Woodstock Music Festival of 1969.

Either make a short oral report on your findings or write a newspaper style report to distribute to classmates.

3. Find someone who attended the 1969 Woodstock Music Festival and do an interview on audio tape or video tape to share with your classmates.

4. A family council is called to deal with the trouble from Phoebe's blowup.

If you have family councils in your family, make and display a chart with the ground rules your family uses.

5. Devise a set of rules you would suggest for a family council in your family. Put them on a chart and display it.

6. The Woodstock Musical Festival took place during the Vietnam War.

Young men who opposed the government and our involvement in that conflict fled to Canada to avoid military conscription in the United States. Find a Vietnam veteran who will talk to you about that conflict. Tape an interview.

How does he feel about those who fled to Canada? If he had it to do over, what would he do?

7. Mike, the brother to Phoebe's stepfather, avoided military conscription (the draft) by fleeing to Canada. In the story, we learn that he could come back to the U.S. to live now if he wanted. Find out when amnesty was granted to these men and by whom.

8. As Rosie's best friend, write a letter to her with your view about what it is like to be part of a family. Suggest what she should expect from other family members and herself. What contribution should she make to the family?

9. As Phoebe's best friend, write a letter to her suggesting what her relationship should be with her boyfriend in public as well as in private. Give her good reasons for your suggestions and concern for her.



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*Publishers Weekly* (July 19, 1991): 37.

A discussion of the popularity of Danziger among British young people.

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Detroit: Gale Research, 1985. A cumulative index to more than 200,000 reviews of approximately 55,000 titles. Includes review sources for five titles by Danziger.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

Relationships and self-esteem are strong themes in the books Danziger writes for young people. Titles by Danziger with similar themes include: *The Divorce Express*, *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* and its sequel, *There's a Bat in Bunk Five*, *Can You Sue Your Parents for Malpractice?* and *The Pistachio Prescription*.

Listening Library has made filmstrips with accompanying cassettes for *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*, 1985; *The Pistachio Prescription*, 1985; *There's a Bat in Bunk Five*, 1985; *Can You Sue Your Parents for Malpractice?* 1986; and *The Divorce Express*, 1986.



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