

Notes for Another Life Short Guide

Notes for Another Life by Sue Ellen Bridgers

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Overview

Bridgers herself identifies three themes which occur throughout her work: "the importance of family, the ties to the land and its heritage, and a spirit of hopefulness" ("From the Inside Out"). All three are evident in *Notes for Another Life*, the story of the Jackson family. It opens with Wren Jackson and her grandmother, Bliss Jackson, traveling by car to the hospital to visit Tom Jackson, Wren's father and Bliss's son. He has been hospitalized once again for depression; Tom periodically withdraws to the point where he will not eat or talk to anyone. Wren's brother Kevin cannot bring himself to visit his father; he fears that he too will be a victim of the strain of insanity that runs through the Jackson family. After his mother, Karen Jackson, files for divorce and moves to Chicago and he breaks up with his girl friend, Melanie, Kevin feels completely deserted and tries to commit suicide. Wren, too, is filled with conflicting desires. She is a gifted musician, but she is undecided about her future—whether to pursue a career or marry Sam Holland and raise a family. But family ties remain strong, reinforced by their grandparents' love and the home they provide as well as the sense of belonging within the community. As the story ends, Kevin seems to be recovering from his depression, and Wren, although still undecided about her future, appears capable of handling these important choices. Bridgers's characters face ordinary problems, but they become extraordinarily real people as they cope with these problems in their daily lives.

Divorce, mental illness, suicide—they may be the elements of a soap opera drama, but they are also a part of the real world. Bridgers takes these problems and weaves them into the life of a contemporary family. Her characters face these problems, make decisions, and then cope with the consequences the way real people do.

About the Author

Sue Ellen Bridgers was born in Greenville, North Carolina, on September 20, 1942. From 1960 to 1963 she attended East Carolina University in Greenville, where she wrote for the literary magazine and majored in English. Before completing her education, she married Ben Bridgers and became the mother of three children. She did little writing during the early years of her marriage, but, as her children grew older, she returned to school at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee and earned a B. A. degree in 1976. In that same year her first novel, *Home Before Dark*, was published. To her surprise, it was marketed as a young adult novel, although it was also published in Redbook and Reader's Digest's Condensed Books. It was named a New York Times Outstanding Book of the Year, an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults, and an ALA Notable Book of the Year. *All Together Now* (1979) received the Christopher Award and was named an ALA Best Book for Young Adults and an ALA Notable Children's Book. In 1981, *Notes for Another Life* was named an ALA Best Book for Young Adults. In 1985, *Sara Will* was published as an adult novel; however, it has also become a popular choice for young adults. In 1985 Sue Ellen Bridgers was honored with the ALAN Award by the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English. Throughout all her writings runs the theme of family connections and commitments. In a world where values are shifting and life styles are changing, families, and especially the strong women in them, are a source of stability. They provide ways of connecting with the past while moving into the future.



Setting

Bridgers identifies the "homeplace" as an old house in a rural setting, the "land on which our ancestors lived" ("From Inside Out"). Bliss Jackson's house, although relatively modern and located in a small town, is still the homeplace, the center of family life.

For Bill and Bliss Jackson, it is the home they built together; for Kevin and Wren it is the place where they have been taken in and loved, the place which holds their memories of growing up—piano practice, family dinners, and first dates. For Tom it is the place to return to in the hope of being healed, and for Karen Jackson it is the place to renew her contact with her children.

The Jackson house is a solid place of refuge for each of them.

And outside the house is a small North Carolina town, a re-creation of the world that Bridgers knows. Bill Jackson is a druggist with a store in the center of town. Wren is working behind the lunch counter when she has her first conversation with Sam Holland. Kevin is stocking shelves when Melanie comes in to visit him. Wren sings in the youth choir of the Baptist Church. She and Sam are first attracted to each other on youth Sunday when Wren sings a duet with Jolene, her best friend, and Sam is the guest speaker.

On Father's Day all the Jacksons file into their pew, giving their love and support to Tom Jackson, who is once again home from the hospital, trying to recover.

The town itself is a place of ritual and security. On Wren's first date, she travels with Sam to the Reed farm where the neighbors have gathered to watch his father search for water with a branch of flowering dogwood which he shapes into a divining rod. At school Wren plays the piano as her class moves onto the stage for their eighth grade graduation. Afterwards, her family celebrates with dinner at the town's finest restaurant. On the Fourth of July, Kevin connects with life again when he joins in the town's celebration. This sense of place and belonging runs deep throughout Bridgers's novels. But it is not a sense of being limited and restricted. Kevin and Wren know they will be free to leave, but they also know they have a place that will always be there when they need or want to return. This setting creates a sense of stability and community, a sense of roots that will hold fast no matter how difficult life becomes. Only Karen Jackson feels constrained and misplaced in this house and this town. She returns periodically to visit her children, but her focus and her life are no longer here.



Social Sensitivity

Bridgers incorporates contemporary social issues into the plot of *Notes for Another Life*: divorce, mental illness, suicide, and women's changing role in the family. She presents these issues openly and honestly with specific details, but her intent is not to shock, excite, or anger her reader. It is to enlighten, to cause the reader to reflect upon these situations and come away with a better understanding of how these issues affect people's lives.

Tom Jackson's mental illness is described with clarity and realism. Karen remembers how it all began, the physical complaints and the gradual withdrawal, "the unwashed smell, the dull pallor of sickly skin." Bliss admits Tom will have to go back to the hospital when he will no longer eat and she cannot get him to the bathroom. And when he gives up and refuses to get out of bed, even Bliss loses patience: "She wanted to strike him, lay solid slaps against that spongy flesh, dig fingers to the bone, ripping him loose."

But instead she tries, unsuccessfully, to reason with him. Kevin demonstrates his love for his father when he feeds and baths his limp body. "He leaned his father against the tiles and balanced him on the stool. Then he took a sponge and soap to begin the gentle washing."

Kevin's attempted suicide is described in equally clear detail. He waits until the house is quiet. A storm has caused the electricity to go off, so he moves in complete darkness as he takes a glass of milk and swallows a handful of Seconals. "It was so easy. Already he felt something like comfort." But when he is recovering in the hospital, the physical suffering—the burning, the gagging, the nausea—has replaced the easy comfort of the pills. And, knowing his family is waiting to see him, he regrets the pain that he has caused them.

The trauma of divorce is chronicled in the lives of the Jackson family.

Kevin and Wren learn early in life that they must never be a bother. Wren tries hard to understand her mother's decision to leave, but she still feels abandoned. Her own decision regarding Sam and a career becomes more complicated when she thinks about her mother's life and choices. As a little boy, Kevin had contemplated various accidents as a ploy to bring his mother to him. Perhaps this is the real motive behind his attempted suicide. Tom's suffering is equally intense when he learns of Karen's plans to file for a divorce. When Kevin breaks the news to Tom, at first he does not see "his father's expression, the animal fear crossing his eyes, the dry sucking mouth opening for a silent howl." Karen suffers too when she tries to explain her decision to a silent Wren who refuses to understand.

Women's changing role is clearly illustrated in the lives of the three female characters. Bliss, the grandmother, is the traditional woman, staying home to raise a family, filling her spare hours with church, gardening, tennis, and serving as the local piano teacher. Karen is caught in the middle.



Growing up, she was taught to accept a traditional role, but now she sees the opportunities that are waiting for her; and she is determined to make a change in her life. Wren is the one who will try to have it all, combining a successful marriage and a career.

Bridgers brings these issues together with honesty and understanding. She does not condemn Karen for her choices. She does not dwell upon the details of Tom's illness or Kevin's suicide to shock the reader. She takes her readers with her into the lives of her characters and then allows them to draw their own conclusions.



Literary Qualities

Bridgers skillfully weaves symbols throughout her novel, enhancing the themes without disrupting the plot.

Music is introduced in the title and recurs throughout the novel as a source of respite. Wren willingly spends long hours at the piano and endures the anxiety of competition because music is a part of her and a key to an important element in her life. Kevin finds refuge in his stereo and the rock music he sends blaring throughout the house.

Bliss, the piano teacher, accepts Kevin's music because it speaks to him now at this moment in his life. After teaching Wren all she knows about the piano, Bliss delivers her to another teacher to continue the training. Finally, music brings the three of them together as they join in a familiar song as the novel ends.

Bridgers uses the body language of her characters as an indicator of the emotions they are feeling. They are literally reaching out, touching tentatively or holding back in an attempt to connect with or distance themselves from others. Kevin learned as a young boy that he could not hold onto his parents, so now "he had learned to touch carelessly, exposing no need of his own with his hands. He was always ready to let go." When his mother visits, she holds out her arms to him, but Kevin is cautious in his response. "He came slowly, as if he would keep her there, arms outstretched to him for as long as he could. Why doesn't she ever come to me?" When they finally embrace, he forces himself to break away, afraid of committing himself to someone who will not always be there. Bliss notes and understands this response in Kevin. When she thinks about him and all his problems, she wants to reach out and touch him but knows that he will draw back and pull away. But when Kevin finally comes to terms with his mother's decision to leave, he is able to initiate their embrace, "nothing could stop him from reaching out to her. Nothing ever would again. ... "

Kevin is willing to take a risk and become involved again with people and with life. Even Wren, who does not have Kevin's emotional problems, has trouble accepting her mother's touch.

Early in the novel, when her mother reaches out to take her hand, "Wren could only think that this touching which reached across four months didn't seem hard to her mother." But by the end of the story, Wren is able to respond to Sam's touch when he pulls her close and "she kissed him right there on Maple Street."

Bridgers makes effective use of flashbacks to enrich the reader's understanding of events that brought the Jackson family to the moments recorded in this novel. Bliss remembers the early years of Tom and Karen's marriage when they had been happy fixing up a small house and awaiting Kevin's birth. Karen remembers her married life, the beginning of Tom's illness, and the conflicts which she felt.

Wren remembers her mother's brief visits, arriving for Christmas Eve and leaving on Christmas Day. These brief journeys into the past, bring readers into the Jackson family, enabling them to share the perspectives and experiences of the various characters.

Themes and Characters

Bridgers's characters move through their daily routines at home or at school, at work and in church with an illusion of the commonplace, the routine. But like real people, they are constantly faced with choices; they make decisions and cope with the consequences which affect not only themselves but those around them. Like Robert Frost, they see "two roads" diverging before them, make a choice, and perhaps look back with a sigh for what might have been.

Wren is thirteen years old and enjoying her first romance. Sam Holland, her boyfriend, is already planning their future together. He will have a secure job, earn a decent living, and provide for his family. The life he projects for Wren is a reflection of the "roads" chosen by his mother and Wren's grandmother, the traditional role of a wife and mother whose "career" revolves around family, church, and community. But Wren enjoys long hours of rehearsing and rigorous competition as a musician; she dreams of a career as a concert pianist. Looking at her mother, she sees a model for a successful career woman, but she appreciates the love and security that her grandmother has provided for her and Kevin. Although, by the end of the novel, she has come to no decision, Sam Holland is already anxiously aware of her dilemma.

Kevin's choices are less distinct; he does not have "two roads" set clearly before him as Wren does. He has a love/hate relationship with his mother.

Even as he tries to force her to stay in North Carolina or to take him with her to Chicago, he knows in his heart that this would never work for either of them, that they would each demand more than either of them could give.

And when his girlfriend, Melanie, walks out on him, he feels completely abandoned. He takes an overdose of sleeping pills, stolen from his grandfather's drugstore, and almost dies. But before the story ends, he has decided to go on with his life. He joins the town's Fourth of July festivities, allowing himself to be the target at a dunking booth, and invites Wren's friend Jolene to a picnic.

Although the novel focuses on Kevin and Wren, the adults in the family make and have made "turning point" decisions too. Karen Jackson has convinced herself that, although she made a mistake when she was young, she should not have to pay for it for the rest of her life. She married Tom Jackson and settled for family life in a small town, but now, at the age of forty, with a mentally ill husband and two teen-age children, she decides to start a new life and career in Chicago.

Even Tom Jackson, who seems to have little control over his own destiny, is constantly being urged to take hold and will himself back to mental health. His mother and his children encourage him to eat, to talk, to be involved in the world around him, as if it were a decision that he could make and carry out. Only Karen has completely given up, seeming to accept the fact that he will never be well again.



Bliss Jackson made her choice long ago. She chose the life that Karen has rejected. Her life and her family are so closely intertwined that she has never pursued any goals apart from them.

But she is content; there is no hint in her of Karen's yearning to be free and independent. She provides support for others, and her husband, although never fully developed in the novel, provides support and strength for her.

The importance of family love and support permeates the novel, and Bliss Jackson is the epitome of this support.

When her son is ill, she takes him in, firmly believing that she will be able to heal him. When her grandchildren need a home, she provides not only the material necessities but also the time and attention to make them feel a part of the family. She plays tennis with Kevin and teaches Wren to play the piano. She arranges birthday parties and graduation celebrations. And even when they sleep, she is still watchful, checking on Kevin with his broken arm or watching over Tom when he returns from the hospital. And it is this habit of watching and caring that saves Kevin's life. When she checks on him during the night, she discovers that he has attempted suicide.

As Bliss supports the family, so Wren supports Kevin. Although younger than her brother, Wren understands his fear—that he, like his father, will lose touch with reality. So she watches him, reads his face for changes in mood, and reassures him that they will always have each other. As Kevin struggles to resolve his conflicts, Wren assures him "But no matter what happens, we have each other."

However, a loving family cannot, of course, erase all of life's problems.

When the novel ends, Tom is once again drifting into his own isolated world and must return to the hospital.

Karen has moved to Chicago, and Kevin and Wren accept their situation—they will never be reunited with their parents as a family. But Bridgers's spirit of hopefulness is evident. Kevin admits that perhaps "a moment of madness" was his cure. By the end of the novel, he can face Melanie. It hurts to say good-bye, but he can feel good once again about playing tennis with Bliss. Wren and Sam have not resolved their differences, but they can talk about their goals and work on reaching them together. And as the weekly hospital visits begin once again, Bliss, Kevin, and Wren join together in song as they travel along the familiar road that will bring them to Tom.



Topics for Discussion

1. Does Kevin deliberately cause his father to relapse by telling him about Karen's plans to file for divorce? Support your answer with evidence.
2. Does Kevin want his suicide attempt to succeed or is he hoping to be stopped?
3. If Wren chooses to combine marriage and a career, will she be more successful than her mother?
4. Wren is quiet and serious, quite different from the women in Sam Holland's family. Why is he attracted to her?
5. Although Wren is younger than Kevin, in some ways she is more mature. In what ways is she more in control of her life than Kevin?
6. Wren and Kevin have an interesting brother/sister relationship. They support each other and never seem to quarrel. Is this realistic?
7. Bill Jackson remains a shadowy background figure. Why did Bridgers choose not to develop him as fully as Bliss? Would it be a better novel if she had?
8. Does Bridgers favor Bliss over Karen? Or is she objective and fair in her development of these two women?
9. Consider Bridgers's use of flashbacks throughout the novel. Why does she use this technique? Is it effective?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Critic Jean Fritz claims that *Bridgers* has too much movement back and forth between different characters' points of view. Analyze her shifting perspective throughout the novel and respond to this critic.

2. Should young adults read about suicide, mental illness, and divorce?

Some critics claim it is too depressing while others agree it is a reflection of the real world. How do these topics, as woven into the novel by Bridgers, affect readers?

3. Read another novel by Sue Ellen Bridgers. Then analyze and compare the significance of setting in both novels.

4. The lives of Bliss, Karen, and Wren might be used to trace the history of the women's movement in contemporary American life. Use these three fictional characters to illustrate what is happening in American society in regard to women's rights and roles.

5. The mental illness of a major or minor character occurs throughout Bridgers's work. Read another novel by Bridgers and compare and analyze her handling of this issue—its effect on the plot and on the other characters.

For Further Reference

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Greenlaw, M. Jean. Review. *Journal of Reading* 25 (1982): 486. The reviewer commends the author for her clear portrayal of the adolescent's search for identity.

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"Responding to the Magic: Sue Ellen Bridgers Talks about Writing." ALAN Review 13, (1986): 56-61. The authors interview Bridgers regarding the themes and characters in her novels.

North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction. Lesson Plans for Teaching Young Adult Literature.

ERIC, 1988. ED 319 063. Home Before Dark is the focus of one of the 28 lesson plans prepared by North Carolina teachers.

Review. Horn Book 57 (1981): 667. The reviewer is impressed by the novel, particularly the development of the characters and their relationships.

Review. Publisher's Weekly 22 (1982): 73.

The reviewer commends Bridgers for creating characters the reader cares about.

Tighe, Mary Ann. "Using Young Adult Literature to Motivate Reluctant Readers or What Do You Do when They Haven't Read Their Assignment?" ERIC, 1991. ED 341 962. The author discusses Home Before Dark as a young adult novel which could be used to motivate students to read and to enhance the development of reading and discussion skills.

Related Titles

The importance of family relationships—how members influence and sustain each other—is a common theme in Bridgers's work, and it is introduced in her first novel, *Home Before Dark*.

Stella Willis, the young protagonist, is growing up in a family of migrant farm workers. When they eventually return to the "homeplace" in North Carolina, they are welcomed and provided for by the younger Willis brother who remained there to work the family farm.

Stella is thrilled with their little tenant house and vows never to leave. As she becomes more independent, she forms relationships outside her family, but the bonds remain strong. She mourns her mother's death, and, when her father remarries, she comes to realize that it is her family, not a house, that is important.



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