

Just Be Gorgeous Short Guide

Just Be Gorgeous by Barbara Wersba

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Contents

Just Be Gorgeous Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	6
Social Sensitivity.....	7
Literary Qualities.....	8
Themes and Characters.....	9
Topics for Discussion.....	11
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	12
For Further Reference.....	13
Related Titles.....	15
Copyright Information.....	16

Overview

"Just be gorgeous," is her mother's advice, but Heidi can only feel lonely and misunderstood until she meets Jeffrey, a gay, homeless street dancer who teaches her to value herself. This novel presents an engaging portrait of two unusual young people and the friendship that makes Heidi start to view the world—and herself—in a different way.



About the Author

Barbara Wersba came to be a writer after an earlier career on the stage. Born August 19, 1932, in Chicago, to Robert and Lucy Jo Wersba, she was an only child who escaped loneliness by writing stories and dreaming about working in the theater. The family was living in San Mateo, California when eleven-year-old Barbara joined a community theater group. She began with backstage tasks, such as fetching coffee and running errands, but soon rose through the ranks and made her stage debut. After her parents divorced, Wersba and her mother moved to New York, where Barbara immersed herself in Broadway theater, and spent time visiting the city's museums, bookstores, and many arts venues. While still a teenager she studied acting at the Neighborhood Playhouse and danced with Martha Graham's company.

After graduating with a degree in drama from Bard College, Wersba moved back to New York City and into the usual lifestyle of an aspiring actress: sharing a Greenwich village flat with other young entertainers, making the rounds of casting agents and auditions, and picking up outside work to pay the bills, including waitressing, typing, and department store clerking. She experienced some success on the stage, acting in summer stock and touring companies, but paralyzing stage fright was a constant companion. Wersba soon reached a turning point in both her acting career and her life.

With a group of friends, she started an acting company; one of their first projects was a production entitled *When I Was a Child*, comprised of short stories about childhood adapted for the stage. Although Wersba had been writing for years, she never considered her work publishable, but adapting these stories satisfied a creative need and paved the way for her career as an author.

Although the production toured for three months and there were even plans to take the show to Broadway, in many ways the tour was disastrous. Wersba ended up seriously ill with hepatitis, and spent her recuperation at a friend's house in Martha's Vineyard. The friend suggested that she bide her time by writing a story. Through a series of events that Wersba credits to "beginner's luck," this first story, *The Boy Who Loved the Sea*, was published in 1961.

Over the next several years she wrote a number of brief, fanciful volumes for children. While working on a historical story, the contemporary voice of a teenage male began to echo in her mind and she put the historical manuscript away while she captured the first-person narrative of a lonely fourteen-year-old boy named Albert Scully and his relationship with an eccentric elderly woman in *The Dream Watcher*. This groundbreaking novel changed the course of Wersba's writing career. Although she continued to write an occasional volume for young readers—usually stories of dark-toned whimsy—her focus has been on young adult novels about sensitive loners searching for self-awareness and love in an often uncaring world.

Wersba considers herself a loner and spends much of her time exploring nature and caring for stray animals. Yet she also spent seven years running a country store with a



partner, has experienced the artistic collaboration of adapting *The Dream Watcher* for the stage (two early productions starred one of Wersba's childhood idols, Eva LeGallienne), and has run her own school, The Women's Writing Workshop. Throughout, she has continued to publish young adult novels to generally positive critical response. During a lengthy professional relationship with the legendary writer and editor Charlotte Zolotow, Wersba produced *Tunes for a Small Harmonica*, which was nominated for the National Book Award in 1977, and two trilogies. The first—composed of *Fat : A Love Story* and its sequels, *Beautiful Losers* and *Love Is the Crooked Thing*—concerns overweight, headstrong Rita Formica. Heidi Rosenbloom, a teenage dogwalker from New York City is introduced in *Just Be Gorgeous*. This book is followed by two more novels about Heidi: *Wonderful Me* and *The Farewell Kid*.

Setting

Sometimes it is possible to be lonely in the biggest city in the nation. That is the case for Heidi, who lives in Manhattan.

New York is vividly portrayed in the novel.

Readers will be taken on a virtual tour of the city, from the plush apartments of the upper east side, down to the theater district, Greenwich Village, and points between.

On the streets, professional dogwalkers stroll with eight dogs in tow, while "car shepherds" move automobiles from one side of the street to the other in order to comply with parking policies. The characters go to Elizabeth Arden's and Tiffany's, but sometimes eat in out-of-the-way diners. They ride in cabs driven by mouthy taxi drivers or travel on buses "so crowded you could hardly breathe." Yet for Heidi the New York setting only comes alive when she is with Jeffrey. After spending Christmas at each of her parents' homes and barely noticing the surroundings, Heidi meets Jeffrey at a small coffee shop "and suddenly it was Christmas, and everything was beautiful" and she begins to notice the red-and-green tablecloths and pine boughs that decorate the restaurant. Similarly, Heidi's friendship with Jeffrey makes her see New York in springtime as a "magical place." As in other books by Barbara Wersba, the author shows that being contented makes one open to— and appreciative of—one's surroundings.

Although the novel is tightly focused on Heidi and Jeffrey's relationship, there are three separate levels of economic class represented in the book so the reader is able to compare and contrast this diversity in New York lifestyles. Heidi's life is relatively affluent. She attends a private school (which she compares to a country club) and lives in a fifteenth-floor apartment complete with antique furniture, a piano, and a Tiffany lamp. Her father, Leonard, lives in a oneroom apartment on 13th Street that is filled with piles of laundry, empty coffee cups, and filled ashtrays. Then there is the abandoned building where Jeffrey lives. Homeless people sleep on mattresses that line the floor, there is no electricity or water, and "a smell of despair" hangs in the air.

Events in the story occur from the Christmas season through the spring. Although no specific year is designated, readers with an interest in Broadway shows may be able to pinpoint the exact month and year the story begins. Early in the book Heidi goes to buy tickets to the revival of *Sweet Charity* which is playing at the Minskoff Theater.

Since *Sweet Charity* played at the Minskoff from April 1986 through March 1987, this means Heidi went to the box office in December of 1986 and Jeffrey leaves for California in May of 1987—approximately a year before this book was published in the spring of 1988.



Social Sensitivity

Heidi lives a privileged, though lonely, life. Her friendship with Jeffrey provides close contact with two social issues—homosexuality and homelessness—that are unrelated except for the fact that both impact her new friend. Jeffrey is comfortable with his sexuality throughout the novel. He is depicted as an effeminate, even flamboyant, figure who bleaches his hair, wears eye makeup, and is clothed in a woman's fur jacket. The author does not disparage Jeffrey's appearance, but merely points out that he represents just one kind of gay male. When Heidi asks how many kinds of gay people there are, Jeffrey replies, "How many kinds of straight people are there?" and points out that "the gay world is only a mirrorimage of the straight world" and is filled with many different people, some that have one partner and some that are promiscuous, some that are effeminate and some that are very masculine. The issue of hate crimes against gays is addressed. Jeffrey left his home town of Chicago because he was being beaten up, and Heidi is walking with Jeffrey in Greenwich Village when he is attacked by two hoods who taunt him with epithets based on his appearance before jumping him.

Attitudes toward homosexuality are reflected in the different characters' responses to Jeffrey. Heidi is without prejudice. When she asks Jeffrey if gays ever change, her question is motivated not by homophobia, but by her own attraction to her friend.

Heidi's parents are both biased against gays.

Although her own sense of propriety allows Shirley Rosenbloom to be polite toward Jeffrey when he comes to dinner, she is quick to tell her daughter, "These people have diseases" and she bans Jeffrey from coming back to their apartment. Despite her "overwhelming desire" to tell her father about Jeffrey, Heidi recalls her father's prejudice against an effeminate office boy that he once fired and knows that telling him about Jeffrey "would have been a disaster." Conversely, Jeffrey's friend Sister Margaret has always been accepting of him.

Other attitudes toward Jeffrey's sexuality are represented by minor characters. A doctor who treats Jeffrey at the hospital looks at his appearance and says, "If you ask for trouble, you get it." The savvy actress Janet Margolis does not need to ask about Jeffrey's orientation, but asks Heidi, "You're in love with that boy, aren't you?" and the affirmative answers causes a "sad smile" to cross her face.

The topic of homelessness is also addressed in the novel. Jeffrey lives in an abandoned building with several other homeless persons including a former lawyer and an insane woman. Heidi only visits the building once, but the experience affects her. She shows her sensitivity by buying Jeffrey meals and later tries to give him money so he can stay in a hotel. Although he is barred from visiting, every time her mother goes out of town, Heidi has Jeffrey over so he can have a homemade dinner, take a bath, and spend the night in a real bed.

Literary Qualities

Because Heidi feels so alone in the world, her first person narration has an intimate quality, as if she is confiding to the reader as a friend. Sometimes self-absorbed and sometimes wryly humorous, Heidi's down-to-earth voice bridges the different social strata depicted in the novel. The tale is told in a straightforward manner, with a few minor flashbacks. A Christmas morning flashback to a happy holiday moment when she was six years old represents the safety and comfort of her childhood, which stands in opposition to the isolation of her teenage years.

Another flashback, recalling happy childhood experiences with her parents segues into a memory of the time she made a crank call to her father's then-girlfriend, which reveals some of the desperation Heidi felt when her family fell apart.

One of the central metaphors in the novel is Heidi's coat—"That Coat"—a frayed man's overcoat that she bought at a thrift store. Nearly everyone in the story comments on it, but for Heidi it represents her differentness. And the first person who responds positively to the coat is Jeffrey. A small gold cross that Jeffrey gives Heidi is also significant. It was given to Jeffrey by Sister Margaret, a nun who encouraged him and accepted him as a child; giving it to Heidi demonstrates that she filled the same role—providing acceptance and encouragement to her friend. The dog that Heidi adopts toward the end of the book also has symbolic meaning. "Another stray. New York is full of them," she says, and Jeffrey makes a sly connection between himself and the dog. To Heidi, the dog represents an omen of the future. Over the course of her friendship with Jeffrey her self-esteem has improved and she is beginning to make plans for the future. It is not surprising that she names her new dog "Happy."

Allusions to poetry, literature, theater, and film are common in Wersba's novels. In this story, Jeffrey makes several references to film actresses such as June Allyson and Gloria DeHaven who may be unknown to today's young film fans. The references are probably used to demonstrate the breadth and depth of Jeffrey's knowledge of the cinema. But at least one movie that is referenced seems to have been chosen for its metaphorical implications. Heidi and Jeffrey go down to Greenwich Village to see a favorite old film of Jeffrey's, *Now, Voyager*.

This classic Bette Davis movie of 1942 is about a lonely drudge who is transformed into a glamorous and self-assured woman.

In many ways this character reflects Jeffrey's philosophy, as well as the gradual transformation which Heidi is undergoing—changing her attitude from fear and loneliness into self-assurance and contentment.



Themes and Characters

Sixteen-year-old Heidi Rosenbloom describes herself as "a klutz." "Short, plump, and insecure," she states in her casual firstperson narration. "A person whose nose is too big and whose eyes are too small. A person with a voice like Woody Allen."

Because she feels so unlovely, she also dresses the part—wearing thrift store clothes and close-cropped hair. She is desperately lonely. Her only real friend has moved away and her divorced parents do not understand Heidi at all. Her mother wants her to be a modern day version of Marilyn Monroe and is obsessed with Heidi's (nonexistent) romances, while her father wants her to be the next Albert Einstein. Jeffrey Collins is a twenty-year-old street entertainer who came to New York from Chicago. Homeless, gay, and adorned with a fur coat and eye makeup, Jeffrey is also "different," but unlike Heidi, he has confidence and optimism to spare. The relationship between these two young people forms the plot of a novel that speaks to issues of friendship, love, loneliness, hope, individuality, and transformation.

Heidi's loneliness is made clear throughout the book. She confides in Jeffrey, "I'm lonely. I don't fit in anywhere" and he responds, "I already knew that." Examples of Heidi's loneliness and isolation are abundant throughout the book. She wishes for connections that will end the loneliness, at one point saying of her parents, "Did I want them to marry again? Yes. Because we were all so lonely." She then comforts herself with the thought: "You have Jeffrey."

The friendship between Heidi and Jeffrey is established almost from the moment they shake hands outside the Minskoff Theater.

Heidi's first thought when she sees Jeffrey tap dancing for money is that he was "very weird." She then does something that even she deems "very strange"—she asks him out for coffee. Although it is never stated, perhaps she views him as a kindred spirit.

With his bleached hair and eyeliner he looks different than everyone else, as does Heidi.

She is wearing—as always—a garment that everyone calls "That Coat;" even taxi drivers and people on the street disparagingly comment on the long man's overcoat that Heidi bought at a thrift shop. Yet the first thing Jeffrey says after they introduce themselves is, "That's a divine coat. Where did you get it?" Jeffrey's appreciation of Heidi's style is one of the factors that cements their friendship.

The theme of love is developed in several ways. While Jeffrey loves Heidi as a friend, there is no real possibility of romance on his part. But Heidi, despite knowing his sexual orientation from their first meeting, does indeed fall in love with him.

This adds a bittersweet element to the story, as the reader knows that her love will always be unrequited. The love between parent and child is also explored in some



surprising ways. It would be easy to dismiss Shirley Rosenbloom as a cartoon character, or a sitcom stereotype of a Jewish mother (the family is described as "typical, assimilated New York Jews—having Christmas one day, and going to some kid's bar mitzvah the next.") Shirley's silly comments about Heidi joining a singles group or her use of attention-getting tactics like faking a heart attack paint her as a humorous, shallow person. Clearly, she and her urbane daughter (who usually refers to her mother as "Shirley") do not see eye to eye on anything. Yet Shirley's character becomes more dimensional as the novel continues.

Her prejudice against Jeffrey is not admirable, but she does have the poise to cover her initial anger and distrust and share a meal with him. When, in the middle of an argument over adopting a dog, Heidi lashes out that she needs someone to love her, Shirley's reaction is touchingly simple: "No one has ever loved a child as much as I love you," she said quietly. 'And if you don't know it, you're a fool.'" This demonstration of parental love leads Heidi to discover another aspect of love—compassion—as she imagines how her own parents related to her grandparents.

The theme of hopefulness (often in the face of despair) is exemplified by the character of Jeffrey. Despite the rough times he has endured—first in an orphanage and foster homes, and now homeless in New York—he always retains hope. Hoofing on the streets of the city, he is confident that he will one day be "discovered" and land a role in a Broadway show. When he attends auditions, he seems to be unfazed by rejections or criticism. The song he dances to, Judy Garland's "Get Happy," could be Jeffrey's private anthem. Jeffrey has positive things to say about almost everyone, including Heidi's mother. When Heidi brings Jeffrey home for dinner, Shirley is polite, but cool. Yet afterward, Jeffrey describes Shirley as "lots of fun."

The key to Jeffrey's optimism may be that he values each person's individuality.

He does not view Heidi as a misfit, but rather as an "original." He finds her campy style and offbeat personality wonderful.

When she casts about trying to figure out what to do with her life, Jeffrey tells her "Whatever you're going to be is inside you right now . . . and it always has been. You were born you . . . and if you believe in yourself nothing can go wrong." So the theme of transformation played out in this novel is not really about becoming what one is not, but rather becoming what one is.



Topics for Discussion

1. If you have read the other two books in this trilogy, does this—the first volume—prepare you for the rest of Heidi's story?

If you have not read the other two novels, what do you imagine will happen to Heidi in later installments?

2. Would Heidi's mode of dress make her blend into the crowd or stand out from the crowd? What does that say about how people judge each other based only on appearances?

3. Compare and contrast the Christmas presents that Heidi and Jeffrey exchange.

4. Characterize Miss Margolis. Is her honesty a helpful or hurtful thing?

5. What do the incidents involving Leonard's two office boys—one effeminate and one a "thug"—tell us about Leonard's personality and attitudes?

6. Is Shirley Rosenbloom a sympathetic character?

7. In Chapter 18, are there any other layers of meaning to the Norfolk terrier description printed in the dog book?

8. The phrase "broken rainbows" is used more than once in the book. What is the implication of that phrase and what does it mean as it is used in the novel?

9. Compare and contrast the ways in which Heidi and Jeffrey view themselves and each other.

10. What is the significance of Jeffrey changing his name?

11. What does Heidi mean when she describes herself as "Mahatma Gandhi Rosenbloom?"

12. In the last volume of this trilogy, Heidi meets up with a male character from another Wersba book and they begin a romance. If you could "fix up" Heidi with a date, what character from another book or movie might be a good match?

13. Compare and contrast Heidi's relationship with Shirley and Leonard with Shirley's and Leonard's relationships with their parents.

14. Is Jeffrey likely to find success in Hollywood? Why or why not?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Barbara Wersba has stated that the characters of Heidi and her mother were inspired after she heard comedian Joan Rivers use the phrase "Just be gorgeous" on television. Research what types of events have inspired other authors to come up with specific character or plots.
2. Many entertainers have looked for their big break by performing on the streets of New York. What is life like for street dancers and musicians?
3. Examine homelessness as a social problem. What help is available for the homeless?
4. Heidi is seeking a career that will allow her to work with animals. What are some possibilities and what training is required?
5. Jeffrey left Chicago because he was frequently beaten up; he is again beaten on the streets of Greenwich Village while walking with Heidi. What types of laws protect people against hate crimes?

What actions do social agencies take to assist the victim of a hate crime?

6. What is the cost of living in New York compared to other cities? What are the advantages and disadvantages of living in a large metropolitan area?
7. Using maps, reference books and internet resources, list which New York streets, locations, theaters, and restaurants described in this novel are real and which are possibly fictional.



For Further Reference

Aswell, Joanne. *School Library Journal* (November 1988): 133-34. A mixed review of *Just Be Gorgeous* that describes Jeffrey as a "truly sympathetic and tragically lovable character" but finds the characterization of Heidi to be much less convincing.

"Barbara Wersba." In *Authors and Artists for Young Adults, Volume 30*. Detroit: Gale, 1999, pp. 159-67. Provides a critical overview of Wersba's works, with quotes from various review sources.

"Barbara Wersba." In *Something about the Author Autobiography Series, Volume 2*.

Detroit: Gale, 1986, pp. 293-304. A lengthy self-portrait of the author as a person and creative artist.

Eaglen, Audrey. "Wersba, Barbara." In *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers, 3rd edition*. Chicago: St. James Press, 1989, p.

1026. A brief critical survey of Wersba's books, focusing on her young adult titles.

Janeczko, Paul. "An Interview with Barbara Wersba." *English Journal* (November 1976): 20-21. Provides Wersba's perspective on life and her "tendency to see sadness in the world," as well as her feelings about the young adult genre of literature.

Poe, Elizabeth. *Presenting Barbara Wersba*.

New York: Twayne, 1998. The only booklength study of Wersba's work includes biographical information, a critical evaluation of her literary output and a chapter entitled "Caring for Strays: The Tales of Heidi Rosenbloom" which focuses on *Just Be Gorgeous* and the other two books in this trilogy.

Rochman, Hazel. *Booklist* (September 1, 1988): 69. This generally positive review of *Just Be Gorgeous* finds the message a bit overstated and the characterizations larger than life, but praises the depiction of Heidi and Jeffrey's friendship.

Sasges, Judy. *Voice of Youth Advocates* (December 1988): 244. A mixed review of *Just Be Gorgeous* that unfavorably compares Heidi to the character of Rita Formica in *Fat: A Love Story* and its sequels.

Sieruta, Peter D. "Wersba, Barbara." In *Children's Literature and Their Creators*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1995, p. 675. A brief biographical-critical overview of the author's life and work.

Sutherland, Zena. *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* (December 1988): 111-12.

Generally favorable review of *Just Be Gorgeous* citing the depth of characterization and bittersweet quality of the story.



Vandergrift, Kay E. "Barbara Wersba." In *American Writers for Children since 1960: Fiction*. Detroit: Gale, 1986, pp. 374-80.

Scholarly examination of Wersba's body of work.

"Wersba, Barbara." In *Something about the Author, Volume 103*. Detroit: Gale, 1999, pp. 186-96. Much of this autobiographical essay was originally printed in the *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, but it does include additional up-to-date information on Wersba's life and career.

Related Titles

Readers of *Just Be Gorgeous* will want to read the next two installments of Heidi's adventures, *Wonderful Me* and *The Farewell Kid*, which follow the protagonist as she finds further romance and determines what she wants to do with her life. Another Wersba novel, *Whistle Me Home*, provides a much darker slant on similar themes when high school Noli falls in love with a boy who is gay. Barbara Wersba writes about another teenage misfit, Rita Formica, in a trilogy that includes *Fat: A Love Story*, *Love Is the Crooked Thing*, and *Beautiful Losers*.

Readers charmed by the hopefulness of Jeffrey may be interested in the portrayal of a similarly optimistic character in Jerry Spinelli's *Stargirl*.

Those with an interest in the world of Broadway and the theater might enjoy *The Street Dancers*, *Broadway Dreams*, and *Curtain Going Up* by Elizabeth Starr Hill; though geared for a somewhat younger audience than Wersba's books, this trilogy captures the excitement of a New York acting family.

Other urban romances played out against a New York City background include *Long Time between Kisses* by Sandra Scoppettone, and novels written by Lucy Frank and Norma Klein.



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