

Lake News Short Guide

Lake News by Barbara Delinsky

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Contents

Lake News Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	5
Techniques.....	8
Themes.....	9
Literary Precedents.....	11
Related Titles.....	12
Copyright Information.....	15



Characters

Atypically for the romance genre, the heroine does not appear on the scene until Chapter Two. The book instead opens with John Kipling (tall, lean, and forty-something, a square-jawed and eligible bachelor— clearly destined to play the hero's role) sitting by himself in a boat on the lake, quietly observing the family of loons. As a troubled teenager, John had fled an unhappy family life in this town, but has recently returned to look after Gus, his ailing father, and take over the running of the eponymous town newspaper. He is also struggling with his own demons, striving to come to terms with "stabs of guilt" over his own part, albeit inadvertent, in the driving of a man to suicide over allegations of sexual misconduct. The peace and quiet offered by the rural community provide him with the chance to make amends and reevaluate what he wants out of life.

Over the course of this first chapter, Delinsky toys with the reader's romantic expectations, presenting in turn a handful of very different female characters living in Lake Henry. All but the last are only indirectly involved in the hero's life and, in fact, play no significant role in the story as it later develops. One by one they are figuratively rejected as heroine material by John and, on some level, both author and reader.

We have the traditional housewife, Liddie Bayne (everyone knows that "whatever [her husband] wanted done, she did"); the victim, Jenny Blodgett, who is "nineteen, pale and blond, and so thin that the big bulge of the baby in her belly looked doubly wrong"; the ever-capable and utterly self-reliant career woman, Alison Quimby, who owns the local real estate agency and is the "quintessential professional;" the sexpot, Shelly Cole, whom John "wasn't touching . . . with a ten-foot pole" (though he is sorely tempted); and lastly the helpmeet, Poppy Blake, "a smiling pixie, always bright and upbeat." Lily, when finally introduced, proves to fit none of the above stereotypical categories. Originally from one of the town's most established families, she is now working two jobs in Boston as a piano teacher and singer, moderately successful, leading an independent and relatively happy life.

Lily Blake enjoys a friendship of many years' standing with Francis Rossetti. They share a love of music, and he has been counseling her on many issues, including how best to cope with her mother. At the beginning of the story, Father Fran has just been named Cardinal. This elevation places him in the spotlight, and in no time at all the churchman's good looks and outgoing personality make him a magnet for media attention.

The villain, Terry Sullivan, is also introduced early in the novel. He telephones John trying to dig up dirt to buttress his claim that Blake and Rossetti "were too close for it to be innocent." Thus the stage is set for a battle between this devious Boston reporter, bent on maligning innocent parties for reasons of his own, and Kipling, who seeks not only the truth, but also redemption for past misdeeds.



One of Lily's first reactions to the attack on her reputation is concern about the embarrassment that will be inflicted on those back home. Her father has been dead for several years, and her mother, a fiercely private woman with her own skeletons in the closet, has taken over the family cider operation. Maida has always demanded no less than perfection from their three daughters, and hapless Lily has never failed to fall short in her mother's eyes, no matter how hard she tried to please. The girl's closest ally during a miserable childhood was Maida's mother Celia St. Marie, warmhearted and easy-going. She bequeathed her homey cabin at the lake to this favorite granddaughter, who now gratefully retreats there in time of trouble. Even long after passing away, the older woman manages to serve as a comforting and protective presence: Lily is constantly wrapping "Celia's shawl" around herself for warmth, disguising her all-too-recognizable features behind "Celia's huge sunglasses," and brandishing "Celia's gun" to ward off a trespasser.

The younger two "Blake blooms," as the community once referred to the sisters, are forced to pick sides in the mother-daughter conflict: Poppy is an indefatigable supporter of embattled Lily, while disapproving, image-conscious Rose supports Maida against them. Further, Rose now has children of her own, and history threatens to repeat itself as awkward ten-year-old Hannah plays a distant third to her younger siblings where maternal affection is concerned. According to its writer, this book "is ultimately about family—about the relationships between children and parents, about sibling rivalry, and about the repetition of family patterns from one generation to the next."

As indicated above, John Kipling also has family issues. His mother is long gone from the scene, remarried and living in Florida. Younger brother Donny (who, incidentally, was the teenager who stole the car Lily was caught riding in) is deceased.

His father, Gus, now lives alone, a frail and embittered old man, oddly resentful of his surviving son's attempts to help him and establish at least a cordial relationship. The father had spent his entire working life building "functional and aesthetic stone walls." Of course, the emotional barriers with which he has managed to surround himself have also proved sturdy, virtually insurmountable in fact. John's tentative attempts to breach them, to get past the years of hostility and guilt that have piled up between father and son, parallel the strained relationship between Lily and her mother.



Social Concerns

"I like my storylines to be current, because that's the kind of book that would interest me. . . . I love Lake News because it is timely and because it makes a statement close to my heart." With the above statement, Barbara Delinsky underscores a strong preference to focus on hot-button issues in her writing. This particular novel represents her foray into the raging debate over how we define what is public and relevant and what should remain private and protected.

The line between public and private has become blurred as the media seek to satisfy the increasingly voyeuristic appetites of their audience. Movie stars, musicians, TV personalities, politicians—anyone with a public profile—is fair game whenever there is a hint of sexual scandal, drug abuse, or even petty family squabbles. The right to know seems to have become all-encompassing, with apparently nothing being sacred or off-limits. As the question is phrased by one Lake News character: "Where does reporter stop and gossipmonger begin?"

In Delinsky's novel, heroine Lily Blake is an ordinary private citizen who just happens to be friends with a public figure, Father Rossetti, recently named cardinal of the Catholic Church in Boston. An unscrupulous reporter nursing a grudge against the priest smears Father Rossetti and Lily with false accusations of an illicit affair.

These charges are immediately and unquestioningly taken up as the truth by others, and are soon plastered across newspapers and magazines, found blaring from television and radio.

Lily flees the harsh glare of publicity and heads to tiny Lake Henry, New Hampshire, where she grew up. Of course, life in a small town offers no guarantee of privacy: everybody there knows everybody else's business. Regardless, this community does protect its own, and Lily is relieved to find that the majority of Lake Henryites rally around her, foiling outsiders' attempts to wheedle information out of them: "It's one thing for us to know who we are and where we come from. It's something else entirely for them to know it." The town is abuzz with rumors and gossip, but at bottom is shocked and revolted at the blatant invasion of private lives being played out in the big-city media with regard to the Blake-Rossetti case. John Kipling, former hard-nosed journalist, has no answer when asked, "Why do you do things like that?" Sheriff Willie Jake's blunt follow-up comment speaks for those who believe that the exposure to which prominent citizens are subjected is unjust: "Well, it's wrong. Somethin's wrong in this country. People don't know about respect."

A corollary to the more general privacy concerns is the frightening amount of power currently wielded by television and the press. Delinsky, who herself worked as a photographer and reporter for a small paper when her children were young, makes the following statement on her Web site: "I wanted to write about what happens when an out-of-control media wrongly slanders a totally innocent woman. The plot came first. I then created Lily Blake to fit into it." The specter of a press run amok, prying ruthlessly



into people's past and present, laying bare the whole of someone's private life for all the world to see, and exposing even the slightest youthful indiscretion or minor peccadillo, is central to this story.

Presumption of innocence seems a lost cause once the seed of suspicion has been planted: "She must be guilty of something.

Otherwise it couldn't have gone this far."

Even when an error is admitted and allegations are withdrawn, the damage is done, especially since the way the system normally works is that "charges [are] made on the front page, and apologies issued somewhere back inside." Smears linger long after the facts have been brought to light, and even after those facts have been forgotten.

Having ruined an individual's reputation, the media quickly move on, hot on the heels of the next big scandal.

Information is power. As one character puts it: "so now you know. That gives you power over us." A minor thread running through *Lake News* is how the Internet can be used to discover virtually anything and everything about someone else. People are frequently appalled to learn how easily a perfect stranger can gain access to personal details—credit rating, employment history, even phone records—with a few simple keystrokes. The media exploit that wealth of information to delve into every aspect of Lily's private life, and the same resources are later used by the good guys to exact revenge. Barbara Delinsky reveals the existence of "information wholesalers" who "have data banks filled with information that's right out there for public consumption," and who operate without benefit of government regulation.

For Lily Blake, the invasiveness begins with an overly insistent reporter who shows up at the private dinner club where she moonlights as a singer, wanting to know details about her relationship with the cardinal. He refuses to take no for an answer, probing and cajoling until she does open up a little, trying to explain how innocent the friendship really is. The next morning, awakened by calls to her unlisted telephone number from other journalists wanting a reaction to what has become that morning's lead story, Lily is horrified to find her world turned upside down and inside out. Privacy becomes a distant dream as her answering machine begins to fill up with messages from people she does not know (and does not want to know) and representatives of various media agencies camp out at her front door, harassing friends and acquaintances. Cameras have taken aim at her living room from the building across the street, and any attempt to leave the apartment building means running the gauntlet of reporters desperate for a scoop.

She loses both her day and evening jobs, is prevented from even having a quiet lunch with a friend, and is mortified to hear everyone talking about her and debating her morals. Like so many others who unwillingly find themselves under a spotlight, she wants "her life back—work, freedom, privacy," but there is no escaping the nightmare.

Having already obtained Lily's telephone number and home address, the press wastes no time in unearthing and reporting such facts as where she works, what kind of car she



drives, what merchandise she buys, even where she holidays. Before long the news stories are covering highly personal details such as a childhood speech impediment that still resurfaces under stress despite years of therapy, and her strained relations with her mother. Even a sealed court file proves eminently accessible, as a fairly innocuous act of teenage rebellion (being an unwitting passenger in a stolen car) that led to a probation term is trumpeted as additional "proof" of her immoral character. No matter that the charge was eventually dropped. No matter that her record since the age of sixteen has been exemplary, with "not a speeding ticket, not a parking ticket, not even a late credit card payment" to blacken her name. Skillful manipulation of ancient history and innuendo can combine to bring the world crashing about one's ears. As Lily rages in frustration, "I worked so hard to build a good life, and they've taken it away, and I don't know why!"

Even where civil rights have been violated, there appears to be little recourse.

Newspapers, reluctant to admit liability, may refuse to issue a retraction. Fighting back with a lawsuit for libel or malice would involve enduring years of intense press coverage and cost vast amounts of money.

Herself married to a lawyer, Delinsky is fully aware of how the American legal system functions.

There is a general concern in today's society that journalists often seem to be making the news instead of simply reporting it. Some stories appear downright malicious, the result of a blind pursuit of ever more shocking copy. Repeated cries of "it's not fair!" reflect a common perception that the press has crossed the line: "Lily's situation was the microcosm of a large and increasingly frightening phenomenon. The media was out of control. Individual rights— in her case, the right to privacy—were being trampled." The wild scramble to sell more papers and boost ratings has created a situation where anything goes.

The satisfying conclusion to *Lake News* (although it could be argued that the protagonists take just a little too much pleasure in their revenge) offers a solution that uses the media's tactics against the media itself.

Overzealous and irresponsible reporters are hoisted on their own petard as a fantasy of retribution is played out. With John's help, Lily makes use of her unwanted celebrity to expose and publicly humiliate those who had thrust that celebrity upon her.



Techniques

Barbara Delinsky is a crossover writer from the formula romance novel genre, which tends to focus more narrowly on the relationship developing between a hero and heroine than do mainstream novels. Her recent work, shelved under general fiction in bookstores and libraries, has a broader scope, each book tackling a timely social issue. Nonetheless, even though she now writes what is known as women's fiction, Delinsky remains a true romantic. *Lake News* centers on a strong yet vulnerable woman who is facing a personal crisis, and a slightly older man who at first seems to belong to the enemy camp: "He wanted to write a book about her, but she wanted privacy.

That put them on opposite sides." This book also offers a cast of vividly drawn minor characters, the gorgeous scenery of autumn in New England, and high drama.

With almost seventy novels to her credit in less than two decades, many of which have appeared on the bestseller lists, Barbara Delinsky has all the ingredients down pat.

The author has degrees in psychology and sociology, and thus it should come as no surprise that the characters' psychological makeup and their emotional interactions are fundamental to the tale. Delinsky has said, "People fascinate me; social dynamics fascinate me." The main characters are constantly seeking to learn what makes others tick: why Maida is so critical of Lily, why Gus has shut John out, why Terry shows such "a reckless disregard for the truth." They are convinced that things happen for a reason, that people are who they are for a reason, and that all solutions to problems are contingent upon understanding those involved.

Images of home and the domestic space as a theater for the playing out of conflict and resolution are skillfully employed throughout this novel. Doors, walls, windows—all of these function literally and as metaphors. John's father is so busy building walls that he has never learned how to relate to his own son, and seems doomed to die a lonely death in his ramshackle house on the Ridge. Delinsky's characters interact with one another in their own and each other's homes, trying, but rarely succeeding, to communicate. They are repeatedly described as standing on opposite sides of a doorway, and emotional breakthroughs are signaled when one party physically crosses the threshold or opens the door. Windows serve to indicate weaknesses in a person's defenses: Lily must cover up the large ones in her apartment in order to shield herself from prying eyes, and is at one point reduced to "peering through a small, dirty window" from what is in effect an utterly disempowered position, cowering in a parking garage.

Themes

There are a significant number of related themes running through this novel—issues of trust, integrity, communication, a quest for justice, the value of community—virtually all of which are more or less broadly hinted at in the first few pages describing idyllic Lake Henry.

Two loons have nested and produced offspring in the sheltered cove of an island on the lake, and this wildlife family serves to foreshadow and enlighten by contrast the human story to follow. They and the reformed newspaperman hero have, over the summer months, gradually established a wary relationship. The outsider has been made welcome only so long as he "kept his distance and respected their space." These birds keep to themselves and, at the slightest sign of predatory behavior, will take flight or fight to protect their own. Unlike man, however, the loon is never willfully aggressive: it "harmed others only when its own existence was threatened." The birds' parental instincts highlight the importance of family in this novel, and the fact that they are constantly on the lookout for lurking danger foreshadows the media feeding frenzy to come.

Finding a way to trust and be trusted is an important theme. John Kipling has learned the hard way about overintrusive behavior and the potential ruinous costs of exploiting others for one's own ends. He now approaches his beloved loons differently, "waiting for trust to build so he could paddle closer." Having herself been burned and betrayed, Lily Blake must overcome her suspicion, just as John must here again slowly and cautiously prove himself trustworthy to her. In many of their relationships with others, as well, both protagonists must overcome fear of rejection in order to reach out and build essential bridges.

Paradoxically, Kipling is planning to write his own take on Lily even as he finds himself chivalrously protecting her from other reporters trying to do the same. The planned book's subject matter—how the public's right to know must be balanced with an individual's right to privacy—"went to the heart of what worried, angered, jaded so very many people." Of course, in order to succeed with his project, he needs Lily's cooperation, and "if she worked with him, it would be compromising what little privacy she had left." Despite her initial misgivings, the besieged young woman knows that she needs a strong and forceful ally, and thus lets him act as her "link to the outside world." John himself is perceptive enough to see the irony of this situation: "Some would say he was exploiting her. He preferred to think he was simply studying her, but he found either case vaguely unsettling."

The quest for justice (Lily needs her name back and John needs to right a wrong or two himself) and the relationship developing between the two lovers are merged from the beginning. As they work together to prove her innocence, there is a gradual erasure of emotional barriers between them.



They rapidly develop an exclusive relationship, with the result that John is wracked by doubt about his goals and motives. He keeps uncovering more details to add to the story: "But if he included it in a book about the invasion of privacy, he would be invading Lily's privacy even more." It all comes down to two questions: "Was John worthy or not?"

Was he decent or not?" Rather than trying to prove "his worth as a writer," he eventually resolves "to prove his worth as a person" and maintain his hard-won integrity.

Everyone in this story has to overcome obstacles of one sort or another. Two characters must deal with physical disabilities: Poppy's paralysis and Lily's speech impediment. Emotional trauma is less easily resolved. There is an implicit parallel between the dysfunctional Blake and Kipling families and the newspaper business: "Mistakes were rarely admitted; retractions were issued only under duress." Parent-child relationships are depicted as suffering from deep pain inflicted years before, as well as a serious failure to communicate that leaves agonizingly unexplained so many of "those never-knew-why things."

The desire for a sense of belonging, for recapturing something important that has been lost or almost destroyed, functions as an undercurrent throughout Lake News. At one point, three families who have traded in the big city for the small town in search of a better quality of life are referred to as "Lake Henry refugees." Delinsky writes that "in the rural New Hampshire town of Lake Henry, I created a place that is the essence of community, with the caring, interpersonal respect, and physical calm so many of us crave." Similarly, Lily and John have both gone home to heal. In so doing, they manage to find their roots as well as some answers to questions that have so long tormented them.



Literary Precedents

Lake News is ultimately the story of how different types of communities treat an individual linked to scandal. Lily finds little real support among friends and neighbors in the big city of Boston, and yet is welcomed almost with open arms by the closeknit small town where she had ironically spent a painful, ostracized childhood.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's nineteenth-century classic, *The Scarlet Letter*, also concerns what happens to a woman tainted by sexual scandal played out in public, and how a community may react. Both Lily Blake and Hester Prynne suffer from social opprobrium, enduring stares, scathing criticism, and unwanted notoriety. While Hawthorne's heroine has indeed been guilty of sexual impropriety with a man of the cloth (although the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale's own part in the adultery remains hidden from public knowledge for many years), Delinsky's is accused of an affair that never happened, and yet finds herself convicted in the public eye through innuendo that she is powerless to fight. In the end, of course, the traumatic events allow both women to grow and become stronger.

The rural setting functions almost as a Lake News character in its own right. In an implicit signal of this fact, Thoreau's *Walden* is cited as epigraph on the opening page: "Nothing so fair, so pure, and at the same time so large, as a lake, perchance, lies on the surface of the earth. Sky water. It needs no fence." Both works are intimately concerned with the serenity and sense of being at one with nature that is to be found in the countryside. When Lily arrives home under cover of darkness, "she felt a mellowness that the lake always brought. Oh yes, there were qualms, but they had to do with people. Not with the lake. Never with the lake."

The country offers a welcome respite from hectic and occasionally hostile city life. Lily "was tired of being a spectacle. She wanted silence, and privacy. She wanted to become invisible. But human beings didn't dig holes and climb in. They went to places where they could hide, places like Lake Henry."



Related Titles

Barbara Delinsky has produced a prodigious output of novels, the earlier ones under the pen names Bonnie Drake and Billie Douglass. All of her work has a love story at the core, more or less following the standard formula of girl meets boy, girl resists boy, girl and boy eventually profess undying love to one another. While she has crossed over into mainstream fiction over the past few years, the fact that this author cut her teeth on the more formulaic romance genre has been evident throughout her career. Legions of loyal fans eagerly await. As such it gives rise to any number of anticipate that each new Delinsky will offer engaging topics for discussion.

a love story that passes the HEA (happily ever after) test, and from her very first 1. Some of Delinsky's fans have com novel, *The Passionate Touch* (1981), she has mented that, having read *Lake News*, rarely failed to deliver on that score. they can "understand what Lady Diana Other recent books also tackle current experienced." Relate the media frenzy social concerns: child custody battles or surrounding Lily with that centered on empty-nest syndrome, dealing with the Princess of Wales before and after Alzheimer's or surviving breast cancer. her sudden death.

Regardless, the essence of each book remains an abiding interest in people and 2. The impetus for the scandal was Sullihow they relate to one another. Delinsky van's personal enmity toward Francis repeatedly explores male-female relation-Rossetti, with Lily Blake being simply ships and the role of family, especially the an innocent victim caught in the crossfire.

frequently difficult bond existing between It is made clear that the priest can rely mother and daughter. on the support and protection of powSome of her novels, such as *Three Wishes*, ertful friends and supporters in the are also set in a small town and have a Church, while his young friend is left to similar cast of characters: the owner of the the wolves: "The focus was on Lily, and local diner, the regulars who gather there, Lily alone. She had become the story." the town gossip, the newcomer, and those Given that the man who has been tainted who proudly belong to the "best" families by sexual scandal gets off scot-free, while in the area. Furthermore, virtually all of the woman continues to suffer irrepaBarbara Delinsky's fictions are set in the rable damage to her reputation and American Northeast, where she has lived freedom, what kind of double standard her entire life. As a rule, she rotates among regarding sex and guilt is operating here? the six New England states with each 3. Consider the motif of home as security new book. throughout this novel. Lily is forced to flee her cherished Boston apartment, whose windows expose her every moveADAPTATIONS ment to the prying cameras and which is located in a building now surrounded *Lake News* has been released as a book on by intrusive paparazzi. Celia's warm, tape, abridged by Lawrence Axmith and welcoming cottage is filled with a large read by Melissa Leo, through Simon and collection of birdhouses, drawing atSchuster Audio (1999). tention to the



grandmother's role as a symbol of refuge and comfort through an image of almost infinite layers of IDEAS FOR GROUP DISCUSSIONS home. What role do the houses inhabited by Lily's and John Kipling's families play? How are they described? Lake News deals explicitly with issues that have been very much in the news and debated around the water cooler in recent years: invasion of privacy, the excesses of character should be basically strong and the paparazzi, and negotiation of healthy appealing, but minor flaws make them relationships with family, friends, and love-all the more attractive to the reader. A perfect character is not only unrealistic, but probably boring." What are Lily's flaws? And John's? Do these less admirable characteristics make them more likeable or interesting to you as reader?

Consider also the secondary characters, such as John's father, in terms of their good and bad points.

5. Lily and Poppy have both overcome once debilitating physical handicaps (Lily stutters painfully and Poppy was made a paraplegic in a traffic accident).

Serious as such disabilities can be, emotional problems are often less easily resolved. Discuss the emotional handicaps exhibited by the various characters, especially Maida and Gus, and the danger that Hannah's psyche will be similarly scarred.

6. Lily eventually does decide to file a lawsuit, reasoning that "what's been done to me is morally wrong. That won't change. But laws have been broken, too." Do you agree with her decision to take this matter to court?

7. Small towns do not offer the anonymity of a big city, and Lake Henry's inhabitants readily admit that "speculation is second nature" to them. Griffin Hughes suggests to Poppy Blake that "there you are in a small town where everyone knows what you're doing and when. Nothing's private there. So maybe you don't feel the need for privacy that city people do." Does he have a point? What about Willie Jake's claim that "we talk about each other, and that's fine, but we don't tell strangers what we learn"?

8. Maida accuses Lily of more or less asking for trouble by choosing to become an entertainer: "scandal comes with that kind of life. People see you onstage, and suddenly you're a public person.

You're fair game for gossipmongers."

Is she right? Do certain professions that invite celebrity also necessarily invite public scrutiny with regard to the celebrity's private activities?

9. "If family's good for anything, it's for coming to the rescue in time of trouble." To what extent does the Blake family close ranks? Compare Maida and Rose's reaction (or even that of Celia's family when scandal rears its ugly head) to that of the Kipling "aunts, uncles and cousins" when they manage to shift part of the blame for car theft from Donny to Lily.



10. In your opinion, should *Lake News* be classified as a romance novel or as belonging to the broader and typically more respected category of women's fiction? How far has Delinsky strayed from her genre fiction roots?



Copyright Information

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Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

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