Necking with Louise Short Guide

Necking with Louise by Rick Book

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

Contents

Overview

Set in 1964-65, the seven chronologically linked stories of Necking with Louise span nearly a year in the life of Eric Anderson, a sixteen-year-old farm boy from rural Saskatchewan. Containing gentle wit, each story deals with an event which contributes in some defining way to Eric's growth as a maturing young adult.

About the Author

The only son and eldest of the three children of Don and Lorraine Book, Rick Book was born on June 29, 1949, in Loreburn, Saskatchewan. He was raised on the family wheat farm which was some nine miles southwest of Loreburn, then a community of about five hundred people.

Following high school, Book attended the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon where, in 1970, he completed a bachelor of arts with majors in English and history.

During his second year at the university, Book involved himself in student radio, an experience which led to his becoming a part-time disc jockey at a commercial radio station, CKOM. Following another year of study at the University of Regina, he returned briefly to employment with CKOM before being offered a job by Canada's national radio and television network, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), which was opening a news bureau in Saskatoon. Book's career with CBC spanned some ten years which included stints in Saskatoon, in Edmonton, Alberta, and in Ottawa and Toronto, Ontario. Working principally in television with some radio, Book covered various news beats, including the provincial legislature when he was in Toronto.

Over the years, Book has reinvented himself a number of times career-wise. The first time occurred in 1981 when he decided to leave the CBC to freelance. Initially, his freelancing activities included writing speeches for a government minister, authoring magazine pieces, and writing documentary film scripts, including part of a series on renewable energy for TV-Ontario.

The father of two, Book found the freelance pace both hectic and not conducive to a strong family life. At the suggestion of his wife, who had a brother-in-law in the advertising industry, Book put together a port folio and was hired by an agency. After a decade in advertising, Book responded to a producer's suggestion that, because he had an "interesting voice," he make a demo tape. When he finally did so, Book got work almost immediately, and, since then, he has largely made his living as a voice actor, narrating commercials and documentaries.

Necking with Louise was not Book's first published title. In 1993, a small Canadian publisher produced The Lonely Seagull, a picture book which had grown out of a story Book originally created as a bedtime tale for his children. Although the picture book was not a commercial success, Book decided then to take up writing as a hobby.

He registered in a children's writing course taught by author Barbara Greenwood at Ryerson Polytechnic University, and, by the end of the program, he had written a novel and a couple of stories. Book sent his writings to a local publishing house, Boardwalk Books, where the publisher, Peter Carver, characterized the novel as "deeply flawed." However, Carver, who had enjoyed one of the stories which had dealt with Book's grandfather's barn, invited Book to join the writing workshop he was conducting through Toronto's George Brown College.

After accepting Carver's invitation, Book initially attempted to write more picture books before undertaking the YA stories which became Necking with Louise. Though none of his picture book stories appeared as a separate book, two were published in anthologies by Prentice Hall Ginn. In talking with Dave Jenkinson about Necking with Louise, Book admitted that, when he started writing the stories that ultimately constituted Necking with Louise, he had no idea that there was going to be a collection because he never saw the individual stories as parts of a whole.

Necking with Louise received the Alberta Book of the Year Award, and one of the stories, "Sun Dogs," was given national recognition in the form of the Vicky Metcalf Short Story Award.

Setting

Place and time impact the events in Necking with Louise. The stereotypical image of the flat Canadian prairies, where the endless horizon seems to be occasionally interrupted by the rising towers of wooden grain elevators, found much truth in the province of Saskatchewan. Today, however, most of these structures have been replaced by massive concrete silos, and the railway tracks that once linked the elevators and small towns together have largely been torn up.

Nonetheless, Saskatchewan remains a province where, economically speaking, agriculture still reigns.

In the time period of Necking with Louise, between Halloween of 1964 and September 19, 1965, the family farm is very much a prairie reality. Often initially homesteaded by immigrants, the family farm is passed on to the first Canadian-born generation and, in the sixties, could be at the point where a third, perhaps even a fourth, generation might be poised to take over, or not. The sixties marked the beginning of change in Saskatchewan and the other two prairie provinces, as the farms and the small communities which serviced farmers' needs began to feel the exodus of their young people. Recognizing the hard work and economic uncertainty of farming, these newly-minted adults were lured away from the land by the bright lights and possibly better paying jobs of urban centers like Saskatoon and Regina.

Social opportunities for rural youth were constrained by distance, and it was not, and still is not, unusual for rural schools to have two social groups based on geography, the town kids and the rest. Opportunities for some rural adolescents to gather together in anything but a school setting were dependent upon transportation. Given the absence of public transportation, until a driver's license was obtained at age sixteen, a youth needing to go somewhere could be at the potentially embarrassing mercy of his or her parents or older siblings. Eric Anderson not only has his license, but he also owns a car, a '58 Ford. However, because the tiny community of Lashburg offers no dating locales, other than Milt's pool hall and the skating rink, when Eric invites Louise out on a date, the nearest movie theatre is in Riverside, a community more than a hundred miles away, round-trip.

While television existed, channel offerings in rural areas were few and severely constrained by the limitations of rooftop antennas. Consequently, in the sixties, the radio was still very much an instrument of news and entertainment. Unlike today, when cable or satellite news channels can bring world events into the home immediately, Eric's awareness of larger world events, such as the American civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, came from his listening to CBC radio or reading the Regina Leader Post, one of the province of Saskatchewan's major newspapers.

Creating one's own opportunities for entertainment, especially outside the planting, growing, and harvesting seasons, was also very much part of rural prairie life.

Consequently, in winter, Eric's parents curled at the community curling rink, and Eric played right wing on the Lashburg Tigers hockey team. Rural parents did not just send their children to play hockey, but they and other members of the community were intimately involved in maintaining the natural ice surfaces and in transporting their children and other players to surrounding communities for games. Another reality of the prairies then and now is the weather. Farmers' livelihoods depend upon the right weather conditions occurring at the right times, and they learn to read and heed the weather signs, something that Eric fails to do in "Sun Dogs" where he becomes caught in a sudden late March snowstorm and almost dies because of his carelessness.

Social Sensitivity

In the case of Necking with Louise, the old saw about not judging a book by its cover can certainly be extended to its title. Book admits that, because of his background in advertising, Necking with Louise was the book's title from the outset. For two years, he tried the title out on people, and they would always laugh. Better yet, a year later they would ask him, "So, how's Necking with Louise going?" Their remembering confirmed for Book that it was a good title.

Placed at the midpoint of the collection's seven stories, "Necking With Louise" deals with Eric's "discovery" of Louise Polonski as possible girlfriend material. Prior to asking her out on a date, Eric had said, "But to me, Louise was just one of the girls in high school I thought of as a great kid, like a sister—only better. She'd be the first girl any of us would pick to be on our ball team." However, having been dumped by Anna-Maria, his first and only girlfriend, and having heard another guy describe Louise as "a ferocious kisser," Eric decides to take advantage of an opportunity to invite Louise out. While Eric's relationship with Louise leads to a number of new lessons, one of the key ones for him are that "I discovered that you can never tell what kind of a kisser a girl's going to be until you kiss her."

Book uses the term "necking" in the 1960s sense of amorous activity that occurs from the neck up as opposed to "petting" which involved body parts below the neck.

The "make love, not war" philosophy of the sixties was certainly not present on the farms of rural Saskatchewan.

Because Eric is, in his own words, "just a big farm boy," his vocabulary sometimes includes terms that are commonly used by those in a farming environment. Consequently, when Eric picks up Anna-Maria for their first real date, the Halloween dance, his self-consciousness expresses itself in farm terms: "I hoped I didn't have cow sh— on my running shoes." The occasional use of such expressions, in concert with Book's rustic similes and metaphors, underlines the stories' rural settings.

Literary Qualities

By being told in the first person in a chronological but episodic fashion, the seven stories effectively illustrate the egocentric nature of adolescence. Instead of following the natural time-cycle of the agricultural prairies—the periods of seeding, growing, and harvesting—Eric's self-focused time frame is very much limited to the present and the immediate future. Consequently, from a reader's perspective, but likely not Eric's, there are many gaps in what he shares with his audience. For instance, in the opening story, "The Clodhopper's Halloween Ball," Eric reports that his girlfriend, Anna-Maria, asks, "I wonder what will happen to us, don't you." It is not until the fourth story that readers get an answer to Anna-Maria's almost rhetorical question: "She'd been my first and only girlfriend, and she'd dumped me three months ago for my ex-friend Peter." Not only is this one sentence all readers learn about the couple's breakup, but Eric also significantly downplays his relationship with Peter, someone Eric had characterized in the first story as "my best friend."

Book also captures another aspect of adolescent egocentrism, the idea of experiences being unique to the individual. When Eric and Anna-Maria kiss after the dance, he says, "I put my hand under her chin, raised it and kissed her. A long gentle kiss that tried to tell her about all the strange and powerful feelings that were in me. A kiss like never before." However, later, when Eric first kisses Louise, he comes to the realization that "It was at that moment I found out I didn't know a darned thing about kissing."

While some of the stories, such as "The Summer I Read Gone with the Wind," do have dates imbedded within them, more often Book establishes the stories' time setting more unobtrusively by including small details which remind readers that their content is not set in the present. For example, in "The Game," the teams play on natural, not artificial ice, use plywood two-holer toilets encrusted with yellow ice crystals, and choose to emulate hockey heroes, like Bobby Hull and Terry Sawchuk, players who are obviously from an earlier era of professional hockey.

Some of the stories also display unique stylistic differences. In his interview with Jenkinson, Book explained that, when he started writing "The Game," he created two documents. One was about Eric's previous experiences with hockey while the other was about a championship game. Not wanting to lose the content of either, Book decided to amalgamate them. The result of Book's merger is that in "The Game," Eric essentially reports on the action of the final game of the best of three finals for the midget provincial hockey championship.

However, he repeatedly interrupts his game reportage with memories of his childhood connections with hockey. In "The Summer I Read Gone with the Wind," Eric also in cludes the text of the letters he writes to Louise when they are separated by their jobs. In "Saying Good-Bye to the Tall Man," Book effectively provides glimpses of Eric's deceased grandfather, Ted, via the grandfather's penciled writings on the barn's walls.

Themes and Characters

Eric Anderson's sixteenth year is a time of many firsts, and while he gains some self-knowledge from each "first," he then discovers that he must modify these learnings based on further events. For example, Eric experiences his first romantic love with Anna-Maria. When he loses her affection to a friend, he reacts with anger and rejection.

Later, Eric rediscovers love with Louise, only to lose it again, but this time, when the relationship ends, he responds with greater magnanimity.

The year also sees Eric encountering death and coming to recognize his own mortality.

The initial instance, as recounted in "Sun Dogs," occurs dramatically when, through adolescent shortsightedness and thoughtlessness, Eric almost kills himself and his horse during a sudden late winter storm.

The second occurrence is found in "The River" during Eric's attempt to rescue someone who is committing suicide. Although Eric's rescue attempt is successful in the sense that he brings the person ashore, his efforts are too late to save the young man's life. Finally, the reality of the life cycle impacts Eric's life in "Saying Good-Bye to the Tall Man," when his beloved ninetytwo-year-old grandfather dies from a heart attack, and Eric truly experiences grief for the first time.

Though characters other than Eric do enter each of the stories, they remain quite limited in their development. Such a statement is not a criticism of Book's writing style, but rather, it simply acknowledges that Eric's continuing maturation is the focus of the collection. Consequently, the other characters make their appearances on the printed stage and play their assigned parts so that Eric will be confronted by experiences from which he can choose, or not choose, to learn. As well, this approach to characterization accurately reflects the egocentric nature of adolescents.

Other people "exist" only when the selfabsorbed adolescents choose to "see" them.

For example, Louise Polonski is the center of Eric's life while she is the object of his passion, but, following his response to her "Dear Eric" letter, Louise is no longer mentioned and, in effect, completely ceases to be. In passing, readers learn that Eric has two younger sisters, Nicky and TraceyLynn, but, because they are younger, female siblings, Eric pays less attention to them than he does to Scamp, the family dog.

Beyond Eric, the only two continuing characters found in most of the stories are Eric's mother and father, but since the stories are told in first person, readers only get to see his parents as Eric chooses to reveal them. Again, adolescent egocentrism causes Eric to perceive them principally in terms of how they are "interfering" in his life. Book, in fact, gives the opening story's first lines to Dad. "'So,' said Dad, hesitating like he was straining to haul the words up from some well, 'you're goin' on your first date tonight.'" Eric immediately assumes he is about to be on the receiving end of some kind of

speech, possibly about sex, and responds in a manner that most parents and adolescent readers will recognize and with which many can identify. "I tuned him out like a radio station you can't quite get, like the ones that come skipping in across the prairies at night from Omaha or Kansas City, that fade in and fade out through the static." Eric's mother is also on the receiving end of Eric's dismissive behavior. In "Sun Dogs," while driving home from church, Eric's mother observes the sun dogs in the March sky: "'Weather's going to change,' said Mom. She raised her eyes to look at the sky, then dropped them quickly back. 'We could be in for a storm.'"

After they arrive home, Eric decides to ride his horse down to the South Saskatchewan River, some three miles away. As Eric gets ready to leave, his mother says, "You think that's a good idea? You saw those sun dogs." While readers will recognize the maternal concern imbedded in the question, they will also understand Eric's unspoken response which reveals how, as an independence-seeking adolescent, he still chaffs at being directed by his parents. Why is it when parents ask a question, there's always an opinion behind it? However, there is growth in Eric's relationship with his parents, and the closing story, "Saying Good-Bye to the Tall Man," finds Eric unashamedly accepting comfort from his mother as they stand together, crying in remembrance.

Topics for Discussion

1. While Eric is on his first real date in "The Clodhopper's Halloween Ball," someone arrives at the dance with juicy gossip about two of the community's adults who are married, but not to each other, and been caught "doing it" in a car in a field. While Eric is aware of who the two people are, he does not have any emotional attachment to either of them. Nonetheless, Eric responds strongly to the happening, saying, "I was angry at them." Why might Eric make such a statement?

2. Eric is involved in a crucial playoff hockey game in "The Game," one which goes into sudden death overtime. However, Book does not describe the overtime period. Given that much of the game's earlier action had been chronicled, why do you think Book jumped to the post-game locker room scene?

3. Eric and his horse, Paddy, manage to survive a sudden March snow storm in "Sun Dogs," but Paddy's right front leg has been broken and the horse should be put down. When Uncle Norm arrives with a rifle, Eric says, "You won't be needing that [rifle]. . . . I'm going to make sure of that." Do you think that Eric's treatment of his horse actually changed after this event, or do you believe that Eric simply lapsed into his earlier indifferent behaviors?

4. Ironically, on their very first date, as described in the story "Necking with Louise," Eric and Louise talk about their summer jobs. Even then, Eric is worried about their future. "In the back of my mind I was calculating the miles I'd have to put on to see Louise if I wanted to and it was kind of depressing to think about, so I didn't." Do you think that, from the outset, their relationship is fated not to succeed? Why or why not?

5. In the summer that Eric spent working on dam construction, he read the book Gone with the Wind. Given that the author could chose any book for Eric to read, why do you think that he selects this particular title?

6. In "The River," Eric learns of his father's cancer. His mother tells him, "If they can't get all the cancer, they're going to amputate. . . . That'll be the end of the farm. And you act like you don't even care." Do you think Eric, the only son, will assume the long term responsibility of running the farm should his father not be able to continue? Why or why not?

7. In "Saying Good-Bye to the Tall Man," Eric recalls stories that his grandfather told him about life on the prairies. What stories will Eric tell his grandchildren?

8. An old saying suggests, "Never judge a book by its cover." When you first look at the Canadian cover of Necking with Louise, what judgements do you make?

If your parents see the book sitting in your room, what do you suppose they will think about its contents? Would your parents react differently if the book had a different title or

cover art? The book was also published in the United States with a different cover. How does the difference in the covers affect your impressions of the book's contents?

Which do you prefer? Why? If you do not have a copy of the book, you can view the two covers in the "Profile" of Rick Book that is posted on the CM: Canadian Review of Materials Web site: http://www.umanitoba.ca/cm/profiles/book.

9. In what way is Eric a character of the 1960s, and how is he also like a contemporary adolescent male?

10. If Book had not used dates in some of the stories, how would you have known that the events of Necking with Louise did not take place in the present?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Book frequently uses the literary device of the simile. The Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (on-line version) defines a simile as "a figure of speech comparing two unlike things that is often introduced by like or as (as in cheeks like roses)." One of an author's intents in employing similes is to assist readers in their understanding of the text. Since Eric, the central character, lives on a farm in a rural area, Book uses comparisons that would be familiar to Eric and those who live around him. For example, while describing the frantic action that occurs when Eric's hockey team is playing against the team from the community of Rousseau, Eric says, "For the last couple of shifts we buzzed around Rousseau like flies on a cow pie." Rewrite the above simile so that its new content would reflect the environment in which you live. Find further examples of similes in Necking with Louise and continue to adapt them to reflect where you live.

2. One of the results of Book's episodic writing style is that some threads of his stories' plots are not completed. For example, when Eric writes to Louise to acknowledge her "goodbye letter," the one in which she breaks up with him over the summer, he says, "It'll be hard to be just friends, but I'll try. Guess I'll see you at school." However, Book never writes the scene in which Eric and Louise first encounter each other at school.

Write what you think might have occurred. Find other story threads that are not carried through to a conclusion, and suggest how they might be completed.

3. In "Saying Good-Bye to the Tall Man," Eric shares that his grandfather has talked about coming to Saskatchewan from the States with his brother in 1903.

Research the settlement of the Canadian prairies in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

4. In the chapter, "The Summer I Read Gone with the Wind," Eric hears a CBC radio news broadcast in which "two churches, just outside Greensboro, Alabama" were torched. The same broadcast also notes that "in Anniston, Alabama, the Negro man shot in the neck Saturday night on a lonely highway has died. Willie Buxton was thirty-eight.

He was shot from a moving car carrying four whites as he and several other Negroes were returning to their homes from work." What part did these two events play in the civil rights movement of the sixties?

5. The emotion of love appears in many forms throughout Necking with Louise.

Identify the different types of love, and explore their differences and similarities.

6. Death is an event that appears in a number of the stories in Necking with Louise. Identify the kinds of "death" that occur in the stories and what each contributes to Eric's growing maturation.

7. Although Eric is the only truly continuing character in the book, Bart, his father, is an ongoing presence in Eric's life. Describe the father-son relationship.

For Further Reference

Bartley, Jim. Review of Necking with Louise.

Globe & Mail (July 24,1999): D13. Bartley, who authors the newspaper's "First Fiction" column that deals with authors' first adult novels, positively reviews Book's work as an adult read.

Canton, Jeffrey. Review of Necking with Louise. Children's Book News (Spring 1999): 30. This is a brief, positive review.

Cart, Michael. Review of Necking with Louise. Booklist (October 15,1999): 442. This is a "Starred Review" in the "Books for Youth" section.

Egoff, Sheila A. "Necking with Louise Misleads." Quill & Quire (April 1999): 36.

Professor emerita in children's literature at the University of British Columbia, Egoff provides a most thoughtful assessment of the book's content and style while taking exception to its title.

Fine, Jana R. Review of Necking with Louise.

School Library Journal (March 2000): 233.

This is a brief, essentially positive review which erroneously identifies the collection of stories as a novel.

Gallagher, Catherine. Review of Necking with Louise. Kliatt (November 1999): 28-29.

This is a brief review which characterizes the book as "an impressive read."

Jenkinson, Dave. Review of Necking with Louise. Canadian Book Review Annual: Canadian Children's Literature 1999. Toronto: CBRA, 2000. This is a brief, but positive, review.

Perren, Susan. Review of Necking with Louise.Globe & Mail (July 10,1999): D17. The newspaper's children's book review columnist provides a positive assessment of the book's stories.

Review of Necking with Louise. Kirkus Reviews (July 1,1999): p. 1051. This is a very brief, positive review.

Review of Necking with Louise. Publishers Weekly (August 2, 1999): 86. A starred review.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Frequently, Eric makes passing references to his grandfather's homesteading in Saskatchewan in the early-twentieth century. More detail about what that experience might have been like can be found in Celia Lottridge's historical fiction, Ticket to Curlew, in which Sam Ferrier travels with his father by train from Jericho, Iowa, in 1915, to take up farming two sections of virgin prairie land in eastern Alberta. The family's story continues in Wings to Fly.

The connected themes of growing up in a rural area and being involved in sports are also found in many of Chris Crutcher novels, such as Running Loose and Chinese Handcuffs, as well as in Will Weaver's Billy Baggs' trilogy of Striking Out, Hard Ball, and Farm Team which also contains the theme of a boy's relationship with his farmer father.

Related Web Sites

Jenkinson, Dave. "Rick Book." CM: Canadian Review of Materials http://www.umanitoba.ca/cm/profiles/book.html.

March 20, 2002. Based on an interview conducted in Toronto, Ontario, on January 30, 2000, this lengthy article, which also includes a photograph of Rick Book, focuses on the author's life and work.

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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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

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