

No Kidding Short Guide

No Kidding by Bruce Brooks

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Overview

Alcoholism is a disease with many victims. Not only can it destroy the life of the alcoholic, but it can gravely damage the alcoholic's entire family.

Some of the ways in which this damage occurs are obvious. Alcoholic parents lose their children's respect and their own self-respect. They limit their ability to support a family and may well drag their children down into poverty.

They can be violent and sometimes that violence can be turned on their dependents. Any number of books for children and young adults have described such situations, but most have ended with the parent entering treatment.

Having grown up the son of an alcoholic, however, Bruce Brooks knows that the situation is much more complicated than a simple loss of status, and that entering treatment is merely the first step in recovery, for both alcoholics and their children.

Having been one himself, Brooks knows that what he calls AOs (alcoholic offspring) are changed by their experience, often permanently. Forced to grow up at an early age, they frequently find themselves accepting parental roles, taking care of both their younger siblings and their alcoholic parents. Since such children have no legal sanction to run the family and rarely have the ability to force the alcoholic parent to listen to them, AOs tend to become master manipulators, control freaks. Other adults are often impressed by the AO's often humorless maturity, not realizing that it is in large part an unhealthy thing, the selfrestricting armor of a child forced to handle situations no boy or girl should be required to deal with. When the parent finally gets treatment, the family's physical situation may improve, but the hyper-responsible oldest child will often find him or herself unwilling and sometimes unable to abdicate from the position of power in the family.

Such children have forgotten how to be children. For many AOs there quite literally is "no kidding" because they have lost the ability to have fun.

About the Author

Bruce Brooks was born in Washington, D.C., the setting for both *Midnight Hour Encores* and *No Kidding*, and divided his childhood years between that city and North Carolina, the setting for his first novel *The Moves Make the Man*. Like a number of his teen-age protagonists, Brooks grew up in a house split by divorce and with an alcoholic, unstable mother. At twelve he ran away from home in North Carolina and went to live with his grandmother in Washington, D.C. A self-described "half-outsider," never fully at home in either location, he grew up on the street, unusually independent, making his own decisions from an early age.

Brooks went to college at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, lived for a time on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, and is a graduate of the prestigious University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. He has worked as a letterpress printer, a newspaper reporter, and a teacher. Married, with a son, he now lives in Washington, D.C.

Like Robert Cormier before him, Brooks set out to be a writer of adult novels, only to discover that publishers classified his books as "young adult" because of their teen-aged protagonists.

His first novel, *The Moves Make the Man* (1984), was named a 1985 Newbery Honor Book by the American Library Association and won the Boston GlobeHorn Book Award for fiction. It was also a Notable Book of the American Library Association and the New York Times, and it made *School Library Journal's* Best Books list. His second and third novels, *Midnight Hour Encores* and *No Kidding*, have also received excellent reviews. The recently published *Everywhere* is his first novel for preteens.

Brooks has also written nonfiction, including *On the Wing: The Life of Birds from Feathers to Flight* (1989), a companion to the PBS series *Nature*.

Setting

No Kidding is Brooks's first science fiction novel. Set in Washington, D.C.

sometime in the twenty-first century, the book describes an America ravaged by the effect of rampant alcoholism and a rapidly declining birth rate. Both catastrophes were triggered, evidently, by some previously undiscovered, long term effect of exposure to cathode ray tubes of the sort used in televisions and computers. With the collapse of the electronics industry and sixty-nine percent of adult Americans suffering from some degree of alcoholism, the only growth business in the United States involves various forms of treatment for the disease. Millions of adult Americans, made wards of their nonalcoholic, teen-aged children, have been committed to Soberlife reeducation facilities. Most public education is centered on the AO (alcoholic offspring) Curriculum. Also damaged by this radical reorganization of American society have been the traditional churches, which stand almost empty, although the Steemers, a radical fundamentalist sect that condemns all alcoholics to Hell, are enjoying rapid growth.



Social Sensitivity

Brooks knows that for children involved in some form of abuse, whether it be physical abuse on the one hand, or drug abuse on the other, the abusive situation often becomes their universe.

Everything is seen through the distortion that the abuse causes in their lives.

Thus, a science fictional world where nearly everyone is either an abuser, a victim, or both, is an apt metaphor for the situation of the child attempting to deal with an alcoholic parent. Although Sam may seem to be in control, in fact, everything in his life revolves around his mother's abuse of alcohol.

Perhaps the greatest strength of *No Kidding* lies in Brooks's ability to treat all of the characters with respect, in insisting that they be given the right to make their own decisions, but also allowing them to make mistakes. Sam's efforts are heroic, but he cannot do it all by himself and he should not try.

Sam's mother has made a mess of her life and the lives of her children, but deserves the chance to make amends.

Ollie has the right to his anger. It is not necessary for him to forgive his mother immediately, or even pretend to. Like any novel for young people that attempts to deal with abuse issues in a realistic manner, *No Kidding* carries within it the potential to give offense to some adults, particularly those who, like the Steemers, would rather see the world in simplistic black and white terms and damn the fallen without giving them a second chance. This potential for offense, however, should probably be seen as a credit to the author and his novel.

Literary Qualities

No Kidding is written entirely in the present tense. Although we get a few of Sam's thoughts, the narration is almost totally descriptive, like explicit stage directions. The actions of the various characters are described in detail, but the reasons for their actions receive little or no attention. This technique helps to emphasize Sam's typical AO need for complete control of his environment. Unable to grant others full autonomy, unable to see people like his mother and brother as having legitimate desires and impulses that are out of line with his own, he judges people entirely on appearances. He reacts to what people do without thinking about why they do it.

This technique also allows Brooks to withhold information about Sam and Ollie's situation and about the world they live in, thus creating an intriguing mystery. Why does a fourteen-year-old boy have so much control over other people? What is an AO? Who are the Steemers? Why are there so many empty houses and factories? One of the pleasures of No Kidding, as is often the case when reading science fiction, is our gradual discovery of the differences between Brooks's twenty-first century Washington, D.C., and our own world. There are problems with this method, however. Like many writers new to science fiction, Brooks sometimes has trouble conveying the necessary background information about his world without slowing down the story. Thus on several occasions characters end up lecturing each other on, for example, how Sam's guardianship over Ollie works or how therapists deal with alcoholic offspring, restating facts everyone engaged in the conversation already knows, but that Brooks has to find some way to convey to the reader.



Themes and Characters

Sam, a fourteen-year-old AO who works full time in a print shop, is the legal guardian of both his mother, a just released graduate of a Soberlife facility, and his younger brother, Ollie.

The father, now a Steemer, is long absent from the family. Sam has entrusted Ollie to the Bigelows, a childless, nondrinking couple who hope to adopt the boy permanently. Over the course of one week he must both help his mother readjust to life outside of the institution and make a decision about placing his brother with the Bigelows on a permanent basis. Intensely co-dependent, Sam has his mother's new, post-alcohol life all arranged. He has found her a job and a new apartment; he has even purchased her an entire new wardrobe. Sam believes, falsely as it turns out, that Ollie is unaware of his mother's alcohol addiction. His cover story has always been that she is sick and in the hospital. In control of the lives of both his mother and his brother, he hesitates to reunite them. Certain that he is looking out for Ollie's best interests, he fears the damage such a reunion might cause, while simultaneously longing to reestablish his fragmented family.

Although Sam worries constantly and compulsively about both his mother and his brother, he has no idea about what is going on inside their heads. A typical oldest child in an alcoholic family, he has arranged very detailed scripts for them and does not even stop to think about what they, or for that matter he, might really want or need. Sam is a good kid, mature far beyond his years, and he sincerely wants the best for everyone, but he is, after all, still a kid. His refusal to admit that some problems simply cannot be fixed, his attempts to control everything and everybody, come very close to causing a disaster. Luckily for everyone concerned, Sam's mother and his brother both revolt. Intentionally causing a scene that leads to her being fired from her new job, pretending to be drunk, Sam's mother demonstrates what she is capable of at her worst right before Sam and Ollie's horrified eyes. Ollie, of course, has always known his mother was an alcoholic, but, since it was never admitted in the family, he has never been able to show Sam any of the anger he feels towards his mother. Instead he has sublimated some of his rage in music and taken the rest of it, secretly, to a mission in downtown Washington, D.C., which specializes in helping the children of alcoholics. Finally able to admit his anger, he is ready to make a clean break with the past. For Ollie, adoption by the Bigelows is the best choice.

While some relationships cannot be fixed, at least not in the short term, Brooks demonstrates that others may be reparable. By refusing to accept Sam's control over her life, his mother has gone a long way toward regaining her self-respect and reestablishing a proper parent-child relationship with him. Her future sobriety is not a sure thing, but she will work on it every day. And Sam has his own addiction to struggle with. He must learn to give up some of the control he has established over the world around him and become, once again, a kid. As the novel comes to a close, Sam speaks to Mr. Bigelow about Ollie, admits he has made some mistakes, and promises to stay away from his younger brother until such time as he is ready to be simply a loving older

brother, rather than a controller. Problems remain, but the potential for a happy ending seems clear.



Topics for Discussion

1. AOs tend to be obsessed with controlling both their own lives and the lives of other people. Why is this the case?
2. Sam and Ollie must not only contend with their mother's alcoholism, but with being abandoned by their father. Why do you think he left? To what extent was the mother's alcoholism either a cause of his leaving or an effect?
3. How is religion presented in *No Kidding*? Are there people in your community with attitudes similar to those of the Steemers? What do you think of Prior Marloe's attempt to build a church dedicated exclusively to the needs of AOs?
4. Sam says he is trying to decide between letting the Bigelows adopt Ollie and returning him to his mother.

Supposedly the deciding factor will be his mother's ability to stay sober. Yet Sam signs the adoption papers before she fakes being drunk. What do you think prompted his decision?

5. Why does Sam's mother fake drunkenness, intentionally losing her job and alienating Ollie? Is this a happy ending or a tragic one?
6. Do you believe that Ollie will be better off with the Bigelows than with his mother and Sam? Why? What can they give him that he cannot get from his mother or brother?
7. It is obvious that Ollie has known his mother is a drunk for some time.

Why has he never mentioned it to Sam or the Bigelows?

8. Ollie seems calm and unemotional when he is with the Bigelows or Sam, and yet Prior Marloe says that when the boy visits his mission, he is extremely angry. After he sees his mother drunk, Ollie explodes with rage and begins preaching, first at her, and then in the church bell tower. Why is there this strange division in his personality?
9. When he sees a young man and woman getting drunk by the wall, Ollie plays his saxophone in an attempt to either control them or humiliate them.

He later plays it when he sees his mother drunk. Why?

10. Most serious authors of science fiction insist that their stories are as much about the world of today as they are about the future. Is this true of *No Kidding*? What relevance is this novel likely to have for today's readers, particularly those who are the children of alcoholics?

11. Bruce Brooks is himself an AO and the child of divorced parents. How does your knowledge of his background effect your reading of the book?

For Further Reference

"Bruce Brooks." *Children's Literature Review*. Vol. 25. Edited by Gerard J. Senick. Detroit: Gale Research, 1991.

An overview of Brooks's career to date, including excerpts from the pieces listed below, as well from the author's 1985 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award acceptance speech, and numerous other book reviews.

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

Information on Brooks' early career.

Marcus, Leonard S. "PW Interviews: Bruce Brooks." *Publishers Weekly* 237 (July 27, 1990): 214-215. An interesting interview with valuable information on the background to *No Kidding*, this piece also contains information on Brooks's nonfiction and current projects.

Reed, Kit. "No Kidding." *New York Times Book Review* (June 25, 1989): 30.

Praises the novel, but points out some real weaknesses in it as well.

Watson, Elizabeth S. "No Kidding."

Horn Book 65 (July-August 1989): 486.

Recommends the novel as a vehicle for discussing the dangers of alcoholism in advanced middle school and high school classes.

Related Titles

Alcohol and drug abuse has long been a major topic in contemporary realistic fiction for young adults, although it has rarely been dealt with within a science-fiction context. Among the more successful novels dealing with alcoholic parents are John Donovan's *I'll Get There: It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969), Sharon Bell Mathis's *Listen for the Fig Tree* (1974), Betsy Byars's *The Pinballs* (1977), and Julia Cunningham's *Come to the Edge* (1977).



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