

M. V. Sexton Speaking Short Guide

M. V. Sexton Speaking by Suzanne Newton

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Overview

M. V. Sexton Speaking is the story of Martha Venable Sexton's sixteenth summer, a summer of self-discovery and initiation into the adult world of work, play and complex but rewarding relationships. When Martha's guardian, Great Aunt Gert, insists she find a summer job, Martha is, at first, reluctant: "Worse than anything," she says, "I hated to be pushed. My resistance juices go into action even if it's something I might, left to myself, be naturally inclined to do." By the novel's end, however, Martha is thanking Aunt Gert "for making me go to work." "It has," she claims, "changed my life."

Martha Venable sheds her pre-adolescent identity along with her name when she is nicknamed M. V. by her new employer, Brad, of Bradley's Bakeshop. At the bakery, M. V. meets a cache of characters who enrich her life.

She also learns to speak up for herself, to trust her instincts, stand her ground, and—perhaps most importantly—that "friendly people have friends." As M. V.'s summer saga unfolds, she discovers, with us, a great deal previously untold about her past and her parents—both of whom died while mountain climbing when M. V. was six.

Moreover, M. V. learns something about "possibility." Initially, she believes "I am like a coloring book person who has been outlined in purple...blending is not possible for me."

At last, M. V. comes to believe that blending is not only possible, it is often, also, desirable. The profile she draws of herself nearer the end of this novel has a much greater range of value than did the stark, hard-edged portrait with which she began.

Newton writes an engaging story in M. V. Sexton Speaking about maturation, and about both the pain and the pleasure that accompanies breaking new ground. As readers, we move, with M. V., into social circles beyond the world of school, and we cheer her honest, forthright response to each new experience. While M. V. is obviously the protagonist and tells her own story here, Newton introduces a cast of other characters through M. V.'s eyes. These characters have greater depth than one might expect, given their numbers, and Newton skillfully reveals the web of relationships that links the lot. It is within this web that M. V. begins to feel she belongs, to lose her sense of isolation from her peers, her community, and the "human" family. M. V. Sexton Speaking addresses the possibility of retaining one's individuality while still reaching out to, and being embraced by, other individuals.

About the Author

Suzanne Newton is an award-winning writer of fiction for young adults who has earned top honors for each full-length work she has published. Her first five novels, in turn, won North Carolina's highest award for juvenile literature; *I Will Call It Georgie's Blues* was an American Library Association, New York Times and New York Times Book Review "best book of the year" in 1983.

Born in 1936, Newton has lived her life in North Carolina, first in Bath and Washington, now in Raleigh. She is the mother of four grown children and is also a teacher, helping young writers develop their craft through North Carolina's Poetry-in-the-Schools project. Of that project, Newton says: "It has been an exciting experience to see children find freedom in word creations of their own."

Although she wrote numerous short stories, poems and articles for adults early in her career, Newton ultimately settled on fiction for young adults as her true artistic calling. To prepare for writing *M. V. Sexton Speaking*, she returned to the small, family bakery where she was employed for one summer while in her teens. *M. V. Sexton Speaking* is not autobiographical, yet, as her research for this book demonstrates, Newton's attention to detail and authenticity gives her prose a special edge, a lifelike feel.

Setting

Gravelly Falls, North Carolina is the physical setting for this story; the temporal setting—the time frame—is less explicit but clearly contemporary.

Gravelly Falls is a good-sized municipality with a bustling Chamber of Commerce; when reading this novel, we sense that all residents contribute to the livelihood of their town.

Much of the action, for M. V., occurs in Bradley's Bakeshop, a new business owned and run by a young married couple, Brad and Rachel Bradley. With the bakery, several locations around town assume significance for M. V.; among them, the Millhouse Restaurant and Talley's Beach. Finally, as home to Martha Venable from age six to age sixteen, Aunt Gert and Uncle Milt's house hosts many of the most dramatic moments in this tale.



Social Sensitivity

A case could be made for claiming this novel is socially sensitive throughout. M. V.'s "education" is, after all, a testament to the happiness derived from being social. On a smaller scale, making new friends while keeping old ones is an idea reinforced repeatedly.

Uncle Milt, for instance, renews a longdormant friendship with Marvin Parker; as he does, M. V. and Arnold Pepper revitalize theirs. With M. V., readers are called to remember those who were there for them first as well as those who people their lives at present.

One pet project Newton attempts is to foster increased intergenerational respect. This kind of respect, she suggests, is sorely lacking in our society.

"Little kids don't have any idea at all about the real lives of grown-ups, do they?" M. V. asks, rhetorically, to which Uncle Milt replies: "Probably not, but it works the other way, too.

Grown-ups don't have any idea about the real lives of kids, either." Newton, offering us a glimpse at these "real lives", promotes open, probing communication between her characters. Many who read M. V. Sexton Speaking will come to more deeply appreciate the diversity of experience and perspective we frequently attribute to age.



Literary Qualities

M. V. Sexton *Speaking* is a kind of Bildungsroman, a German word that means "novel of education." In a Bildungsroman the education of the central character is at stake, and, typically, that education occurs outside of school.

Very often, the protagonist in a novel of this sort has a mentor or guide; in M. V. Sexton *Speaking*, M. V. has several. These guides are, generally, members of her parent's generation, and they represent role models heretofore absent from M. V.'s life. The most notable guides appearing in M. V.'s Bildungsroman are the Bradleys, Gene Kestler, and Arnold Pepper's mother, Nancy.

Although not a guide, per se, Uncle Milt plays the role of sage, one who seldom speaks but who makes considerable sense when he does. It is Uncle Milt who helps M. V. unravel the puzzles of her past, her parents, her Aunt Gert and, to some extent, herself.

Doppelgänger is another German word for a literary device used effectively in this story. The English translation of Doppelgänger is "the double"; in a narrative, the Doppelgänger is a secondary character whose behavior somehow mirrors the central character's.

Martha Venable's Doppelgänger is Marvin Parker; that their names echo is but one clue. In Marvin, Martha sees an older, lonely individual who hides fear of rejection behind a steely exterior.

Marvin represents the person M. V. could have easily become, before her summer of self-discovery, that is. Newton employs the Doppelgänger device with a light touch; therefore, spotting subtle character similarities is a bonus for the careful reader.

A consistent, reliable first-person narration leads readers to trust and believe M. V.; she comes across as honest and fair, spunky and likable. This consistency of narrative voice also lends the novel dramatic unity. Moreover, by writing dialogue that avoids jargon, the author provides characters with voices appropriate for their ages which, nevertheless, do not restrict the appeal of the novel to a particular region or time. There is nothing in M. V. Sexton *Speaking* to date or outdate the story; its appeal is timeless and its potential audience is broad.



Themes and Characters

There are multiple themes in *M. V. Sexton Speaking* although each is related, in part, to larger questions of identity formation, the joys (and fears) of growing up and the need to balance independence with interdependence.

Aunt Gert raised Elise, M. V.'s mother, and loved her fiercely; she believes, though, that she made many mistakes as a surrogate mom. Determined to spare herself, and M. V., similar heartaches and the pain of further loss, Aunt Gert responds by being an even more protective guardian for Martha Venable than she was for Elise. According to M. V., Aunt Gert is convinced "all teenagers make out, drink and smoke pot." She is wary of M. V.'s growing need to socialize, and she is frequently afraid that M. V.'s judgment will not be "sound." M. V. says: "I have taken the path of least resistance." "I have lived the kind of life Aunt Gert approved of" and given her no reason for mistrust. Even Uncle Milt admonishes: "Treating Martha Venable as though you expected her to turn out to be a juvenile delinquent is an insult to her—and to us, too...After all, we have raised her!" Gradually, as stubborn willfulness gives way to real talk, M. V. is able to persuade her great aunt that she is sensible and trustworthy.

M. V. is not her mother, and history is not fated to repeat itself. This idea emerges, thematically, again when M. V. befriends Gene Kestler, a local jeweler and watch repairman nine years her senior. Because M. V.'s father was a college professor and her mother was his student when they met, their relationship cost him his job, and the age difference between them made life hard in other ways. When M. V. learns this, she wonders if gravitating toward older men might be genetically inscribed. Although she is smitten with Gene—and he with her—she recognizes that being romantically involved "can lead you into more reality than you can handle sometimes." For his part, Gene advises M. V.: "Just because a man is old enough to be your father doesn't mean he always has fatherly thoughts."

That notwithstanding, Gene has been M. V.'s principal mentor in her quest for friends, and she declares him her "forever friend" as they part, amicably.

Throughout this novel, the author implies that having a measure of faith in oneself and others is a healthy trait.

Brad and Rachel demonstrate their faith in M. V. as an employee, believing she can, in fact, learn to "do it all at once." In turn, M. V.'s faith in herself escalates. As it does, Aunt Gert begins to respect M. V.'s maturity, and by worrying less, enjoys life more.

One prominent older character in *M. V. Sexton Speaking* is Marvin Parker, a financially-successful wholesale supplier, and former school chum of Uncle Milt's. Marvin Parker has faith in no one. In those with whom he comes in contact daily, he inspires mostly fear.



Stern and threatening, Parker puts the establishment of the Bradley's business in peril by demanding payment before they can generate sufficient revenue.

M. V., at first intimidated by Parker's public persona, eventually sees that this gruff demeanor simply masks inner insecurity. As she learns to "let down her guard" and invite others into her life, M. V. is able to encourage Marvin Parker to do the same.

With their unflinching support of each other in a risky enterprise, Brad and Rachel are excellent exemplars of faith.

Many other characters, too, convey an "I believe in you" attitude that seems a central idea here. From Gene Kestler to Aunt Gert to Uncle Milt, Brad and Rachel to Marvin to Mrs. Ligamore Brown, all are, by the story's close, wealthier people, spiritually, for empathizing with and investing faith in one another.

Suzanne Newton is not overly-idealistic in this regard, however. Through the character of Buddy Cramer (a postal worker with delusions that "all women wait for him") she suggests a bit of skepticism is also healthy. It is wise to be kind, perhaps, but also wise to beware.

The work ethic is strong in Gravelly Falls, North Carolina, and "work before play" is a maxim made manifest in M. V. Sexton Speaking. Nearly all characters are introduced while at work, and in a variety of jobs. The high school students—Arnold, Holly, M. V. — all put in an eight hour day before heading off to the movies or the beach.

When Arnold offers M. V. a ride to work, a friendship they enjoyed as children is renewed. While they swap stories about their jobs, laugh and tease, M. V. and Arnold become better acquainted, and they begin dating.

That work and play are intertwined and that both configure quality of life is everywhere apparent in this novel.



Topics for Discussion

1. M. V. does not want a summer job; Aunt Gert makes her look for one. Why is she reluctant? Why does she choose to respond to the bakery want ad over her other options?
2. M. V. has a rough first day on the job, but she vows to return. Why? In her place, would you go back? Why or why not?
3. What is a Bildungsroman and why does this novel qualify as such? How would you describe M. V.'s "education"? What other books have you read that also fit this description?
4. Early on, Aunt Gert and M. V. have a rocky relationship. What is the nature of their conflict? What causes them to better understand each other by the story's end?
5. What does Marvin Parker's treatment of his mother-in-law say to M. V. about her own behavior?
6. Holly Hazen makes two brief but important appearances in this novel.
Why is her role significant?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Explain how the setting for this story contributes to its overall effect.

Does the setting somehow underscore the meaning you make of the novel? If yes, how?

2. Describe the most significant way in which three secondary characters serve as guides for M. V. in this Bildungsroman.

3. Evaluate the impact of working at Bradley's Bakeshop on the quality of M. V.'s life. In what important ways has her life changed as a result of employment?

4. Show how Marvin Parker functions as a Doppelganger for M. V. by citing examples from the text.

3669 5. Consider the phrase "intergenerational respect." What might this mean to Mrs. Ligamore Brown? To Aunt Gert? M. V.? How does Suzanne Newton convey her beliefs about inter-generational respect?



For Further Reference

Greenlaw, M. Jean. "M. V. Sexton Speaking." *Journal of Reading* 25,6 (March 1982): 613. "Best of all, the book makes you laugh. It is one of the best coming of age books I've read in years and manages to be intriguing without one four-letter word or obligatory sex scene. A real winner!"

"M. V. Sexton Speaking." *Kirkus Reviews*, 99, 24. (December 15, 1981): 1524-1525. "When M. V. Sexton speaks it's in her own sure voice, which makes this a pleasure to read . . . it's the sort of story where everyone turns out nice. . .but outside Rachel's frosting there's nothing sugary about it—thanks mostly to M. V.'s fresh feet-on-the-ground personality."

Noah, Carolyn. "M. V. Sexton Speaking." *School Library Journal* 28,4 (December 1981): 72. "Job, employers and a new male friend are catalysts, and acquiescent M. V. emerges a witty and confident young woman."

Newton's prose is energetic and spiced with humor. Each character is convincingly multidimensional."

Sutherland, Zena. "M. V. Sexton Speaking." *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* 35,5 (January 1982): 92.

Sutherland contends this novel isn't "an emotional-charged or dramatic story," but it is "nicely developed" as M. V. learns to "take life and Aunt Gert a little less seriously."

Related Titles

Other books by Suzanne Newton which may be of interest to readers of this novel include *I Will Call It Georgie's Blues* (1983); *An End to Perfect* (1984); *A Place Between* (1986), and *Where are You When I Need You?* (1991).

Novels for young adults that treat initiation into the world of work, as does M. V. Sexton *Speaking* include *Double Take*, by Richard Belair; *A Man's Pride*, by Jane Claypool Milner, and *Blue Denim Blues*, by Ann Warren Smith.

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