

# Maudie and Me and the Dirty Book Short Guide

## Maudie and Me and the Dirty Book by Betty Miles

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## Overview

presents a provoking portrait of censorship and its effects. Humor, suspense, and a believable plot keep the book interesting as it demonstrates the negative chain of events that censorship triggers, especially in school. Miles depicts a complex issue in an understandable way while also giving a well-rounded picture of friendship, adolescent-parent relationships, community action and interaction, and the transition from elementary to middle school.

## About the Author

Betty Miles, the daughter of David D. and Helen Otte Baker, was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1928. She married Matthew B. Miles in 1949, and they now have three grown children: Sara, David Baker, and Ellen. Miles graduated from Antioch College in 1950, and now resides in New York.

Employed from 1958 to 1965 as a publications associate for the Bank Street College of Education in New York, Miles has also taught and written about children's literature and edited the Bank Street Readers. She continues to contribute to magazines, and often travels to schools around the country to talk with librarians, parents, teachers, and students about books. She has written young adult and children's fiction, as well as nonfiction about environmental science and ecological concepts.

# Setting

The story takes place in the late 1970s in small, historic Sussex, Massachusetts. The main characters, Maudie Schmidt and Kate Harris, volunteer to participate in an experimental school reading program in which Revere Middle School students help first graders learn to appreciate reading. The two sixthgraders experience censorship firsthand when students question Kate's choice of reading material and outraged parents declare the book "smut." Maudie and Kate develop a true friendship as a result of the conflict they encounter.

## Social Sensitivity

The novel's explicit reference to the sexual reproduction of dogs and the innocent, straightforward discussion that follows may concern some readers or their parents. Those who support some degree of censorship may not like the overtly anti-censorship stance of the book or the negative portrayal of censors. Clearly, the anti-censorship characters are the heroes of this work.

Another sensitive aspect of *Maudie and Me and the Dirty Book* is eleven-year-old Kate's apprehension about middle school. She tries very hard to be "cool" and to choose the right friends. The slightly overweight Maudie is at first shunned by Kate and the rest of the students. After getting to know Maudie, Kate sees her only as a good and trusted friend.



## Literary Qualities

This novel is usually recommended for students in grades four through seven, but many older readers relate well to it also. The young protagonist and relatively simple plot belie the book's complexity and sensitivity. Kate's wellorganized, fast-paced narration and the realistic portrayal of community action and interaction quickly draw the reader into the plot of the story. Within the limits of this tightly focused plot, Miles deftly creates characters the reader cares about. Although Miles emphasizes the action revolving around the censorship crisis, rather than the psychological depth of her main characters, she accurately conveys the attitudes and language of modern, suburban middle-school students. Realistic dialogue—which includes humorous slang, as well as references to the television show "Saturday Night Live" and to purveyors of popular culture such as the Monty Python comedy troupe—places the story in a familiar contemporary context.

While some of the relationships between friends and siblings seem stereotypical of conventional teen-age novels, Miles complicates her character development with realistic twists on typical behavior. Kate's clique of girlfriends, for example, does not accept Maudie because she is clumsy and overweight. But one of the girls, Rosemary, surprises Kate by expressing her disapproval of those who make fun of Maudie and by gracefully including Maudie in the group. Josh's character also resists stereotype; although he frequently exercises his older-brother prerogative to torment Kate, he emerges as a conscientious person—a committed vegetarian and a supportive sibling. Miles handles her subject matter with intelligence and sensitivity.

# Themes and Characters

Kate and Maudie reveal much about themselves by volunteering to help firstgraders learn to read. Kate is understanding and more outgoing than Maudie, but they both feel apprehensive about starting middle school. Although they are only eleven-year-olds, they worry about choosing the "right" friends and about being accepted.

Kate's friends Jackie, Laura, and Chris form a clique—they pass notes to each other in class, plan exclusive afterschool activities together, and discuss their interest in boys, especially in Steve Bader, the "new boy" from California.

Maudie, on the other hand, is a shy, overweight loner; early in the book, Kate describes her as "sort of a dope—one of the kids that everybody wants to avoid."

But as Kate spends more time with Maudie, she learns to appreciate Maudie's intelligence, sensitivity, and sense of humor.

Miles's other characters represent realistic members of a middle-class American community. Kate's parents, Roy and Nina Harris, sell real estate in Sussex, and Maudie's mother, Carrie Schmidt, is an artist. Loving and supportive, these parents encourage their daughters' interest in the reading program; their comments and attitudes keep the story interesting and believable.

Kate's brother, Josh, a ninth-grader, loves to tease his sister, but is essentially caring and protective. Both he and Kate share great affection for their greatgreat Aunt Lucy, an insightful, outspoken one-hundred-year-old who writes a letter to the editor in Kate's defense during the censorship debate.

Gerda Whitman, another relative of Kate's, works at the library where Kate obtains the controversial children's book and struggles to educate the community about the dangers of censorship.

Mrs. Judith Bergen, the mother of two first-graders at Concord, forms a group called Parents for United Decency, and instigates the irrational protest against the book. In contrast, Grace Plotkin, Kate and Maudie's English teacher, inspires the girls' interest in the reading program. Grace's friend Anne Dwyer, a first-grade teacher at Concord Elementary School, seems to be a similarly enthusiastic and nurturing teacher.

Censorship and its effects on the school and community constitute the central theme of this novel, but Miles also explores respect for the elderly, resistance to peer pressure, and adolescent-parent relationships.





## Topics for Discussion

1. What is the real reason that Kate and Maudie volunteer to work with the students at Concord?
2. Why is Aunt Lucy such an important character in this novel?
3. How does the issue of censorship in Sussex affect Kate's parents and brother?
4. Why does Kate select *The Birthday Dog*?
5. Does Kate do the right thing by trying to handle the discussion, or should she have asked Anne Dwyer for help?
6. How do Concord students react to *The Birthday Dog*?
7. Is Kate responsible for the discussion that follows her reading of the book?
8. Does Mrs. Bergen infringe on the rights of other students' parents and members of the community when she calls the book "smut"?
9. Does any good come out of Kate and Maudie's reading to the students at Concord?
10. Why are Kate and Maudie upset about people calling the book "smut"?
11. Do Kate and Maudie realize the seriousness of censorship?
12. Do you agree or disagree with the results of the school board meeting?

Why?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. To what extent do Kate and Maudie grow up during the course of the novel?
2. Weigh the pros and cons of censorship and decide if censorship is usually good or bad. Is the censoring of reading materials for others ever acceptable?
3. Define the criteria for a welldeveloped character. Apply this definition to Maudie, Kate, and Kate's parents.
4. Describe how this novel would change if it employed third-person narration instead of first-person narration.
5. Why are Gerda Whitman, Ms. Plotkin, and Anne Dwyer important characters?
6. What are the positive results of the censorship incident and how do they affect the story?
7. What valuable lesson does Kate learn about friendship as a result of the Concord project? Will this lesson help her in the future? Why?

## For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*. Vol. 8. Detroit: Gale Research, 1976. Contains a brief discussion of Miles's life and works.

Holtze, Sally Holmes, ed. *Fifth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983. Contains an autobiographical sketch, information on book awards, a list of selected works, and sources for more information on Miles.

Mooney, Martha T., and Robert E. Klaum, eds. *Book Review Digest*. Vol.

77. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1982.

Includes short excerpts from reviews of Miles's major works.



## Related Titles

In *The Trouble with Thirteen*, Miles writes about adolescent issues such as the separation of parents, friends moving away, the death of a pet, and the effects of puberty on adolescent girls.

The young protagonist of *Just the Beginning* learns to appreciate her own worth and to better understand her relationships with others after she is humiliated by her suspension from school and her mother's newfound employment as a cleaning lady.

*The Real Me* depicts an eleven-year-old girl fighting sexual discrimination in school over the issue of course selection.

This spunky young girl also fights for her right to have a paper route at a time when it was illegal for girls to have paper routes. Miles explores the meaning of friendship in *All It Takes Is Practice* when racial tensions surround a character from an interracial family. *The Secret Life of the Underwater Champ* is about a ten-year-old boy who appears on a television commercial and discovers only later what he was advertising. This story explores the humiliation that can result from taking action without knowing what you are doing or why.



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## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996