

The Keeper Short Guide

The Keeper by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

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Overview

Naylor uses her experience of living with a mentally ill husband to write a sensitive novel about Nick Karpinski and Jacob, his mentally ill father. Nick is torn between his love for his father and the need to get help for him. He watches his father's behavior and relationships with others become more and more bizarre and unreasonable as he sinks ever deeper into mental illness.

As an eighth grader, Nick is developing a whole new social life. He feels a part of a group for the first time and takes a girl to the movies. Nick's father talks and acts strangely, so Nick makes excuses for not inviting his friends to his apartment because he is unsure of their reaction. Nick finds the courage to force his family into a situation that brings intervention on behalf of his father, and he discovers the meaning of true friendship when he reveals the truth to his friends about his father's mental illness. Nick's circumstances force him to make difficult decisions which shape his character and help him face the future with hope, making him a worthy role model for young readers.



About the Author

Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, born January 4, 1933, in Anderson, Indiana, has been a storyteller and writer all her life. Phyllis and her siblings, Norma and John, were nourished in a storytelling tradition by their father, Eugene, a traveling salesman and by their mother, Lura Schield Reynolds, a schoolteacher. Although the family was poor, it had a small library which included Egermeier's Bible Story Book, a set of encyclopedias, and Grimm's Fairy Tales which were read over and over.

In *How I Came to Be a Writer*, Naylor says, "These were not just books to read, I'm afraid, but they were also our toys. The books became walls for doll houses, train tunnels and weights to hold bedsheets in place across the backs of chairs for playing train."

She relates that she never thought of becoming a writer while growing up because she knew the years of preparation and hard work involved, plus writing for her was "simply too much fun." Making up stories, writing stories and poetry became a passion from kindergarten through high school. She sold her first story to Sunday School for \$4.67 at the age of sixteen. It seemed to happen so easily, and she decided she could write for more lucrative markets like *Children's Playmate*, *Boy's Life*, and *Seventeen*. She spent hours writing and typing stories, then sending to publishers, expecting the money to roll in. She waited, but instead of money and contracts, she received rejection slips for all of her manuscripts except one.

Through that experience she gained a new respect for writing and determined to write the very best stories she could. Naylor became a prolific writer of fiction and nonfiction. She writes for children, young adults, and adults. The diversity of her writing ranges from books about herself, to advice on getting along with others, to fiction centering on problems facing young adults.

She married in 1951 at age eighteen, and after graduating from Joliet Junior College, moved to Chicago with her husband. While he pursued more education, she worked as a clinical secretary at the university hospital and taught third grade for six months.

When she was twenty-three, her husband became mentally ill and she began writing in earnest to pay for his treatment and her living expenses. She divorced him after she lost hope that he would ever recover. In 1960 she married Rex Naylor, a speech pathologist. They have two children, Jeffrey Alan and Michael Scott.

After earning a degree in psychology from American University, Naylor knew she wanted to be a full-time writer. In 1965, she published her first book, *The Galloping Goat and Other Stories*. She has published one or more books each year since then for a total of more than fifty books. In 1977, Naylor was able to write about the painful experience of mental illness in a loved one. *Crazy Love: An Autobiographical Account of Marriage and Madness*, chronicles her reaction to her husband's mental illness. The *Keeper* grew out of this adult account. In it, thirteen-year-old Nick Karpinski reacts to



mental illness in his father. Naylor has written several novels about young adults who cope with sensitive issues and problems. Among them are: *A String of Chances* (death and religious beliefs); *The Solomon System* (divorce of parents); and *The Dark of the Tunnel* (death of parents).

Rex Naylor says of his wife in the *Horn Book*, 1992: She yearns to draw a warm, protective circle around those she loves most. She needs much of her time alone, relatively uninterrupted, for writing. . . . she loves talking with many people, singly and in groups, and is moved or touched by them. . . . Events from her life as family member, neighbor, concerned citizen, and passing stranger feed into the writing, but usually indirectly Phyllis organizes her waking hours like a railroad timetable. . . . It's a cliché, but writing is as necessary for her as eating or sleeping Favorite pastimes—apart from her writing—are almost any activity with the family, or going to the theater.

Her hobbies include music, hiking, and swimming.

Naylor's work has received numerous awards including: listing in the Children's Books of the Year from the Child Study Association of America in 1971 for *Wrestle the Mountain*; in 1979 for *How Lazy Can You Get?*; and in 1986 for *The Agony of Alice*. *A String of Chances* was selected as a Best Book for Young Adults from Young Adult Services Division of American Library Association and as a Notable Children's Book in the Field of Social Studies from National Council for Social Studies and Children's Book Council, both 1982, and it received the South Carolina Young Adult Book Award, 1985-86. *The Keeper* was listed as a Best Book for Young Adults from Young Adult Services Division of the American Library Association in 1986. She received the Child Study Award from Bank Street of College of Education in 1983 for *The Solomon System*; *The Dark of the Tunnel*, a Notable Children's Book in the Field of Social Studies in 1985; the Edgar Allan Poe Award from Mystery Writers of America in 1985 for *Night Cry*; Christopher Award in 1989 for *Keeping a Christmas Secret*; and the Newbery award in 1992 for *Shiloh*.

Setting

The Keeper takes place in Chicago prior to the late 1980s break-up of the communist countries in Eastern Europe. Much of the action takes place in the Karpinski home, a third floor, walk-up apartment. It is a comfortable place with two bedrooms and a large enough living room for Mrs. Karpinski's piano and piano students. Jacob Karpinski and a brother immigrated to America from Poland as very young men, so Nick's only near relatives are Mrs. Karpinski's parents in Hammond, Indiana. There are no close friends in their social circle. Since they are fairly recent residents of Chicago, Nick has made no close friends. He and his mother feel isolated from others in their apartment building and only associate with those who come into their lives by necessity.

Each morning on his way to school, Nick follows Karen Zimmerman, who lives in his apartment building, carefully pacing himself so he will not catch up with her because he has no idea what he could possibly say.

School and an after school job—to help pay expenses—become places of refuge for Nick from the frightening changes in his father and from his mother's reluctance to press her husband for details about his erratic employment. In school Nick makes friends and is forced to talk to the school nurse after he blacks out in gym class.

The city is integral to the setting. It provides a friendly backdrop for Nick and his friends as they ride the "el" (subway) downtown, visit a genetics display, go to the movies, and move about their part of the city with ease. It only becomes impersonal when Nick and his mother turn to people they do not know, trying to find help for Jacob.



Social Sensitivity

Society, for whatever reason, struggles with acceptance of people who are different. Young people hesitate to reveal things about themselves that might make them stand out among their peers—things like ethnicity, unusual family members, economic disadvantages, diseases, illnesses, or other qualities or activities that make them unique. They want to be accepted and liked by others and to be like others.

Nick experiences some of these same struggles in *The Keeper*.

Naylor is sensitive to the feelings of young people and shows respect for their individuality. When Nick "explodes" about halfway through the narrative, he begins using the euphemism, "Jeez," a mild expostulation which some might think is taking God's name in vain, but which is just a natural response to his anger and frustration.

Literary Qualities

Naylor is a master in the use of the literary device of flashback. Frequently, we find Nick thinking about more peaceful, happy times. Other times the flashbacks give the reader a glimpse into Jacob Karpinski's personality and actions that may have been warning flags and lend insight into his present situation. Sometimes, in the flashback, we see Nick trying to analyze situations where he thinks he may have contributed to his father's illness.



Themes and Characters

Naylor develops strong universal themes in *The Keeper* that will appeal to young adult readers. Being accepted is a strong theme throughout *The Keeper*.

Nick has moved so frequently he has been unable to develop the closeness in friendships he feels is necessary to "belong." He looks around and sees his classmates in tight-knit groups, talking and eating together in the cafeteria, studying together and meeting each other for after-school activities. He longs to belong to such a group but does not know how to break in. After the phone calls he and Danny, his one friend, make to Karen and Lois, a group seems to come together effortlessly and we see Nick examining this new phenomenon in his life. Nick faces common experiences of adolescence— being in a group, first phone call to a girl, first date, and first girl friend— with the same trepidation and tremulous bravado many young people feel.

A "love of family" theme and Nick's tenacious desire to live in a "normal" family situation provide a strong fabric which is torn by the uncertainty of dealing with mental illness. Mrs. Karpinski's fierce loyalty to her husband keeps her from the truth of his illness and she waits too long to seek help.

Nick, an only child, has enjoyed a close-knit family setting with his lively, musical mother and a more reticent, regimented father. Nick looks like his father and wants to be more like his mother in her ease with people. He wants to belong to a group of friends.

He is sensitive to the feelings and actions of others and works at believing others want him as a friend and will accept him as he is, but the circumstances surrounding his father cause him to compartmentalize his life. He lives a secret life with his mentally ill father and a more carefree one with his friends in the group. Nick is forced to examine himself, seeing faults in himself that he thinks may have contributed to his father's illness. He reluctantly worries about whether or not he might inherit his father's illness and about what others might think of him if they know about Mr. Karpinski.

Eventually, he makes peace with himself, accepts those things he cannot change and decides to get on with his own life after the committal of his father to the mental ward at the veterans' hospital.

Jacob Karpinski was a meticulous man prior to the onset of the mental illness, but as it deepens, he becomes careless about his appearance. He becomes distrustful of everyone, even his wife and Nick, and suspects that everyone is involved in a scheme by the Communists to kill him because he knows too much.

Wanda Karpinski, Nick's mother, is a pianist whose teaching ability provides the sole income as Jacob leaves a job at the post office, the second job in a few weeks time, and refuses to search for another. She will not discuss the strange actions of her husband with anyone because of her fierce loyalty and her fear of the embarrassment it



would cause him knowing she had confided their problems to family, let alone strangers. She is warm, loving and supportive towards Nick, Jacob, and her music students.

In contrast to Nick, his best friend Danny Beck is gregarious. He is a catalyst in Nick's social life and makes Nick laugh. Together, they work up enough courage to ask their classmates, Karen Zimmerman and Lois Mueller, to go to the movies, their first dates.



Topics for Discussion

1. Pretending to be each other, Nick and Danny call Lois and Karen and ask the girls for dates. Why did they do that? Why didn't each of them call the girl he was interested in? Wouldn't it be just as easy to be honest as to try to deceive the girls?
2. Nick hyperventilates and faints in gym class. Why? What is hyperventilation?
3. Nick wants to blend in with other students, to be inconspicuous. Why?

Have you ever felt like that?

4. After Nick finds his father near the exhaust pipe of the car and realizes he has tried to take his own life, he goes to the school nurse to talk. Why does he choose her? Why does he talk about his "friend and his problems" instead of telling her the problems are his own?

5. Mrs. Karpinski refuses to call the office to find out why Jacob no longer works there. Nick cannot tell the school nurse he is talking about his father and himself. Why can't they share problems with someone else?

Why do they think they need to keep Mr. Karpinski's actions and illness a secret? Would you keep it a secret?

6. Danny thinks he needs "insurance," a girl on the string in case his friendship with Karen falls through. He does not want to spend ten dollars for the dance and end up without a date.

What do you think about Danny's arrangement?

7. Nick finally tells his friends about his father's mental illness after Jacob is committed to the veterans' hospital.

How did they react? Lois cancels her date with Nick. Does she give him the real reason? What do you think her real reason is? What kind of person would do that to a friend?

8. Predict what you think will happen to Nick and Karen's friendship.

9. The novel ends without telling us whether or not Mr. Karpinski gets well.

What do you think happens to him?

10. Do you think The Keeper is a good title for this book? Explain your answer.



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. As you read *The Keeper*, chart the progression of Mr. Karpinski's illness.

Research schizophrenia and compare the medical description to the description and progress in *The Keeper*.

2. Marjorie Eltin, school nurse, hits a raw nerve with Nick when she suggests that stress can cause blackouts.

Read about stress. Describe its causes and symptoms. How can it be relieved?

3. You have probably heard jokes which denigrate a group of people because of their nationality. Mrs. Karpinski tells Nick she was named for Wanda Landowska and Nick for Copernicus. Nick is surprised to learn that they, along with Chopin, were Polish. Read about one of these historical figures and write a paper about their accomplishments. Can you think of any other well-known Polish people?

4. Nick is finally able to cry for help by blowing the horn on the car. Describe what you might have done in Nick's situation to get help.

5. When Nick talks to Dr. Rothman at the V.A. hospital, he asks if schizophrenia is inherited. Read about schizophrenia and write a short report on the illness. What is it? What causes it?

Can Nick inherit the illness? Why or why not?

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something About the Author*. Vol. 66. Detroit: Gale Research, 1991. An extensive article detailing Naylor's life and work.

Naylor, Phyllis Reynolds. *Crazy Love: An Autobiographical Account of Marriage and Madness*. New York: Morrow, 1977. An account of the mental illness of her first husband.

———. *How I Came to Be a Writer*. New York: Atheneum, 1978. An autobiographical account of Naylor's interest in writing.

Naylor, Rex. "Phyllis Reynolds Naylor." *Horn Book* (July/August 1992): 412. A personal look at the life of Phyllis Reynolds Naylor by her husband, Rex Naylor.

Related Titles/Adaptations

The Keeper was the basis for "My Dad Can't be Crazy, Can He?" an Afterschool The Keeper 3437 Special aired September 14, 1989, on ABC-TV.

The Keeper is based loosely on Naylor's book, *Crazy Love: An Autobiographical Account of Marriage and Madness*, which records the mental illness of her first husband. Although it is intended for adult audiences, some high school students may possess the maturity necessary to read and appreciate the account. Naylor is very forward and at times, graphic in her descriptions of intimacies between her and her husband. The two titles provide an excellent opportunity for the reader to analyze Naylor's writing style and how she uses many of her own experiences along with her imagination to produce a captivating narrative for young people.

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