

# Night Kites Short Guide

## Night Kites by M. E. Kerr (Marijane Meaker)

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## Overview

"Night kites are different. They don't think about the dark. They go up alone, on their own, and they're not afraid to be different."

One of Kerr's many trademarks is that she gives no easy answers to the intricate problems in the lives of her characters, nor does she offer any lulling conclusions. Seventeen-year-old Erick Rudd should be in the prime of his life: He is a senior in high school; he is going steady with his long-time girlfriend; his best friend has a new girlfriend that he really likes; and he has a good relationship with his parents and his older brother. Suddenly, Erick's life is not what he thought it was or what he wants it to be.

Erick's life starts to fall apart shortly after he meets Nicki Marr, his best friend's girl. He is attracted to her, she excites him in a way that his long-time, steady girlfriend Dill does not. It is obvious that Nicki is pursuing him, but he keeps his distance because he does not want to hurt Dill or Jack. But when Erick finds out that his older brother Pete has AIDS, he gives up his resistance and lets Nicki comfort him. Nicki represents a safe, yet exciting escape.

She does not know his family, nor does she want to be included in family functions, so he does not have to worry about taking her home to meet his family. With Nicki he can forget that his brother is gay and dying; he can forget that his father will not let anyone know that his brother is gay and dying; and he can forget that his mother only pretends to accept that his brother is gay and dying. Erick loves Pete very much and he is not willing to accept that Pete may not be the person Erick thought he was.

When things start closing in on him, Erick goes to the Kingdom by the Sea, the motel where Nicki lives. With Nicki he swims nude in the motel swimming pool and experiences what he believes is love. Erick does not realize that he is using Nicki; the problem is that Erick does not realize anything that he is doing. He appears to be living two different lives in two different worlds. When Jack finds Erick and Nicki together he runs to Dill, who leaves Erick a note in his school locker the next morning. Dill's letter to Erick Night Kites 3713 is a symbol of what Erick was trying to achieve with Nicki. She tells him that it is a good thing they are breaking up now because she can go on with her life and "not have anyone from the past to keep me from enjoying the future."

After Pete moves home and Nicki and her father find out that he has the AIDS virus, Erick is no longer welcome at the Kingdom by the Sea. When Erick does reach Nicki on the telephone she tells him her father will not allow her to see him, and that he cannot come to the hotel. She is hurt and angry that he concealed the fact that AIDS is in his family. He tries to explain, but she cannot hear it. It is too soon in their relationship for the two of them to have this conversation. When Erick does go out to Kingdom by the Sea weeks later in an attempt to straighten things out because he is so miserable without her, Nicki is out behind the sand dunes with her newest trophy, Roman Knight.



Before Nicki discovers that Erick's brother has AIDS, she and Roman were not very compatible. Whenever Erick and Nicki ran into Roman, at the Sweet Mouth, at the football game, at the dance, there were always sarcastic exchanges between them. Nicki said more than once, "He doesn't like me." When Erick sees Nicki stand on tiptoe to kiss Roman he remembers the first time she kissed him: "It's funny because I never thought you liked me." He thinks back to all the times Jack told him that Nicki did not think he liked her. Erick walks away from Nicki and from denial and goes home to his family and his life as it really is. He goes home to Pete, the older brother whom he idolizes, before and now. He has come full circle about his feelings for his brother; but it is unrealistic to believe that he will ever have the relationships he once had with Jack and Dill. Kerr does not tie problems up in a neat package. It is left to the reader to decide whether Jack and Dill will ever forgive Erick.

## About the Author

Marijane Meaker was born on May 27, 1927, in Auburn, New York.

She has written under the pen names of M. J. Meaker, Vin Packer, Ann Aidrich, and since 1972 when she started to write young adult fiction, M. E. Kerr. She received her B. A. in English from the University of Missouri in 1949, whereupon she moved to New York City to work for publisher E. P. Dutton. While working, she continued with her own writing and as a freelance writer, and during the 1950s and 1960s she published twenty-eight adult novels. In 1972, she wrote her first young adult novel, *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack*. Since then she has become one of the genre's most popular authors because of her ability to write with credibility and humor about human fallibility. In 1983, in her autobiography *Me Me Me Me Me: Not a Novel* she answered the most often asked questions about herself and her characters.

At the end of each episodic chapter she highlights her adolescence, her friends, and her family, and she connects the facts to her fictional works and characters. She confesses that "whenever you find a little smart-mouth tomboy kid in any of my books, you have found me from long ago." Kerr has said that she writes to entertain; she succeeds, and one can only hope that she continues to write for the young adult in her uncompromising manner.

Kerr has won numerous awards for her books. *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack*, *Is That You*, *Miss Blue?*, *Gentlehands*, and *Little Little* were named Notable Children's Books by the American Library Association. *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack*, *Is That You*, *Miss Blue?*, *Gentlehands*, *Little Little*, and *Me Me Me Me Me: Not a Novel* were named Best Books for Young Adults by the American Library Association. *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack*, *The Son of Someone Famous*, *I'll Love You When You 're More Like Me*, *Gentlehands*, *Little Little*, and *What I Really Think of You* were named Best Children's Books by *School Library Journal*. *If I Love You*, *Am I Trapped Forever?*, *Is That You*, *Miss Blue?* and *Gentlehands* were named Best Children's Books by the *New York Times*. *If I Love You*, *Am I Trapped Forever?* was named an Honor Book by the *Book World Children's Spring Book Festival*. *The Son of Someone Famous* was named one of the "Best of the Best" Children's Books, 1966-1978, by *School Library Journal*. *Gentlehands* won the 1978 Christopher Award. *Little Little* won the 1981 Golden Kite Award, given by the Society of Children's Book Writers.

## Setting

Night Kites is one of Kerr's seven books that take place in Seaville, New York. While the Sweet Mouth and the Surf Club are only familiar background to this novel, the Hadeffield Club and the Witherspoon Funeral Home play more significant roles. The already established small town environment, with the small-town mentality, allows readers of Kerr's other books to remember some of the earlier happenings, thereby enabling them not only to understand the thinking of the main characters, but to understand the reactions of the minor characters to the plot of this novel.

The familiarity of the setting also helps the reader to see the differences between the characters and to set the stage for a realistic parent-child conflict. The Hadeffield Club is a prestigious club of which Mr. Rudd is very proud to be a member. In previous books the club has been referred to as "The Hate-Filled Club." In this novel it sits at the center with Pete on the one side and his father on the opposite side. The difference between whether the club is prejudiced or selective accentuates the difference between Mr. Rudd and Pete. The father believes that Pete "was a one-man Salvation Army when he was a kid." And Pete gives his father a shirt which reads "Whoever has the most things when he dies, wins." Money is important to Mr. Rudd, whereas Pete volunteers his time to teach a writing course. Mr. Rudd belongs in Seaville, Pete moves to New York City.

The Witherspoon Funeral Home is where Charlie Gilhooley works. Charlie gets beaten up by Toledo, the manager at Nicki's father's bar at Kingdom by the Sea, because he is gay. The reactions of Nicki, her father, and Toledo to the "gay undertaker" foreshadow the reaction to the news about Pete.

When Jack and Nicki, and Dill and Erick go to New York to see Bruce Springsteen, they talk about how poor Charlie got beaten up. Nicki explains that "Toledo's afraid if fairies hang out at the bar, they'll ruin business." This appears to be a normal reaction by someone raised in the kind of environment in which she was raised. However, Jack and Dill represent two steady, normal, everyday teen-agers and they also are unsympathetic about Charlie's beating. In fact, Jack says that Charlie got what he was asking for.

Dill laughs at the gay jokes which Jack starts spouting. It is Erick who is the odd-man out for not laughing. Dill leans over and asks, "Do you think you'll ever laugh at anything again?"

Being raised in Seaville leaves its mark on all, even those who are not selfrighteous by nature.



# Social Sensitivity

Night Kites has some aspects which may be of concern to some readers or parents. There is a pending death of a likeable character; there is bigotry and insensitivity toward homosexuals; there are possibly loose morals and questionable values.

Kerr deals realistically with the issue of prejudice against gays. Charlie Gilhooley is cruelly beaten, allegedly for making a pass at a straight male, although it is more likely that he is beaten simply because he looks gay. Nick's father and the motel manager Toledo will not serve people they think are gay, nor permit gays to stay at the motel. Jack tells gay jokes, not realizing that such jokes slander Pete, whom he likes, and hurt Erick. Even Mrs. Rudd, the sensitive and usually understanding mother of Pete and Erick, considers the gay lifestyle "sordid", although she manages to conceal her distaste from Pete.

The dilemma of a family confronted with AIDS is also convincingly treated.

The Rudds are supportive of Pete; they will care for him to the end. But they will keep the real nature of his illness as secret as they can because they feel a stigma attached to the disease. Their housekeeper quits because of it; Pete loses his job and his apartment because of it. Even one of his gay friends does not want to be near him. The fear of AIDS, magnified by ignorance of the nature of the disease and its transmission, causes Nicki's father to tell Erick not to come back to Kingdom by the Sea, and contributes to Nicki's own rejection of Erick.

The issue of sexual behavior in general is central to the book. Mr. Rudd urges his sons to "sow a lot of wild oats before you marry . . . because Rudds marry forever!" This is a strangely mixed message, urging sexual promiscuity and marital fidelity in the same breath. Both Erick and Pete seem to be strongly affected by this constant refrain of their father's: Pete, for whom marriage is not an option, has no fidelity to any of his male lovers, but moves rapidly through numerous brief sexual encounters; Erick, virtually engaged to Dill, partly regards his sexual liaison with Nicki as the requisite "wild oats" he needs to sow before settling down. Fidelity outside marriage seems impossible for both the Rudd sons. Love, on the other hand, is not something about which their father advises them.

Class differences and prejudices are also treated in the book. Erick's family is well-to-do; Nicki's is much poorer.

In the town of Seaville, the distinctions between the upper middle class and the working class are sharply drawn.

As Nicki points out, when a poor person commits a crime, he or she goes to jail; when one of the Rudds' wealthy friends was "caught in some Wall Street swindle," and the family needed money, Mrs. Rudd organized a Bill Ball at which everyone attending paid one of the bills of the swindler's family.



Dill's catty attitude toward Nicki is partly motivated by justifiable jealousy, but it is also partly motivated by classism, a prejudice against anyone not of her own social class. The Hadefield Club makes its membership choices from a similarly prejudiced position, and it is therefore not much used by Mrs. Rudd, Pete, and Erick, but Mr. Rudd defends the biases of the Hadefield Club as "selectivity."

On the whole, Kerr presents prejudice, whether sexual or social, in such a way that the reader can easily see the foolishness of injustice of such attitudes. But she also, by having even likeable characters show some prejudices, shows that it is not easy to be prejudice-free, and that meaning well, as with the Bill Ball, is often not enough.



# Literary Qualities

Kerr is a very popular writer among young adults because she writes about themes that are current, that address the complexity of life, and that do not offer easy solutions or answers to teenage problems. Gwen Spring tells Suzy in *Love Is a Missing Person* that "Life isn't answers. It's questions." Kerr's characters ask questions. Mary Kingsbury in an article on Kerr says that she "offers her readers a choice. One takes from these books a genuine sense of the ambiguity of life and the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of pinning down definite answers." There are often familiar patterns that emerge from Kerr's books. The parent-child relationship is often at the center of the tension. She encourages the notion of following one's instincts in those relationships. Another pattern is the balancing of two opposing sets of values, as in *Night Kites*.

Kerr's style is fast-paced and readable. She uses much dialogue, and she is skilled at capturing the nuances of class and attitude through her character's words. Although Erick is narrating the story, we do not go with him deeply into his thoughts. Instead of introspection and decision, he delivers detailed and generally nonjudgmental accounts of conversations and events.

His uncertainty about the meaning of people and things is passed on to the reader directly.

*Night Kites*, like many of Kerr's works, is filled with literary allusions which create powerful intertextual relationships between the book and the works of Poe, Frost, Emily Bronte, and others. For instance, Nicki's mother was a Poe enthusiast, and Nicki herself, living in the strange gothic atmosphere of Kingdom by the Sea motel, whose name is taken from Poe's poem "Annabel Lee," has some of the haunting quality of a Poe heroine, as well as some of the deadliness.

Kerr's characterizations are the more effective for being very realistic. None of the major characters is totally good or bad. Even our narrator, Erick himself, is flawed by a certain indifference to the pain his actions—like seeing Nicki behind Jack's and Dill's backs—may cause others. Jack, who insists he "loves" Nicki, pressures her to be a different person for him—try out for the pom-pom squad, meet his family, join his crowd. Dill has strong morals but they may be based more on convention than on a real commitment, religious or reasoned, to being and doing good. Nicki, on the other hand, deliberately sets out to seduce Erick; she is sexually promiscuous, and she pronounces herself to be opposed to family and traditional values. On the other hand, she has a particular type of courage, the courage not to conform.

She is not a "safe" person like Dill, but she is an interesting one.

Kerr weaves the literary elements of *Night Kites* into an artful but disturbing whole. Plot, themes, character, and style blend together effectively to create a book that encourages the reader to question his or her own previously unquestioned cultural views and assumptions.



# Themes and Characters

People being different from society's approved behavior is a common theme in many of Kerr's books; normally she portrays such individualistic figures as gentle and sympathetic characters who are different either physically or emotionally, but who are trying to fit into the mainstream of society. In *Night Kites* the stakes of being different appear high. Those who dare to be different appear to have no responsibility toward others; in focusing on understanding themselves, the characters thoughtlessly hurt and confuse others around them. In the novel, there are two types of characters: those who dare to be different and unconventional, and those who seem dull and boring, yet comfortable. The dare-to-be-different characters are Pete, Nicki, and Mrs. Rudd, while the dull and boring are Jack, Dill, and Mr. Rudd. Erick walks the fence. He seems like his brother Pete, yet he really is not; he and his best friend Jack appear to be cut from the same mold, yet they are very different. He is in love with Dill, yet drops her without an explanation or second thought in order to chase Nicki.

Although the theme of homosexuality is not central to *Night Kites*, it runs throughout the novel as a tool to measure the characters' conscience and self-worth. Erick is the cautious, conservative one in the family. Whereas Pete is the first one in the water, Erick is the last. He is only seventeen, but he seems much younger in that he is never really sure who or what he wants. When he does take a chance he does not think about hurting anyone; he is only interested in having a good time. He accepts Pete's homosexuality as just another way of being. Yet later he says that he thought he would have been the one to blot the family record.

As usual, Erick is on the fence, not making a real commitment to anyone.

Pete is the daredevil, the adventurer in the family. He takes chances and lives life to the fullest. He says he is not afraid to be different, yet it is because he was afraid to admit he was different that he slept around with numerous one-night stands and contracted the AIDS virus. It is only now that Pete is willing to be honest with himself and with others.

Arthur Rudd at first seems to be a

*Illustration for Night Kites by M. E. Kerr. Harper: New York (1986).*

bigoted phoney with no values—or at the very least, values which are difficult to respect. He is the complete opposite of Pete. He married into money and since then has tried to prove that he is worthy. He is a corporate Wall Street worrier with an apartment in New York City; he only comes home on weekends, and then to only give advice. Surprisingly, it is Mr. Rudd who says that "we're not going to judge [Pete]. We're going to support him."

This suggests that for his faults, he does have some strength of character.



Laura Rudd is the parent they talk with and take after; Pete believes her values are to be respected. She is involved with many, many causes because she believes that "rain does not fall on one roof alone." She acts as the buffer between the boys and Mr. Rudd; however, she is not as open and honest as she seems to be. Her seemingly accepting behavior is no more than a front when she is asked to accept Pete's homosexuality.

Nicki is much the same as Pete; she takes chances and lives life to the fullest. Since her own mother's death, she has had no one she could count on. She expects nothing from anyone, but appears to give nothing in return. She hated meeting with Jack's family because she hates "all that family-around-the-table crap." She hates tradition and family values. In contrast to Dill, she is exciting, bold and adventurous. Her perfume smells like New York City, whereas Dill's perfume smells like cookies. She dumps Erick when she finds out his brother is gay and has AIDS, revealing her shallow, self-centered personality.

Jack will stay in Seaville after high school and go into business with his father. He was Erick's best friend from grade school through high school. They wore the same type of clothing and appeared to be cut from the same pattern. Nicki is his first girlfriend, and he behaves around her like a little kid with a new toy. He will do anything to please her. Jack is a traditionalist; he is very hurt when he finds out that his best friend has been seeing his girlfriend. Erick's betrayal of Jack will probably affect him for the rest of his life. It is not clear whether Jack would have accepted Pete's lifestyle; he thought Charlie got what he deserved and he appears to be an unforgiving person.

Dill is going to college to study anthropology; she wants to be another Margaret Mead. Like Jack, she is reliable and decent. She would never hurt anyone intentionally, nor would she do anything that she perceived as being wrong, such as sleep with Erick. If she and Erick had stayed friends, she is the type who would have been a comfort to him when it became known that his brother had AIDS, in spite of her seeming lack of sympathy for gays.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Night Kites provides an excellent opportunity for an in-depth discussion of AIDS and its effect on human lives.

Discuss the facts about the transmission and prevention of AIDS. Are there members of your discussion group who know someone with AIDS? Has anyone done volunteer work with support groups for AIDS victims or their families?

2. AIDS is an illness; homosexuality is a sexual preference. Discuss the implications of the social prejudice against homosexuals described in Night Kites. Is Pete, one of the nicest characters in the book, a bad person because he is gay? How does the knowledge that Pete is gay change the reader's perception of him? How do the other characters' attitudes toward homosexuality help define them?

3. What is the difference between love and sexual attraction? Is there anyone in Night Kites who seems to know what love really is? The French mystic Simone Weil said, "Love isn't something that you feel, it's something that you do." What does that mean? Is there anyone in the book who does love rather than just feel an emotion?

4. Parent-child relationships are complex and sometimes troubled in Night Kites. Who are the best parents in the book? The worst? Are the parent-child relationships realistic?

5. The setting of Seaville is often used by Kerr. It is a town with a beautiful coastal setting. However, the inhabitants of the town are sometimes shown to be sharply divided economically, even, in some instances, religiously and racially. How does the setting of Seaville reinforce the themes of Night Kites?

6. Novels like Night Kites, in which important contemporary social issues are dealt with realistically and nonjudgmentally are thought by some critics to be inappropriate reading material for young people. Discuss the issue and the question of censorship.

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Write an essay explaining the relationship between the title *Night Kites* and the themes and characterization in the book.
2. Analyze the ways in which Kerr uses literary allusions to Poe, Frost, and other writers to deepen our understanding of characters and themes.
3. Pete is a creative writer, and the plots of some of his stories are summarized for us in *Night Kites*. They are mostly science fiction or fantasies. Analyze their significance in the book.

How do they simplify themes, foreshadow events, and contribute to our understanding of characters?

4. What is the significance of Erick and Dill's conversation with Dill's aunt when they visit her while they are in New York? The aunt does not appear again in the story, and this visit is quite brief. Why did Kerr include it in the book at all?
5. All of *Night Kites* is told from Erick's point of view. Is he a completely trustworthy narrator? Write an essay explaining how the story might be different if told by Nicki, Mrs. Rudd, or Pete.
6. Pete's story "The Skids" is about a world in which everyone is both male and female except the Skids, who are male or female and therefore need each other to reproduce. But it is illegal for Skids to mate. Obviously, Pete's story is to some extent an allegory of the homosexual's life in our society. If the plot interests you, you might wish to read Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, a novel with a similar premise. Or you might like to try your hand at writing a story of your own that through its plot illuminates some condition in our present society.

## For Further Reference

Kingsbury, Mary. "The Why of People: The Novels of M. E. Kerr." *Horn Book* (June 1977): 288-295. An article which reviews most of Kerr's novels and reaches the realization that a common theme appears in each of them. "The author is concerned with love, its presence and, more commonly, its absence in the lives of her characters." An excellent review about Kerr, the author.

Sweeney, Patricia Runk. "Self-discovery and Rediscovery in the Novels of M. E. Kerr." *The Lion and the Unicorn* (Fall 1978): 37-42. This article focuses on the basic structures of Kerr's novels as well as looks at the motifs which often appear. The article sums up by saying, "In showing her readers so many patterns of discovery, revolt, and return, M. E. Kerr is providing them with hope and a wonderful relish for the variety in human nature."

## Related Titles

We first meet Charlie Gilhooley in *I'll Love You When You're More Like Me* when he decides to come out of the closet and publicly announce his sexual preference. He chooses to bury himself forever in a small town where no gay lifestyle is possible: We were all used to Charlie in Seaville. He wasn't a macho gay like some of the ones who came out to Seaville on weekends and in summer. You could tell what Charlie was by looking at him, and if you heard him talking behind you in a restaurant, you could tell what Charlie was. Charlie never asked for anything but to be left alone with his embalming fluids and his funeral processions.

I think most of us in Seaville had the kind of affection for Charlie any small town has for one of its characters. He was our resident gay.



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