

A Kindness Short Guide

A Kindness by Cynthia Rylant

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Overview

A Kindness portrays the fine relationship which may develop between a single-parent mother and her son. This relationship is explored first as a predictable one built on mutual respect in which the two main characters, Anne Becker and her teen-age son Chip, feel they know each other well and maintain a home by complementing the strengths of one another. This relationship disintegrates when Anne finds she is pregnant and refuses to tell Chip the name of the father. Her nearly nonexistent relationship with a married man who has fathered the child is viewed in comparison with Chip's enjoyment of his daily closeness in his relationship with his girlfriend. Ironically, the teenage Chip is living the love his mother, as a mature adult, should have been free to experience. A third type of relationship is represented by Randy, a man who has always been a confidante to both mother and son, and who remains faithful throughout these times.

The fragility of human bonds and the strength needed to maintain close relationships of all descriptions becomes an unstated theme.

About the Author

Cynthia Rylant is a child of Appalachia, raised in the small town of Beaver, West Virginia. She came to this town at age eight to live with her mother, after living for four years at her grandparents' home in a nearby town. Her grandparents' house had been filled with loving aunts and uncles and cousins who had also come to stay, none of whom had much money, but they had time and love. Much of her work reflects her memories of this life which moved at a slow pace, and Rylant often provides the reader with a reminiscent look at the close relationships of families who have few material things, but really care about one another. Rylant says that she "soaked it all up, every last bit of it," and later began to "ease these memories out, little by little, and [I] led them into books."

Before this time at her grandparents' home, Rylant's early childhood was an unhappy one. She was born on June 6, 1954, while her father was in the army.

For four years her parents moved to different bases and were unhappy with one another. Rylant's mother took her back to Cool Ridge, West Virginia to live with her grandparents while she moved to another city to study for a career as a nurse. Between the ages of 4 and 8, Cynthia never saw, and rarely heard from her father, and her mother only visited infrequently. In her autobiography, Rylant says that writers who have suffered a loss, such as her loss of contact with her parents, often write as a means of finding the words and meaning for the way they have lived. "Writing stories has given me the power to change things I could not change as a child."

As a child, Rylant was never in a library or an art museum. Her early life left her with a desire for better things, and she said, "I wanted to be someone else, and that turned out to be the worst curse and the best gift of my life." Although she never again saw her father after her parents separated, Rylant was able to attend college with his army benefits, and she graduated with a bachelor's degree from Morris Harvey College (now the University of Charleston) in 1975, a master's degree from Marshall University in 1976, and a Master of Library Science from Kent State University in 1982. She worked briefly as an English instructor and as a children's librarian, then decided she could also write books for children and began to submit her manuscripts, which were almost immediately published. She has been married and divorced twice, and now lives in Kent, Ohio, with her son, Nathaniel.

Rylant has written a wide variety of fiction and poetry for both adolescents and young adults, including the Henry and Mudge series for beginning readers.

Her works for young adults include the 1993 Newbery Award winner *Missing May*, published in 1992, and a Newbery Honor Book, *A Fine White Dust*, 1986; two books of poetry, *Waiting to Waltz: A Childhood*, 1984, and *Soda Jerk*, 1990; three collections of short stories, *Every Living Thing*, 1985, *Children of Christmas*, 1987, and *A Couple of Kooks, and Other Stories about Love*, 1990; and an autobiographical work entitled *But I'll Be Back Again: An Album*, 1989.

Setting

Physical setting is incidental to this book, as the types of human bonds portrayed are never bound by locale.

Of some importance to the storyline is the fact that Anne has elected to live in Seattle until Chip is raised, even though her work as an artist depends on the ability to sell her paintings in the New York market. The necessity of trips to New York City to consult her agent presents the opportunity for the father of her baby to live at a distance, and therefore be unknown to Chip, remaining until nearly the end of the novel what Chip terms a "phantom."



Social Sensitivity

Rylant touches serious issues of social significance. Both Anne and her teen-age son Chip briefly entertain the idea of abortion when Anne reveals her undesired pregnancy. As a teen-ager who is somewhat self-absorbed, Chip focuses on how his life will change if an infant is introduced into the household; he feels that the event will "screw up my life." He demonstrates his concern with verbal outbursts to ward his mother, berating her for bringing another child into the world without a father, since his father has never been a part of his life. Because his mother respects Chip, she listens to his outbursts and responds calmly, while Chip reports that he "wanted to hug and club her at the same time."

As an adult, Anne's decision to have the baby is precipitated by her caring attitude toward the sea turtles she often observes and the dusky seaside sparrow which had recently become extinct. She sees a parallel between the struggles of the newly hatched turtles and a sparrow that could not compete in a changed ecological system and the seemingly insurmountable difficulties of human infants who struggle to be born and to survive in a world which can be inhospitable.

Also, as a brief part of the dialogue, Chip expresses his physical desire for his girlfriend Jeannie and teases her about wanting to neck while maintaining a platonic relationship. None of his thoughts are graphic, but seem to reveal a desire for the closeness of companionship that intimacy often brings.

Rylant has created a strong story of human love and connection which places these issues within the proper context of human decisions made by both teen-agers and adults. Since neither abortion nor physical sex is a major focus of the dialogue or storyline, they become a part of the fabric of the book and are not given undue emphasis. Children younger than the novel's characters and who are not ready to consider these topics might well read past these references without note.

Literary Qualities

This realistic novel begins with a segment of a poem which is also entitled "A Kindness," by William Dickey.

As a precursor to the story, the poem stands as a unique way to begin. Although Rylant has made no direct references to the meaning of the poem, she has used the lines of poetry to cause the reader to begin to consider the kindness involved in relationships of love. After reading the novel, the poem takes on added connotations for the reader. The poem speaks of the "kindness you can do me, to have been there" and "I need to have loved you.

I need to have told you so." These lines build a direct connection to the intent of the parallel human stories Rylant tells.

An omniscient narrator who knows the innermost feelings of the characters begins the story. In two brief chapters, the reader is brought up-to-date on the past history of the main characters, and the problem that will endanger their future relationship is set. The remainder of the story is told using two devices: dialogue and the thoughts of Anne and Chip as described by the narrator. The tone of this narration is at once engaging, encouraging interest in the struggles of these characters.

Changes from present tense dialogue and action to thoughts of past events are depicted by different type fonts characteristic of the personalities of the thinker/writer. Anne's thoughts are written in an old-fashioned, italic print, and Chip's in a computer font.

Rylant's skillful use of language envelops the reader in the sensitive story and permits the reader to empathize with the decisions and struggles of both Chip and Anne. With a minimum of description, the author allows the reader to see the characters' individual points of view and to understand their actions, even without always approving of these actions.



Themes and Characters

A Kindness explores the changing roles of two main characters, Anne and Chip Becker, as they interact with three minor characters as partners in love relationships of various types. Chip is the person the reader comes to know best, as he serves as narrator for most of the story. It is through his voice and eyes that the reader views the novel's events. His mother Anne is defined as a stereotypical impractical artist with no sense of money or management. It is because of her ephemeral character that Chip, at age sixteen, has already assumed a major portion of the duties necessary in running a household, including grocery shopping, meal planning, and distribution of money. Their personalities and concerns seem as different as night and day. While Anne lives in her world of paints and illusion, Chip takes a very practical view of life. He is described as being brighter and more logical than his mother, a boy who has always put his own toys together and filed his mother's income tax.

Chip describes himself as an "owner" and discovers through his failures to completely own and be responsible for his mother and his girlfriend, that in his relationships he has attempted to be too controlling. He begins to learn that loving someone also means allowing her the freedom to exist in a life separate from him. What Anne and Chip hold in common is a commitment to the feeding and caring for wildlife and a mutual concern about the extinction of species. It is their different understanding of how this commitment to living things might transfer from animals such as sea turtles and dusky seaside sparrows to human beings that is explored during the course of the novel.

Three minor characters interact with Anne and Chip to allow a full exploration of a range of human relationships.

None of these minor characters is fully formed, since we rarely see them in action. Randy is the level-headed and ever-faithful friend of the family who has often served Chip as a substitute father, and now takes on the role of birth coach for Anne. Randy will continue to provide both mother and son with a listening ear, and will always be a person to call in an emergency.

The character attributes of Jeannie, Chip's girlfriend, are only evident through Chip's adoring and biased eyes. It is Jeannie's uneasiness about the consequences of Anne's pregnancy, as well as Chip's possessiveness, which cause the breakup of their relationship.

The concerns Jeannie expresses permit the reader to view the typical concerns of teenage girls with steady boyfriends: Can it happen to me? Will necking get out of our control? At the end of the novel, the difficulties between Jeannie and Chip remain unresolved, but there is every reason to hope that the pair will reunite once Chip completes his self-examination and becomes comfortable with his new roles and responsibilities as a son and big brother.



The voice of the third character, Ben, is only heard during long-distance phone conversations. Although he never appears within the physical setting, it is his act of loving Anne, although only for one night, which provides the turning point for the change in each of the relationships portrayed.

Through his decision to remain remote from the family, the new family relationship created with the birth of Dusky Anne will become a strong and cohesive unit.



Topics for Discussion

1. Chip Becker seems to have overstepped the boundary which divides the concerns of children from the responsibilities adults have for maintenance of a family. What are the responsibilities which should fall to a teenager within the context of a family unit? Might these responsibilities differ depending on the composition of the family unit?

2. Chip is able to maintain a friendship with Randy, yet unable to sustain his relationship with Jeannie. Explore the facets of friendships with people of different ages, genders, social groups.

How do these relationships differ? Are the friends always equal in the need for honesty, disclosure, time, and communication?

3. As the father of Dusky Anne, did Ben have a responsibility for her care and financial support? Is this responsibility moral or legal? Even though Anne and Chip have both asked that he not come to Seattle to see Dusky, should he establish a role as father to the baby?

4. Although the author does not permit the issue of whether or not Anne should have an abortion to become a debate in this book, she does seem to try to impress upon the reader the commitment humans should have for the survival of all forms of life. Does this book take a pro-life stance? Do the views of the characters necessarily reflect the beliefs of the author, or simply make the characters appear more human since they are immersed in real-life controversies?

5. Unfortunately, Chip and his mother never really take the time to discuss his relationship with Jeannie, yet high school boy/girl relationships, based on love or friendship, are often very strong and long-lasting. Was the depth of their relationship something Anne should have investigated as a responsible parent? Was there some advice Anne might have given to Chip or Jeannie which would have held them together?

6. Explore the connection of the interest of Anne and Chip in the extinction of the dusky seaside sparrow and naming the baby Dusky Anne. What does this act of naming imply?

7. After the birth of Dusky, Anne deliberately excludes Chip from the baby's care, reasoning that she must allow him to be a sibling, rather than an adult caretaker. A bond between siblings is finally formed when Chip is forced to take care of Dusky for an extended period. Without this necessity, would Chip ever have come to the realization that he loved Dusky? Will this new realization assist his relationships with others in any way?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Look closely at Rylant's use of different fonts to signify a change in the stance of the narrator. These sections allow for different tones to be used as the speaker changes; speakers who are not characters can enter the story, and necessary background information can be provided, but without additional character dialogue that would have lengthened the novel. How do other authors meet the challenge of providing the information readers need to understand the characters' motivations?
2. Was the dusky seaside sparrow a real bird? Which animals are now considered extinct or endangered? What roles do humans play in the extinction and preservation of endangered species?
3. The voices of the three minor characters, Ben, Randy, and Jeannie, are virtually silent throughout the book.

What opportunities might the author have provided for these characters to take an increased role in the action of the story? Write a missing episode or chapter in which these characters are given voice.

4. The characters of this novel do not always tell their own story, nor do they always perform actions which the reader can see. Much of the information given to the reader is provided by Chip or an omniscient narrator who describes the end result of the actions.

Are these narrators to be trusted to tell the story? Are there some instances where the additional points of view of other characters would have been helpful in understanding the events?

5. Chip uses the analogy of a pawn in a chess game to refer to Dusky's importance in the relationship of Ben to the Becker family. Since this chess analogy is another way of looking at Chip's efforts toward controlling people, one assumes this is negative. But are there not some moves in life which must be planned with just the care of a move in a chess game?

For Further Reference

Rylant, Cynthia. *Appalachia: The Voices of Sleeping Birds*. Illustrated by Barry Moser. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991. Although this is a picture book, it provides a sense of the people and countryside of the Appalachian area prominent in Rylant's writing.

———. *But I'll Be Back Again: An Album*.

New York: Orchard Books, 1989.

This short autobiography covers Rylant's childhood and teen-age years and includes a few photographs from the family album. Readers will enjoy the tone which Rylant uses to directly address them. By reading this book, you will feel you know Cynthia Rylant as a person.

———. "Cynthia Rylant." In *Speaking for Ourselves, Too: More Autobiographical Sketches by Notable Authors of Books for Young Adults*. Edited by Donald R. Gallo. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1993. This book and its earlier companion, *Speaking for Ourselves*, provide two-to-three page entries written by a wide variety of authors who write for the young adult audience. Each includes a photograph of the author and a comprehensive list of his or her works. Although the content of the entries varies, most of the authors describe how they came to writing as a career.

———. "Thank you, Miss Evans." *Language Arts* (September 1985). This is a tribute written by Rylant about a teacher who influenced her to love and understand the power of books.

Related Titles

In *A Kindness*, love and faithfulness are explored as a single mother and her son cope with the breaking of the bonds of trust between them. Each grows while trying to deal with some of life's most difficult problems. By way of contrast, *A Fine White Dust* tells of a boy's religious faith and events that shake it, including betrayal by a preacher, making the boy wiser and more understanding of others. Like *Missing May* and much of Rylant's other novels. *A Blue-Eyed Daisy* takes place in Appalachia; the narrator, a girl about the age of *Summer*, tells of a year of hardship in school and at home, during which she matures and learns to fend for herself.



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