

# Liar, Liar Short Guide

## Liar, Liar by Laurence Yep

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## Overview

Liar, Liar is a mystery about Sean Pierce, a troubled sixteen-year-old, starting life fresh in a new setting.

When his best friend, Marsh Weiss, dies in a fiery auto accident, Sean becomes suspicious of the circumstances of his death. He teams up with Nora Weiss, younger sister of Marsh, and their sleuthing leads them to Russ Towers, a respected business man in the community, who has reason to wish Marsh harm. When Sean's police record is revealed, Nora loses confidence in him and Sean is forced to continue alone to prove himself trustworthy and Russ Towers a murderer.

## About the Author

Laurence Yep was born June 14, 1948, in San Francisco, California, the son of Thomas Gim, a postal clerk and Franche Lee, a homemaker. His own identity was a difficult issue because he grew up in a Chinese home in a predominantly black neighborhood where his parents operated a small grocery store; he attended a parochial school in San Francisco's Chinatown. He felt like an outsider at school because he spoke no Chinese like his peers. In *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, he says of himself, "I was the all-purpose Asian. When we played war, I was the Japanese who got killed; then when the Korean war came along, I was a North Korean Communist." He first came face to face with white American culture when he attended high school, where he continued to feel like an outsider. There he discovered science fiction and began writing, publishing his first story at age eighteen. Many of his books are about young people from multicultural backgrounds. He says that writing has helped him in his own search for cultural identity.

Several of Yep's books have received numerous awards. *Dragonwings* was named one of the *New York Times* Outstanding Books of the Year (1975), a Newbery Medal Honor Book (1976), a Jane Addams Children's Book Award Honor Book, and a Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book (1976). *Child of the Owl* was named one of the *School Library Journal's* Best Books for Spring and one of the *New York Times* Outstanding Books of the Year (1977). *The Rainbow People* was named a Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor book (1989).

## Setting

Liar, Liar is set in the contemporary, bedroom community of Almaden, California, and is close to Mr. Pierce's work as a computer troubleshooter. He hopes the location and environment will be a good place for Sean to get a fresh start with people who don't know about his past; a past that includes breaking, entering and stealing as part of a gang led by a Mr. Rosniak who fenced the stolen property. Mr. Pierce is unhappy with Sean's choice of a close friend, Marsh, who lives next door and seems aimless.



## Social Sensitivity

Liar, Liar tells of young people who feel they are immortal and not accountable for their actions. Sean is unable to escape his past and is forced to deal with old behavior patterns and habits in a new situation. All people are ultimately responsible for their actions and deeds, as Sean learns. The reader is pulled into the ways Sean thinks and handles his problems, which includes lying. He longs to be close to his father, resents his parents' divorce, and dislikes the man his mother dates.

Doubted by some, he eventually proves himself trustworthy. These are issues familiar to many young people. Readers are confronted with Sean's feelings of guilt after Marsh's death. They can learn from Sean as he makes peace with himself because it is not his fault that Marsh is dead and he is alive.

## Literary Qualities

Yep has written a contemporary, first-person mystery about Sean Pierce's struggle to prove himself trustworthy. The action in *Liar, Liar* keeps the reader involved as a prank moves from the category of harmless fun to death for Marsh Weiss. Tension builds as the pieces fall into place in this murder mystery and Sean faces life-threatening danger with no one to believe him. The suspense builds with Sean's breaking and entering Russ Towers's home and the encounter with Towers in Sean's home. It climaxes with Towers's admission of tampering with the brakes on Marsh's car. The final events move with rapid fire speed as Sean fights Towers in a life and death struggle.



## Themes and Characters

The theme of parent-teen relationships is strong in *Liar, Liar* as we see the troubled relationship between Sean and his father. Sean yearns for a parent to talk to who will listen without being judgmental. Dad always seems occupied with his work and Mom is too far away. Not knowing how to relate to Sean, Dad frequently uses gifts and the promise of outings together to smooth things over, when all Sean wants is to talk. This is a common problem between parents and their teen-age children and helps to make the novel meaningful to young readers.

Mortality confronts the reader in *Liar, Liar* as Sean thinks about real life following Marsh's death. "I mean, once Marsh and I thought nothing would ever happen to us. No matter how bad the accident, we would walk away from it just like Burt Reynolds always does. Only I knew now that it didn't work that way in real life." Young people often believe they are invincible; accidents and death happen to others, not them.

Guilt is a difficult emotion with which to live. Many people feel guilty about something at one time or another in their lives. Sean feels terrible guilt about Marsh's death. Why should he still be alive when his best friend is dead? The novel handles this issue with compassion and sensitivity as Sean grows through his pain.

Sean Pierce, the protagonist, is a bit of a worrier and a follower, trying to fit in with new friends, a new school, and a new community. Sean becomes a follower in his attempt to make friends; first he follows the lead of his friend Marsh Weiss and then Nora Weiss, Marsh's sister. Sean matures into a take-charge person as he proves another person guilty of murder when no one believes his story. When he has no one else to rely on, he must call on his own reserves and resources, which are not wholly ethical, to accomplish his mission. As Towers assaults Sean's life, Sean thinks very clearly and rationally, knowing his decisions may make the difference between life and death for himself.

Marsh Weiss is carefree, a practical joker, loves horror movies, anti-establishment and talks about strings attached to people, making them behave like puppets. Marsh's strong personality attracts Sean. His practical jokes have made some enemies for him and get him and Sean into serious trouble.

Sean's dad dislikes Marsh and tells Sean, "I don't want you hanging around with that boy. He's poison. I thought we agreed. No mistakes like last time."

Marsh's younger sister, Nora, seems to be the studious type; she is into "causes," writes for the school newspaper, and is a truthful and truth seeking person. She likes who-dun-its and is smart and tough. She is a take-charge person and takes over the search for the murderer when Sean tells her of his suspicions about Marsh's death.

Mr. Pierce, Sean's dad, is a workaholic. He is a very talented computer troubleshooter. Unsuccessful in starting his own computer business, he now works for a man fifteen





years his junior, whom he calls "the kid." He has difficulty talking to others, which is part of the reason for the break-up of his marriage. He always addresses Sean as "Sport" which annoys Sean. He is a very organized man, and so caught up in his work that he is not really aware of Sean's activities and feelings.

Mrs. Pierce, Sean's mother, is a counselor in a suicide prevention center in Seattle. She has a male friend, Neil, of whom Sean disapproves. Sean thinks his mother might not like him and that that contributed to the divorce between his parents. From her conversations with Sean, she seems genuinely interested in her son.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Sean stepped in to even up the sides in Marsh's fight with the kids from Peterson high at the outset of the story. What do you think Marsh meant by his statement, "You'd better stay out of this. Knights in shining armor are out of date nowadays."

2. In Chapter one, Sean admits to cheating on a quiz and letting the air out of the tires on a Porsche. How do you feel about these activities? Explain your answer. Would you ever be tempted to cheat or pull a prank similar to this?

3. As Sean leaves the hospital with his father after the accident, he thinks about how he and Marsh once thought nothing would ever happen to them.

Why do young people believe they can do what they please with their bodies and not suffer the consequences of pain or death?

4. Later in the story, Sean tells us he did not use to plan his conversations with his mom, but does now. Why do you think he feels he needs to plan his conversations? Do you ever plan conversations? Why?

5. At the funeral home, Sean paused at the casket and noted that it was a "nice expensive one of polished walnut and brass. I just wish the Weisses had spent half as much on a car for Marsh as they had probably wasted on his casket." What is Sean thinking? Is he blaming Marsh's parents for his death?

Explain your answer.

6. What should Sean have done to avoid the scene he made at the funeral by trying to convince Nora they were in danger? How should he have handled the situation? Was his timing off? Why?

7. Sean blows-up at his dad when he calls him "Sport" one time too many in Chapter fifteen. "I'm not a 'sport.' Why can't you use my name like I was a human being?" Why does Sean react so strongly this time? Why do you think dad called him "sport" instead of Sean?

8. Look back at the beginning of Chapter sixteen. Sean remembers Marsh told him, "When we let other people pull our strings, we die inside—bit by bit, day by day until nothing's left but a body as soulless as a bunch of wooden blocks tied together with strings. No, I couldn't go crawling back to the others." What do you think Marsh meant?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Sean makes this statement as he and his dad are leaving the hospital: "Let's just get out of here before they claim me for spare parts." Research the topic of organ transplants. What organs can be transplanted? What does the term harvesting mean in this context?

How does time factor into transplant surgery?

2. Some kind of rescue team would have been called to the scene of the accident to free Marsh. What personnel would most likely be on that team?

What would they do to free Marsh?

3. Sean did not like his nickname, "Sport." Do you have a nickname you do not like? Tell how it makes you feel to be called by that nickname. What would you like to do about it?

4. Sean takes the law into his own hands when Lt. Silva does not take him seriously. Do you think Sean had other alternatives that he did not explore?

Tell what you would do in Sean's situation to get help.

5. Liar, Liar has a violent ending. Do you think Russ Towers got his just deserts? Reread the last two pages of the novel. How do you account for Sean's change of attitude towards Towers?

## For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*. Vol. 69. Detroit: Gale, 1992.

Includes a brief biographical sketch of Yep, a recent photograph, a detailed list of books, a list of awards and notes on several of his novels.

Holtze, Sally Holmes, editor. *Fifth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983. A short biographical sketch and photograph of the author.

Norton, Donna E. *Through the Eyes of a Child*. 3d ed. New York: Merrill, 1991. Discusses the merits of authors, illustrators, and individual titles.

Yep, Laurence. "Writing Dragonwings." *The Reading Teacher* (January 1977): 358. Yep tells the story behind the writing of *Dragonwings* and includes autobiographical details about his own search for cultural identity.

## Related Titles

There are several titles which deal with troubled relationships between teens and parents and other significant adults and their yearning for understanding which students might read and compare to Sean's relationship with his father in *Liar, Liar*.

In *After the Rain*, by Norma Fox Mazer, fifteen-year-old Rachel gets to know her dying grandfather better than ever before and finds the experience bittersweet. *Give Dad My Best*, by James Lincoln Collier, tells the story of fourteen-year-old Jack who gets a job at the town boat club to help out because his father, a trombone player, gets little work in the middle of the 1930s Depression. Jack is tempted to steal when he realizes his dad can't really be depended upon to take care of the family.

*Queenie*, in *Queenie Peavy* by Robert Burch, is a strong female character longing for the day when her father will return from jail and she can get to know him. In *Sons from Afar*, by Cynthia Voigt, the youngest Tillerman brothers search for their father.

Terrie, fourteen, knows only life with her father, but then discovers he kidnapped her from her mother after a divorce and her mother is still alive in *Taking Terri Mueller* by Norma Fox Mazer.

In *The Moonlight Man* by Paula Fox, Catherine, a teenager, struggles to understand herself and her father after her parents' divorce.



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