

Journey to an 800 Number Short Guide

Journey to an 800 Number by E. L. Konigsburg

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Overview

Children are exposed to peer pressure at an early age, forced to reconcile their search for self-identity with the need to be "normal" and fit in with the group.

Journey to an 800 Number tells the story of one boy's search for a sense of self, a pivotal journey which he, like many young adults, embarks on unawares. All Max knows at the start of the novel is that he must spend the month of August in Texas with his father, Woody, a camel-keeper, and his father's camel, Ahmed, while his newly remarried mother honeymoones on a cruise ship. A well-adjusted, intelligent, but cynical twelve-year-old. Max has lived with his status-conscious mother since his parents divorced eight years earlier. Max enlivens his first-person narration with deft observations and dry humor. Although Journey to an 800 Number deals with serious subject matter—the only child of divorced parents reevaluating his goals and learning to accept his nonconformist father—Königsburg draws the reader into Max's story with her humor, imaginative plot, and quirky details.

About the Author

Elaine Lobl Konigsburg was born on February 10, 1930, in New York City but spent most of her childhood in small towns in Pennsylvania. She worked her way through Pittsburgh's experiences and her insights into human behavior. Her first two books—Jennifer, Hecate, Macbeth, William McKinley, and Me, Elizabeth and From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler—were both published in 1967 and created an unprecedented critical sensation the following year when the Carnegie-Mellon University by taking odd jobs: manager of a dormitory laundry, playground instructor, waitress, and library page. In 1952 she graduated with a bachelor's degree in chemistry and married David Konigsburg that same year.

Chemistry, however, did not prove to be her calling. In graduate school she blew up a lab sink—twice. While teaching at a private girls' school, Konigsburg found she was more interested in her students' thoughts and actions than in teaching science.

Konigsburg also found her own three children's behavior fascinating, and when her youngest son entered kindergarten, she began writing about their former was named runner-up for the Newbery Medal, and the latter captured the coveted award. The author illustrated both books.

Konigsburg experiments in her books, taking the ordinary one step further and exploring the results. Her books are humorous, lively, unique, and a joy to read.

Setting

In this contemporary story, Max lives with his mother, Sally, at a private school in Havemyer, Pennsylvania, outside of Philadelphia. Groomed by his mother for the elite social ranks of the Fortnum School—which he will enter in the fall as a seventh-grader—Max reluctantly leaves the comfortable confines of Pennsylvania for a month's stay with his father. He meets Woody in Smilax, Texas, where Ahmed, the camel, is appearing at summer school fairs. Woody lives in a tiny trailer in the transient section of a trailer park. From there, father and son drive with Ahmed to Dallas for a convention job, and then on to Tulsa, Oklahoma, for the Tulsa State Fair. After a gig outside of Denver, Colorado, they head for Las Vegas, where Max meets his godmother and stays in her hotel penthouse.



Social Sensitivity

Max, a precocious twelve-year-old whose parents were influenced by 1960s notions of communal living and "free love," encounters a variety of offbeat, earthy characters in his travels with his father. Some of the language and incidents in *Journey to an 800 Number*, which is told entirely from Max's perspective, may seem offensively realistic.

Konigsburg does not flinch from realistic dialogue in her attempt to convincingly and sensitively address the subject of a boy growing up in a fragmented society. The language of the children in the story is generally sophisticated and humorous but reflects the prevalence of vulgar slang in contemporary language.

Readers should be aware that Konigsburg occasionally uses expletives for characterization purposes.

Another sensitive issue arises when Max discovers that his mother, Sally, was pregnant and unmarried when she met Woody; he also learns that his mother has lied to him, telling him his grandparents are dead, when in fact they have rejected her as a result of her unplanned—and, to them, disgraceful—pregnancy. Max is initially shocked to learn the truth about his parents, but he soon accepts Woody as his true father.

Konigsburg handles the incident in a straightforward, nonjudgmental manner. Max rationalizes his legitimacy, saying, "I've joined the crowd. I'll bet half the first-borns at Fortnum School can't add nine months between the time their parents got married and the time they were born." Max is also worldly enough to remain relatively unfazed when his father stays with Ruthie Britten during the visit to the dude ranch. Max understands that the two have a sexual relationship, but aside from feeling left out and noting that Ruthie is not as attractive as his mother, Max is undisturbed.

Because Max accepts and adapts to his parents' divorce and new relationships, Konigsburg's emphasis falls not on her characters' morality but rather on the qualities that transcend conventional standards of comportment. She highlights Woody's unconditional generosity, tolerance, and compassion, showing that despite his unusual way of life, he is a dedicated and loving father.

In contrast, Max's grandparents are so tied to convention that they abandon their daughter and grandson. Sally, who doggedly pursues upper-middle-class status and security, immerses herself in pretension and instills this pretense in her son as well. Hence Max is prone to making snap, snide judgments about people such as Mama Rosita simply because she is fat and heavily made-up, and about her children, whose Mexican names he derides. But Woody passes on to Max a reverence for his surroundings and for others.



Literary Qualities

By employing Max as the narrator of *Journey to an 800 Number*, Konigsburg reinforces her theme, choosing a personal, unique voice rather than anonymous third-person narration.

Max tells his story as if he were talking out loud, using sentence fragments, slang, and sarcasm. His often humorous, colorful descriptions reveal Konigsburg's symbolic intentions. For instance, when Max travels south to meet his father—significantly leaving the crowded, urban environment of the northeast for the lazy, sprawling space of Texas—he immediately encounters heat and humidity so thick that he says, "I felt that I was breathing mayonnaise."

Although he tries to resist the heat by refusing to take off his school jacket, Max gradually adapts to the southern climate, just as he eventually allows his father's easy-going warmth and affection to envelop him.

Konigsburg begins the book with background information on the main characters, establishes the initial conflict between the snobbish Maximilian and the down-to-earth Woody, and sets the scene for their circus-like travels together. Chapters in the book correspond to the change of setting; each time Max and Woody move to a new place, Konigsburg starts a new chapter.

Throughout the book Konigsburg sets up parallel scenes to emphasize the contrasts among characters. At the beginning of the novel Sally appears only as a disembodied voice, arguing with Woody (whom she addresses as "Woodrow") about her desire for a real house and china plates; at the end of the novel Sally appears, through Trina's recollection, as Sally Ghost, a scared, lost, pregnant girl whom Woody befriends and later marries. Sally Malatesta is preparing for a luxurious cruise and an affluent lifestyle; the young Sally Ghost has no secure destination in mind as she drives to New Mexico with Trina Rose in a dusty old station wagon. As Sabrina has stated, everyone wears a disguise and pretends to be someone else. When Max learns the truth about his mother's youth, he recognizes that she has been pretending all along, and he learns to reject his own pretensions.

In another parallel scene, F. Hugo Malatesta, Max's stepfather, hands Max fifty dollars and utters his only line of dialogue: "Spend it foolishly." Later in the story, Woody offers Max a hard-earned ten dollars, which Max arrogantly refuses. The contrast between the two father figures favors the genuine, thoughtful Woody over the indifferent, impersonal Hugo. Max's values change during the course of the novel, until he is able to recognize Woody's wealth of love and generosity.

Konigsburg also creates a parallel between Lilly and Sabrina's mother-daughter relationship and Woody and Max's father-son relationship. Although both Lilly and Sabrina pretend to be other people at conventions, they are genuinely themselves with each other.



Max, however, pretends to be Maximilian and denies the name "Bo" when he is with Woody.

Konigsburg's symbolic names lend clarity to her thematic concepts.

Woody's name suggests a man of the earth; he shows respect for the first settlers of the West, the Native Americans, by following their custom in naming his child. Maximilian and Hugo Malatesta's bombastic names suggest wealth and power and contrast dramatically with the natural names "Woody" and "Rainbow."



Themes and Characters

R. Maximilian Stubbs is a twelve-year-old snob, intolerant of those who do not conform to his notions of normalcy.

Bright and witty, Max smugly enjoys his intelligence and feels he deserves a life of ease and comfort. Like his mother, he looks down on his father's occupation and nomadic way of life. He tries to maintain a pretense of aloof independence when he meets his father at the airport; despite the heat, Max makes a point of wearing his navy school jacket, emblazoned with the school crest, and carrying his own luggage.

Max's first initial stands for "Rainbow."

He gained this name when, shortly after his birth, Woody—in accordance with an old Native American custom—walked blindfolded out of the hospital, took off the blindfold upon stepping outside, and named Max after the first thing he saw, a rainbow. He becomes the more civilized "Maximilian" when his mother begins her quest for an upper-class way of life but is called "Bo" again during his month's stay with his father while his mother honeymoones with his new, affluent stepfather, F. Hugo Malatesta the First.

Max's father, Woody Stubbs, is a freeliving soul of the 1960s. Roaming from conventions to fairgrounds selling rides on his camel, Woody accepts people for what they are and helps those that he can. A hardworking, unassuming man, he genuinely loves Max but never lectures him, preferring to nudge the boy gently toward a new awareness of and sensitivity toward others. As Max interacts with people of different economic and ethnic backgrounds, he gradually acquires a sense of humility and compassion. Every place they go, Max meets people who admire his father for his kindness and generosity; he sees that these people treat one another with the love and loyalty of a true family.

When Max learns that Woody is not his biological father, he still considers him his true dad. Just as Woody gave Max's mother, Sally, a home and the legitimate husband she desired when she was pregnant, unwed, and alone, he also gives Max unconditional love and support. Woody teaches Max to enjoy being himself, Bo Stubbs, and to stop aspiring to the "first-class" persona of Maximilian Malatesta the First.

Most of the characters Max meets during his trip help him to appreciate his father and to better understand himself and his past. Mama Rosita, a hefty Mexican-American woman from Texas who "vacations" with her four children each year by selling tacos at the Tulsa State Fair, feeds Max and helps him care for his father when Woody becomes sick.

At the dude ranch in Colorado, Max meets his father's special friend, Ruthie Britten, who works as a school librarian in the winter and a waitress at the ranch in the summer. Max at first resents his father for moving in with Ruthie during their stay at the ranch but later



realizes that Woody is teaching him not to impose unreasonable expectations on their father-son relationship.

Max meets Trina Rose, a famous English singer, in Las Vegas, where Ahmed is performing in her "Arabian Chic" hotel show. Trina Rose introduced Woody and Sally, and is Max's godmother. Fat, outspoken, and accepting of others, she invites Max to stay with her in her penthouse suite. Max enjoys both the luxury and the straightforward conversations about his parents that he has with Trina.

Max also meets a mother and daughter whose unique, nomadic way of life causes him to reflect on his own. Lilly and her fifth-grade daughter, Sabrina, turn up at a truck stop, a convention of travel agents in Dallas, a sorority convention at the dude ranch, and at Trina Rose's Las Vegas hotel. Max is attracted to Sabrina, who collects information about freaks because she believes that only freaks wear no disguise as they go through life. Sabrina points out that Max's Fortnum School blazer, which he always wears in public, is a type of disguise. Because Sabrina and Lilly attend different conventions with different last names, Max figures out that they skip out without paying their bills.

Sabrina confirms his suspicions and explains that she and her mother enjoy pretending to be convention guests.

Konigsburg's thematic concerns emerge most clearly in Sabrina's explanation of her mother's motivation for attending conferences under assumed names. According to Sabrina, Lilly works as an "800-number" operator for several catalogues. Hers "is the most anonymous job in the world, speaking to people you'll never know and who will never know you. Always available. Always a polite voice. Never a face. Never a personality. Never a before. Never an after." Because her job trains her to be anonymous, Lilly can fit in anywhere.

She studies a group of people and knows what traits she and Sabrina should assume in order to make them more like the group, and thus more anonymous.

Sabrina helps Max realize that in attempting to conform to the codes and manners of the other boys at Fortnum School, he has come to equate anonymity with acceptance. By the end of his vacation, Max has learned about pretending, acceptance, love, and loyalty. Rainbow Maximilian Stubbs takes the first steps toward understanding himself with reluctance but also with humor.



Topics for Discussion

1. What is the significance of the title?

Is it effective? Why?

2. Why did Konigsburg choose a camel as the animal in the story? Would a horse have served the same purpose?

3. How do Mama Rosita and her children help Max and Woody at the Tulsa State Fair?

4. Describe Trina Rose. What is her daily routine?

5. The author uses similes throughout her book. Give examples and discuss whether they enrich or detract from the book's value.

6. In a tongue-in-cheek section, Max describes the convention of social workers. How does Ruthie Britten handle these people?

7. How is Lilly's identity as an 800number operator similar to Max's idea of being "normal"?

8. Why is Sabrina fascinated with freaks? Explain her notion of the difference between freaks and eccentrics.

9. What method of research does Lilly use to plan vacations?

10. What does Woody do with the newspaper clippings about himself?

What does this reveal about his character?

11. At the Tulsa State Fair, Max says of Emmy, "She held my hand again just like someone who is really her own age."

What does he mean by this?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Max's mother plays an important part in the story, even though she is never physically present. Trace her transformation from Sally Ghost to Sarah J. Malatesta.
2. Mama Rosita's fourteen-year-old son, Manuelo, steps in for the bedridden Woody and assumes responsibility for Ahmed; later, Max accuses Manuelo of cheating Woody out of his profits. Woody and Trina Rose have the same reaction to Max's story of his run-in with Manuelo. What is this reaction? How does Max feel?
3. Lilly's physical appearance changes at each convention she attends. How does she look at the travel agents' convention, the sorority convention, and the physical therapists' convention? Does her personality change as well? How?
4. How does Max see Woody at the beginning of his visit? At the end?
5. Max says, "I had never thought of myself as strange; I can honestly say that I have spent all my time that I can remember trying not to be strange." At what point in the story does Max learn to accept and enjoy his idiosyncrasies and forget about being "normal"? What events lead up to this decision?

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