

# **The Man in the Woods Short Guide**

## **The Man in the Woods by Rosemary Wells**

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## Overview

Helen and Pinky witness an accident caused by the Punk Rock Thrower who has been throwing huge rocks at cars, but they do not actually see anyone throw the rock. Helen sees a suspicious stranger near the scene of the crime and follows him into the woods. She never gets a clear look at the stranger, but later realizes that he knows who she is. Helen is convinced that the police have arrested the wrong person as the Punk Rock Thrower, that the man in the woods could not be the person who was arrested. Only Pinky believes her. Helen is threatened and is faced with real and imaginary dangers, all of which become convincingly frightening. Wells skillfully creates an atmosphere of suspense that makes the reader feel Helen's panic, fear, and suspicion as she tries to figure out who the mysterious man in the woods is.

Although clues are scattered throughout the book, the identity of the man in the woods is a secret until the last pages.

## About the Author

Rosemary Wells was born in New York City in 1943, but spent most of her childhood years in her parents' home near Red Bank, New Jersey or at her grandmother's home on the Jersey Shore. Her father was English/Australian and their home was filled with books and nineteenth-century music.

Wells claims to have been a poor student at Red Bank High School; however, her artistic ability gained her entrance into the prestigious Museum School in Boston where she studied art.

She left the Museum School at age nineteen to marry Tom Wells and worked as a textbook designer in Boston for two years. When her husband entered the Columbia School of Architecture they moved to New York and Rosemary worked as a designer for another publisher. She and her husband currently live in Briarcliff Manor, New York with their two daughters.

They like to end each day by reading aloud to each other.

Wells began illustrating picture books for young children in 1968 and wrote and illustrated her first picture book a year later. Since then she has written and illustrated over two dozen books for young children, many of which have received critical acclaim and awards and have been placed on lists of books recommended for young children. She has received the American Library Association Notable Books for Children Award six times, the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award five times, and the School Library Journal Best Books of the Year Award six times.

Max's Breakfast (1985) and Max's Christmas (1986) earned all three of these awards. Hazel's Amazing Mother (1985) received the New York Times Best Illustrated Children's Books award.

Wells is one of few authors who writes equally well for young children and for adolescents. She wrote her first book for adolescents, *The Fog Comes on Little Pig Feet*, in 1972, and she has written five more since then. *Leave Well Enough Alone* and *When No One Was Looking* were both named by School Library Journal as Best Books of the Year.

*Through the Hidden Door* was named Children's Editors' Choice by Booklist and one of the American Library Association's Best Books for Young Adults.

She was awarded the Mystery Writers of America's Edgar Allan Poe Award for *When No One Was Looking* and for *Through the Hidden Door*. She is currently working on a historical novel set in the Shenandoah Valley during the Civil War.

Memories, both good and bad, of Wells's growing up years in New Jersey are incorporated into her books, as are incidents involving her two daughters, Victoria and



Beezoo. Wells claims to be an "accomplished eavesdropper" in restaurants, train stations, and any other place where people gather. She combines ideas gathered from these overheard conversations with real events to create stories. Wells enjoys mysteries and says that some day she would like to work for the FBI.

# Setting

Present-day New Bedford, Massachusetts is the setting for the story. In an effort to follow-up on an important clue, the main characters delve into the history of the city and one of its families. The high school Helen and Pinky attend is typical of high schools anywhere in the country.

## Social Sensitivity

Wells draws attention to the offensiveness of sexist language through the patronizing attitude of a policeman who calls Helen "Honey." Helen resents this, especially when she realizes that the policeman has treated her male companion in a more respectful manner. In another situation, Helen chides Pinky for making "a male chauvinist pig remark." Although this is not a central theme of the book, Wells makes her point effectively within the context of the story.

Violence is handled gently. The initial scene at the accident caused by a rock thrown through the windshield of the car is described in enough detail to depict the seriousness and senselessness of the crime, but the accident victims are not seriously hurt. There is a threat of harm to Helen throughout the book, but no actual violence takes place. Indeed, the threat is implied through words to a song. The potential for harm is used effectively to create suspense without including violent acts in the story.



## Literary Qualities

Wells makes effective use of interior dialogue to show the thought processes Helen uses to solve the mystery and to show the terror Helen feels. Displaying the mark of a good mystery writer, Wells knows when to unexpectedly interject whistling or some other reminder of the Man in the Woods. She gives just enough information to make the reader think, but the reader does not know more than the characters in the book know; the reader solves the mystery along with Helen and Pinky.

The book contains some symbols of the mysterious, such as rain, fog, and darkness. A cat in a tree stares at Helen with "phosphorescent eyes" and later "blinked and disappeared as quickly as a magician's trick coin, as if in fear." Some of the symbolism in the book turns out to be a clue to the mystery. Helen's lost locket is returned to her with the picture of her mother damaged as a warning or threat. The tunes whistled by the Man in the Woods provide clues.





## Themes and Characters

Helen is an artistic, intelligent, fourteen-year-old who has been brought up to be honest, and to follow the rules.

Her character is well developed from the first page when she snaps shut the padlock on her locker without first trying the combination. After several unsuccessful attempts to unlock it, she is hesitant to tell a helpful classmate the combination because the instructions said not to tell your combination to any other student. Throughout the book, Helen is faced with moral decisions with more serious consequences as she becomes involved in solving the mystery of the Punk Rock Thrower. As a freshman who looks younger than she is, Helen tries to prove herself in a world that seems full of seniors. Helen lives with her father and a well-meaning, but overprotective aunt. Although her mother died when Helen was four, Helen senses her mother's presence, and calls on her in times of trouble.

Pinky, who befriends Helen, is a freshman who was kept back a year, dislikes school, and plans to drop out as soon as he turns sixteen. Their common interests are the school newspaper and contempt for the seniors who control the paper. Although Helen is the main character, Pinky is also a fully developed character. He is intelligent, but not particularly interested in school. Like Helen, he is something of a misfit. Pinky's father is dead and the motorcycle helps to keep his father's image alive, just as Helen's locket preserves her mother's image.

Mr. Brzostoski, the history teacher, recognizes Helen's artistic talent as well as her interest in history. He is one of two adults who believes Helen's story that the wrong man is in jail and he serves to moderate Helen's impulsiveness while providing some assistance in problem-solving. The other adult who believes in Helen and provides guidance is Sister Ignatius, a nun from the parochial school Helen had attended.

Other minor characters in the book remain flat with only one major character trait, typically a negative one. Stubby Atlas, son of a known racketeer, has a record of delinquent behavior and is arrested as the Punk Rock Thrower.

Although Helen (and the reader) know little about Stubby, Helen uses a variety of clues to deduce that he is not the real criminal. Jerry Rosen, editor of the school paper, wants the paper to win awards so that he can get a scholarship for college, but his judgment is hampered by allegiance to his air-head girlfriend, Beverly Boone. Barry de Wolf, a senior in charge of advertising for the school paper, is highly critical of Helen's artwork and rejects dozens of Helen's drawings as if to show her that freshmen should not have important responsibilities on a school paper.

In addition to being a suspenseful mystery, *The Man in the Woods* examines several issues of concern to adolescents. Helen is not only a freshman, she has transferred to a public high school from a small parochial school and her best friend has moved out of



town. She is obsessed with the idea that once she has her very curly hair straightened, she will become popular and all of her problems will be solved.

"Cheerleader types simply didn't associate with frizzy-haired new girls who looked two years too young." Helen is concerned about the disposal of nuclear waste and is equally concerned over her classmates' lack of interest in the issue and the school paper's unwillingness to run political cartoons for fear of losing advertisers.



## Topics for Discussion

1. When Pinky first offers Helen a ride on his motorcycle, she considers asking him if his driving the cycle is illegal, decides that it is, and does not ask him. Since Helen is merely a passenger on the motorcycle, does it make any difference whether or not Pinky has a license to drive it? Does she have a legal or moral responsibility?

2. On a number of occasions Helen and Pinky do not tell the truth. In most cases they say they are going one place, but are really going to the woods or elsewhere in search of clues. They often end up in potentially dangerous places. How serious are these lies?

Does the purpose for telling a lie make a difference in determining whether it is right or wrong?

3. At what point in the book did you figure out the identity of the Man in the Woods? Think back through the book to identify the clues the author gave that helped you solve the mystery.

4. A good mystery will keep you in suspense to the very end, never sure who the culprit is. How did the author deliberately try to mislead you in order to maintain suspense throughout the book?

5. Helen is convinced that once she has her curly hair straightened, she will become popular, older students will treat her with respect, and all of her problems will be solved. How important are physical attributes to popularity and to gaining the respect of others?

6. Helen's Aunt Stella was born in Ireland, but denies her Irishness by saying, "I'm an American citizen, thank you very much." However, Helen's father says of his sister that "she can take an oath, change her name, and sign a piece of paper . . . but she'll never change her cooking, her temper, or her religion, and they're as Irish as Paddy's pig, so there." Helen's father seems proud of his Irishness. Is one of these attitudes preferable over the other? Why or why not?

7. Apparently the town newspaper withheld some information regarding the Punk Rock Thrower for fear of offending a major advertiser. The school newspaper editor and ad manager refuse to run Helen's political cartoon and discourage her from writing an article the might offend that same advertiser. Why might advertisers have such a strong influence over what gets published? How should an editor decide whether or not to publish controversial stories?

8. Evaluate Helen's decision not to write the story about Lorenzo Fairchild and his daughter, Lucy.

9. Helen states that "only in the movies do people know what to say and have it all come out right." What does she mean by this?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Think of a mystery, puzzle, or question about your family or your community that could be solved by using original documents, such as letters, diaries, or old newspapers. Determine the best resources for finding the information you need and where those resources might be located, such as your grandparents' attic, the local historical society, the public library, or a special museum. Even if you do not find the answer to your mystery, you will be learning how historians try to reconstruct the past.
2. In some mystery stories the author lets the reader know information the main character does not yet know, so that the reader knows who the "bad guys" are but the potential victim in the book does not. Suspense is built as the character becomes involved in what the reader already knows is a dangerous situation. In *The Man in the Woods* the reader is not given any more information than the main characters have; suspense is built as the reader tries to solve the mystery along with Pinky and Helen. Which type of mystery do you think creates the most suspense and why?
3. Explain the meaning of this passage from near the end of the book when Helen cries in despair in the bathtub: ". . . ever since she'd been little she'd been raised to be intelligent, to follow things through and not drop them in the middle, to use her eyes and ears and good brain and good heart, and she had failed. Was everything in the real world a lie or a trick?"

## For Further Reference

Kirkpatrick, D. L., ed. *Twentieth Century Children's Writers*. 2d ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983: 810-811. Contains a brief biography of Wells and critiques her work.

Sutton, Roger. "A Second Look: None of the Above." *Horn Book Magazine* 63,3 (1987): 368-371. This article examines Wells's book *None of the Above*, in which bitterness arises from the choices young people face today.

Wells, Rosemary. "The Artist at Work: The Writer at Work." *Horn Book Magazine* 63,2 (1987): 163-170. Wells describes the beginning of her career as an author and illustrator and tells where she gets her inspiration and ideas.

## Related Titles

Other Wells's mysteries are *Leave Well Enough Alone*, in which a glamorous summer job as a mother's helper for a wealthy family turns into a gothic mystery and forces a young girl to make difficult decisions; *When No One Was Looking*, a mystery involving a young tennis star who examines the value of winning; and *Through the Hidden Door*, in which two teen-age boys discover relics of the past in a secret cave.

A young girl's world and lifestyle are challenged when her widowed father remarries in *None of the Above*. Using a diary format, *The Fog Comes on Little Pig Feet* examines life in a boarding school and shows how a thirteen-year-old deals with adult questions.



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