

Midnight Hour Encores Short Guide

Midnight Hour Encores by Bruce Brooks

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Overview

Midnight Hour Encores, Brooks's second novel, follows Sibilance T. Spooner, world-class cellist, with the cockiness and sarcasm to match, on a crosscountry journey across the United States with her father. She has finally, after sixteen years, asked to meet Connie, the mother she has never known.

The underlying motivation of the trip from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco, however, may be to solve the mystery of the Tartar cellist Dzyga who disappeared from the music world at a young age for daring to displease the Soviet establishment. He may be waiting for her in San Francisco.

To prepare Sib for her meeting with her mother and to try to explain why her mother refused to raise her, Sib's father Taxi (Cabot Spooner) tries to recreate the mood and attitude of her parents' life in the 1960s by finding a VW bus with a soul (and a mind of its own) and by stocking up on Procul Harem and Buffalo Springfield records.

A variety of surprises greet Sib in San Francisco. Her mother is a wealthy businesswoman and not a self-absorbed macrame artist, Sib finds romance with an attractive young architect, she finally encounters the mysterious Dzyga during an audition for a prestigious conservatory, and, most importantly, she rediscovers her father, the source of her energy and creativity. Sib must choose from among the four people competing for her loyalties and who represent conflicting sides of her personality—Connie, Taxi, Martin, and Dzyga. In a surprising and well-disguised choice, she returns to her father and to Washington, D.C. She realizes, somewhat paradoxically, that her selfsufficiency emanates from her relationship with him and that independence is not necessarily the highest good.



About the Author

Versatile American author Bruce Brooks was acknowledged as a notable author of young adult fiction with the publication of his first novel *The Moves Make the Man* in 1984. Since then, his work has encompassed both fiction and nonfiction, full-length novels and collections of tales, and works for older and younger readers. His characters and settings range from a thirteen-year-old black student in the South in the 1960s to an adolescent female cello virtuoso in Washington in the 1980s to a fourteen-year-old boy from the twenty-first century who is featured in a cautionary tale about the dangers of alcoholism. Brooks's range of work marks him as a writer who does not want to be pigeonholed and who is willing to experiment with technique.

Born in 1950 in Washington, D.C., Brooks spent much of his early life with family members in both Washington, D.C., and, after his parents' divorce, in North Carolina. His peripatetic life led him, after high school in Washington and graduation from the University of North Carolina in 1972, to several years on Martha's Vineyard, graduation from the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop (in 1980), and back to Silver Spring, Maryland, near Washington, D.C., where he currently lives with his wife and son. Brooks explains that it is his "restlessness and curiosity" that have kept him happily on the move. It is this same attribute that has kept him busily experimenting with changes in character, point of view, range of readership, and genre in his years as an author.

Before becoming an author of young adult books, Brooks worked in a variety of professions, from letterpress printer to reporter to teacher. He had, in fact, never anticipated writing for young adults. As has been the case with many authors since the 1950s, Brooks wrote a novel intended for the adult market, and, because of the age of the protagonist, the work was redirected to the young adult market.

Brooks contends, "I don't know what young adult means. . . . Nothing exists for me except the shape my books have."

Brooks's writing has won numerous awards. His very first novel, *The Moves Make the Man*, received the prestigious distinctions of being named both a 1985 Newbery Honor Book and the winner of the 1985 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for fiction. Both *The Moves Make the Man* and *Midnight Hour Encores* have been named to best book lists, including the ALA Best Books and the School Library Journal Best Books. The novel *Everywhere*, written for a younger audience, was an Honor Book for the 1990 Golden Kite Award.

Since 1989 Brooks has also published a series of nonfiction nature books about animals, also intended for younger readers.

Setting

Midnight Hour Encores is structured around the cross-country journey. Part of Sib's dilemma at the end of the novel involves which home, her father's or her mother's, is her home. The physical setting and description of each home is thus important in helping Sib decide where she best fits in and feels the most comfortable.

The two most vivid locations in the Washington home are the conservatorio and the workshop. The conservatorio is "where all the music is," the place where Sib and her father take turns playing their favorite music. The central role of music in the room is obvious: clustered here are a stereo, records, a piano, a viola da gamba, and a double bass. The room's chair sits right in the middle at the "optimum conjunction point for the sound" from the speakers. Here jazz and classical music coexist, and neither the father nor the daughter invades the privacy of the other.

Taxi's workbench provides the setting for another key scene in which Taxi is crafting a stool for Sib to use in the van on the trip. Sib watches him unobserved from a staircase above his workbench. As he works, almost Zenlike, crafting her stool from what seems to be a constantly replenished Master Plank, Sib admires his skill, his strength, and his energy. Clearly, the two have a special affection for one another.

The cross-country trip to Sib's mother's house supposedly foreshadows what Sib should expect from her hippie mother. Taxi tries to immerse Sib in the places, scents, and sounds of the 1960s in order to help Sib understand the attitudes and situations that lead to her parents' separation and her life with her father. The two most notable scenes are in a record shop which specializes in 1960s music and in the house of one of Taxi's former lovers, outside of Des Moines.

The scene in the record shop is particularly effective. While a bemused and sarcastic Sib watches, Taxi reimmerses himself in the pop music of the 1960s with the aid of the clerk, who sports "the required flannel plaid shirt and heavy eyebrows" and wears "a ponytail lying in a hunk on his slouched back like a dead rabbit." An amazed Sib watches as her elegant and literate father calls the clerk "man" and ecstatically purchases Sergeant Pepper, Buffalo Springfield, and the Fugs.

Later, near Des Moines, Taxi takes Sib to visit Gwen, his former lover, in her faded, folksy home replete with lesbian lover, so that Sib can understand more about the way he lived his life back then.

Surprisingly, considering the magnitude of the cross-country journey, the countryside through which they pass remains incidental. Only fleeting references to cities interrupt the primary setting for the trip, the interior of the VW bus that Taxi buys with such care in another attempt to recreate the 1960s. The bus has a mind and soul of its own, almost as if it is another character in the novel. Sib and Taxi are in a time machine to the past, a past that is recreated not only through setting but also through the sounds of the music they listen to and play themselves during the journey.



In another revealing setting Sib wakes up in a campground under the trees with a pine needle in her mouth.

Significantly, however, these physical aspects of setting only serve as a spur to memory. The pine needle reminds her of the time her first cello teacher chided her for chewing rosin, and the trees only remind her of the wood used to make cellos. She experiences setting in a very self-absorbed and introspective way. The journey is an inward one into her experiences, ideas, and doubts.

Two other important settings in the novel are her mother Connie's house in San Francisco and the Phrygian Institute. The setting of the Institute is primarily important as a touchstone to the character of Martin, Connie's secretary.

He designed the Institute, so its beauty, natural setting, and classic lines serve as his credentials for being an appropriate romantic interest for Sib.

Connie's house acts as a counterpoint to Taxi's home and also provides whatever surprise the reader encounters in finding that Connie is not a hippie macrame artist but rather a successful businesswoman. The home speaks of elegance and taste, including understated furniture, silver and fine china, and an elaborate sound system. The house reveals a mother who has intelligence, resolve, and sensitivity and who could serve as a viable alternative to Taxi as a parent.

Taxi is not the only one who revisits the past. On the way to dinner, Connie takes Sib to her old, decrepit hippie neighborhood in Berkeley where she explains to Sib how the misery and dead-end lives she saw there made her fight for a way out. Both Taxi and Connie have traded in the lifestyle of the 1960s for a more modern one.

Even given the contrasts between the cities of Washington and San Francisco and the decades of the 1960s and 1980s, setting plays a secondary role to other aspects of the novel. The places are a means to understanding character and a passage to memory for Connie, Taxi, and Sib.

Social Sensitivity

Midnight Hour Encores develops both strong male and female characters in nontraditional roles. Sib's father, for example, takes on the primary parenting role when Sib is only a few days old and balances his career as a writer with his new responsibilities as a father. Sib's mother rejects the responsibility of raising her daughter in order to maintain her independence and to pursue her career options. The reversal of traditional roles offers a source of conflict in the plot as Sib, somewhat bitterly, tries to understand her mother's actions.

The novel contains a few obscenities and mild sexual references, including a scene in which Sib loses her virginity to a Hungarian cellist named Milosz who is last seen heroically sacrificing himself to the boot factory for playing "The Star-Spangled Banner" as the last number on his contest program. Recreating the culture of the 1960s inevitably invites descriptions of the drug scene and hippie squalor. They are, however, invariably presented as negative, unproductive avenues of living. The novel also presents a brief glimpse of a lesbian relationship, but the scene is fairly low-key and peripheral. All of these issues are dealt with in a sensitive and discreet way, and they often provide key atmosphere or foreshadowing for subsequent plot developments. The incident with Milosz, for instance, clearly foreshadows Sib's "Midnight Hour" encore at the Phrygian Institute.



Literary Qualities

As one might expect in a novel told from the first-person point of view of a sixteen-year-old cello prodigy, much of *Midnight Hour Encores* revolves around the world of music. How characters enjoy and respond to music serves as a key to personality, and it is through musical comparisons and experience that Sib views the world.

Musical allusion is common. A doorbell rings, and Sib hears a perfect F sharp; she offhandedly refers to listening to Ma (Yo-Yo Ma) playing the Bach suites; she hears Procul Harem and automatically calls it a "bad mockery" of Rachmaninoff and Buxtehude. Sib thinks musically. When she tries to prepare Taxi for her request to see her mother, she compares it to the use of the lyrical fragment: Music has taught me that people are suckers for foreshadowing.

Give them a little lyrical fragment in the woodwinds behind the theme in the first movement, then bring it back through the double basses in the second, and by the time the whole melody jumps out in the third movement, they feel like they wrote it themselves and have been waiting to hear it for years. So I made a couple of special little shifts in our Saturday routine to give Taxi his lyrical fragment.

Sib thinks primarily in terms of the classical cello repertoire which is the mainstay of her life, but other music constantly plays in the background of the novel. Taxi listens to jazz and 1960s pop and plays the guitar. Martin chooses music with a fine ear, but he also takes Sib to the club where they dance to pop music. The record shop clerk's improvisation on his Martin guitar in the alley behind the record shop helps Sib and Taxi recognize his true talent and see behind the artificial nostalgia of the interior of the shop.

Even Gwen, Taxi's former lover, is identified with the country music playing in the background.

Music also forms the central metaphors of the work. At one point Sib crawls inside the plush-lined interior of the VW bus just as if she is a cello returning to its case. She not only plays the music, she is the music.

In one of the most successful scenes in the novel, Sib describes how she is first introduced to the cello and to her teacher Gustavus. She explores the instrument, getting a sense of its balance and feel, almost climbing inside to become one with the instrument and the music. She chooses the cello, but the cello also chooses her. She describes the artificiality of "show-off" pieces and effectively explains the phenomenon of being inside the music, in a different world and time. She also describes the idiosyncrasies of the rare 1721 Bianchi cello that she inherits from Gustavus after his death: When I started playing the Bianchi, I recognized some of its idiosyncrasies right away. And I recognized in them—or at least in what they seemed to require from me—a lot of Gustavus.

The Bianchi becomes one with her when she plays, but it also carries with it the traditions of the past and the lessons and personality of her teacher.

Music also forms the central metaphor inherent in the title of the work, *Midnight Hour Encores*. Wrapped up in this central image is a reference to an improvisational piece that Taxi and Sib create on their way to California and which Sib plays to a shocked Phrygian Institute faculty as her encore. It also refers to the pop song "Midnight Hour" which Taxi plays for her on their cross-country journey. Although Taxi never stays for Sib's encores, this particular encore is Sib's love song to Taxi and her revolutionary gesture against the rigidity of the Phrygian Institute. It signals her decision to return to Washington.

What the novel may lack in concrete physical setting, it makes up for in the richness of its aural imagery. Brooks describes not only the sounds but the hands and bodies, wood and strings, which produce the sounds.

Throughout the two major sections of "Away" and "Home," Brooks develops two plots. One is the story of Sib's choice among father, mother, career, and romance. This plot develops the tensions between staying within the security of home and adventuring into the world, a theme prevalent in many children's and young adult works. The other plot is the mystery of Dzyga. Sib searches for "a ghost" who has accomplished many of the same things in his career as she has so far in hers. Sib keeps the her search for Dzyga secret and, in doing so, creates ambiguity and suspense concerning her real reason for going to San Francisco.



Themes and Characters

In a work with two major sections entitled "Away" and "Home," the central theme involves the choices concerning where and how Sib should live her life. Four different characters in the novel compete for her attention: Taxi, Connie, Martin, and Dzyga.

Taxi has been Sib's only real parent for her entire life. The editor of an environmental newsletter in Washington, D.C., he monitors the political scene objectively and literately. Taxi explains to Sib how he continued his career and raised her at the same time. In this first-person narrative, Sib tellingly begins by describing Taxi's style. When Sib wants to see horses, he does not just take her to the nearest stable; instead, he drives six hours to the coastal sand dunes to let her experience the wild horses pounding down the beach.

In the scene where Sib overlooks her father's workbench, she details his incredible energy and natural athletic grace, all accompanied by modesty and affability. It is in this scene that we first recognize how important Taxi is to Sib, even if she has not yet realized it herself. Her father constantly amazes her as she begins to glimpse his 1960s past and begins to know more about him even while he is ostensibly trying to explain Connie's motivations and character.

Sib's mother Connie is not as well-developed a character as is Taxi, but clearly she represents an alternative way of life for Sib. Sib realizes how much she would like to nurture her relationship with her mother, despite the fact that Sib has shown no curiosity about her up to this time and has harbored a great deal of resentment. Connie seems uncertain about Sib, too.

Although Connie is confident, almost magisterial, in her professional life, she worries that Sib will not understand why she did not choose to raise her daughter. Connie wants to "mother" Sib, to dress her up, to show her off to her friends, all endeavors Sib finds uncomfortable. It is only to her mother, however, that she can confess such secrets as her affair with a Hungarian cellist. Confident though she is as a businesswoman, Connie is clearly not confident as a mother, a fact she reveals to Taxi late in the novel.

Beyond the choices offered by living either with her mother or her father, Sib is offered the choice of romantic love with Martin or a high-level professional career under the tutelage of the renowned cellist Dzyga at the Phrygian Institute. Martin, Connie's secretary, is hastily, and not altogether convincingly, introduced as a romantic interest. A handsome young man probably in his mid-twenties, he is clearly a connoisseur of art, food, and music, and serves as Sib's entree into a world of young people. Martin takes her to lunch, buys her clothes, helps her escape a particularly stultifying party at her mother's house, and then squires her to Penny Lane, a club where she can just hang out and dance on Friday night like other sixteen-year-olds. Martin offers the enticements of the experienced "older man" who can show her a world she has yet to experience.



Dzyga, on the other hand, offers her the opportunity to reach the pinnacle of her career. He is the real reason Sib has come to San Francisco. He is the mysterious prodigy who had accomplished the same musical feats as Sib but who has been buried in the Soviet system for not following the party line.

Sib has been searching for him and now believes she has found him at the Phrygian Institute. He champions her as a student at the Institute even after her audacious audition which is not only brilliant but also insulting to the faculty of the conservatory. He offers her the opportunity for greatness in her career.

Sib must make the choice from among the four offered to her, in many ways a choice similar to that which both her mother and father made concerning who would raise her. Her mother chose career and independence; her father chose family (baby) and commitment. Sib's choice is difficult for her to make because she can make it only when she comes to terms with herself and understands the dynamics of independence and dependence in her own nature.

Sib sees herself as relentlessly independent. Through much of the novel she is at times arrogant, overbearing, sarcastic, devious, and self-absorbed.

She reports with a caustic eye but also reveals a vulnerability to doubts and uncertainties. She is a confident, aggressive performer who mercilessly "wipes out" other musical competitors, she likes to feel the power to "amaze" her listeners, and she assuredly takes her place among cellists as "about third or fourth in the world right now." She also sees herself as strong and independent, needing no one, molding herself into the person and musician she has become.

It is only when Sib begins to see that her independence has come from her dependence on Taxi that she is able to make her final choice. It is Martin, suffering in his own way from a lack of confidence in his abilities as an architect, who helps Sib realize how much she relies on her father. When she declares that she "grew" her own "spontaneity, talent, and freedom from doubt" herself, Martin replies: I think maybe it's a mistake to take your self-sufficiency that far. . . .

Loving someone is the only way you get that kind of energy and daring. That kind of freedom. And you've had that for a long time, Sib.

Sib chooses to return to Washington with her father, not rejecting the other opportunities awaiting her, but delaying them for a while. She returns home to the source of her strength and with new insight into the limitations and illusion of complete independence.



Topics for Discussion

1. How does Taxi's description of Connie and their life together differ from her version of the same events?

Were you surprised to find Connie as a successful and wealthy businesswoman?

2. Music plays a major role in the novel, not only for Sib but also for other characters. Describe the various ways music is used (e.g., to recreate the 1960s, to provide information about characters, to show relationships among characters).

3. Why does Sib return to Washington with her father instead of staying in San Francisco and studying at the Phrygian Institute?

4. Sib must choose from among the competing relationships with her father, her mother, Martin, and Dzyga.

Identify what each of these relationships offers her.

5. In what ways are Sib and Dzyga alike?

6. Describe the character of Sib. She narrates the story. Does Sib give us an honest view of herself?

7. Why does Sib choose to play the cello?

8. Early in the novel, Sib plays a game with her father in which she asks him to fill in categories like favorite color or favorite animal for himself, Connie, and Sib. How do Sib's and Taxi's lists compare?

9. Taxi tries to recreate the mood of the 1960s for Sib's benefit. How does he do this? Why does he do this?

How does she react?

10. Sib sees herself as a very independent and self-sufficient individual.

Is she?

11. Many young people are not familiar with the world of classical music depicted in the novel. Would this make the novel difficult or uninteresting for most young readers?

12. What do you know about the 1960s? Does Brooks's portrait of the period surprise you?

13. Sib renames herself at age eight.



Why does she dislike her original name and how does she go about choosing a new one? Do you like her new name?

14. What kind of person is Taxi? Describe him.

15. Sometimes readers believe that authors must have direct personal experience to be able to create believable characters. In *The Moves Make the Man*, however, Brooks writes from the point of view of a black male teen-ager. In *Midnight Hour Encores* he writes from the perspective of a female. Being neither African-American nor female, how can he presume to write about such characters?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. On their journey to San Francisco, Taxi and Sib work together to improvise a musical piece that reflects the preoccupations of the 1960s. Explain the various ideas and qualities that go into the piece and discuss whether these values are expressed elsewhere in the novel.

2. Many novels about adolescent protagonists develop as novels of education in which the central character grows up and becomes more mature.

Does this happen to Sib, or does her decision to return to Washington with her father reflect her need to be his child for a while longer?

3. Choose one of the composers or musicians mentioned in the text and explore his or her life and work. If possible, listen to the musical works mentioned in the novel.

4. The 1960s are often characterized as a period of individual searching for spiritual, nonmaterial truths. Conversely, the 1980s are often characterized as a time in which people were primarily interested in material gain (hippies versus yuppies). Is this contrast developed in the novel?

5. Watch the film *The Competition*, which focuses on a piano competition.

How do the experiences reflected there compare to the cello competitions Sib describes?

6. Artists of various types appear in the story—musicians, composers, writers, architects. Sib offers several observations about how these disciplines differ from one another and explains why she chose music. Explore the similarities and differences between two art forms.

7. *Midnight Hour Encores* is a novel that revolves around a journey—both across country and back in time. Explore another book about a journey—for instance, *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac, the quest for the Holy Grail, or *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain—to determine whether these works share common elements due to the journey motif.

8. Choose another of Brooks's independent, strong protagonists (For example, Jerome Foxworthy in *The Moves Make the Man*) and compare him or her to Sib.

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Marcus, Leonard. "Bruce Brooks." *Publisher's Weekly* (July 27, 1990): 214215. An interview with Brooks in which he describes his childhood and his experiences as an author for young adults.

McDonnell, Christine. "New Voices, New Visions: Bruce Brooks." *Horn Book* 63 (March/April 1987): 188-191.

Praises Brooks's work and discusses the first-person point of view and imaginative metaphors of both *Midnight Hour Encores* and *The Moves Make the Man*.

Paterson, Katherine. "Heart Strings and Other Attachments." *Book World—The Washington Post* (November 9, 1986): 17. Praises Brooks's use of the extended metaphor and describes the subtlety and complexity of the plot and characterization.

Rile, Karen. Review. *New York Times Book Review* (January 4, 1987): 33.

Criticizes the inconsistencies in the descriptions of the music world and expresses concern that readers will be unsympathetic to the arrogant heroine and to the classical music milieu.

Rochman, Hazel. Review. *Booklist* 83 (September 15, 1986): 120. Praises the delineation of Sib's character, but criticizes the plot for being occasionally unconvincing and contrived.

Spencer, Pam. Review. *Voice of Youth Advocates* 9 (December 1986): 213.

Praises the character relationships and the description of the musical world.

Related Titles

Although Brooks has written no other books directly about the same characters or setting as in *Midnight Hour Encores*, nor any others about music, the common threads in his work appear to be a focus on strong, intelligent, independent adolescent protagonists. Furthermore, we often experience these characters through first person narratives in which they are attempting to come to terms with an elusive character (Connie for Sib, for example, or Bix for Jerome). Beyond that, Brooks's work is notable for its diversity and experimentation.



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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