

# The Novels of Danielle Steel Short Guide

## The Novels of Danielle Steel by Danielle Steel

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# Characters

The key to Steel's success is in creating appealing characters. They are uniformly attractive and usually wealthy and successful, but on closer examination she reveals flaws which mark them as little different from the ordinary reader. All the wealth and beauty is little help in dealing with the most important aspects of life: the relationships between men, women, and their children.

Faye, in *Family Album* (1984) is a good example. She is a strong woman who makes choices and then lives with the results of her choices, admirable in her determination and endurance, and frightening in the force of her personality. She fights to keep the family together, observes the mistakes she makes. She demands a great deal from others as well as from herself, and loves as best she can. In this character Steel has created a complex, flawed and yet heroic woman. One understands why her children fight her influence and seek her approval. Externally, she is a figure from fantasy: beautiful, intelligent, the first major female director in Hollywood. But at home, she is just a mother, doing the best she can in the complex and imperfect relationships which are part of ordinary and real life.



## Social Concerns

Loving In Loving (1980) the first significant man in Bettina's life is her father, a celebrated and egotistical author. Although Bettina's life appears to be all that is glamorous and desirable, it is in fact hollow and destructive, a perfect example of the seductive quality of fame and wealth. Bettina lives in a jeweled cage, pampered and protected, but also used, as her entire life is geared towards pleasing her father at the expense of her own personality.

Bettina's father dies, and she is comforted by her father's friend Ivo Stewart, and then unfolds another fantasy story in the Cinderella mode. This cultured and much older man offers Bettina a more generous love than her father did, but it is still paternalism.

Ivo allows her to explore her love of theater while maintaining the gilded cage of wealth and nurturing. For example, Bettina gets a job in an experimental theater but is picked up every night after the show by her husband's limousine.

The best thing Ivo does for Bettina is force her to leave him, again like a father who observes that the beloved young woman has grown up and is ready to fly the cage. Bettina precipitates this by falling into an affair with a very attractive actor, Anthony Pierce, but even before Bettina realizes it, Steel signals to the reader that this young man spouts the dangerous and egotistical charm of Bettina's father. So Bettina falls into the pattern of subjugating herself to the needs of others, as with Anthony, who dumps Bettina as fast as possible when she finds herself pregnant.

This appears to be the lowest point this still young heroine can experience.

She loses the child and attempts suicide, but in the hospital another romantic fantasy appears to be unfolding.

The handsome young doctor attending her reveals that he, too, is lonely and eager for someone to love, and Bettina finds herself ensconced in an urban gilded cage. John Fields is supportive of her emotional and physical needs, but tries to squeeze Bettina into the mold of wife and mother to which he ascribes. Bettina is forced to hide her play writing attempts, a clear sign of the destructive qualities of this superficially attractive relationship. But it is at the birth of her first child that the husband's true nature is revealed. All of the needs of the woman are ignored in pursuit of the perfect delivery from the obstetrician's point of view, and John, a doctor, sides with his medical colleague instead of his wife.

Bettina's growth as an individual is signaled by her ability to think through the faults of the situation and leave it of her own accord, as opposed to all of the previous relationships, which were ended by the man. She finds herself in New York, having received a rather implausible "lucky break" in finding a producer for her first play. She also meets one of the breed of new men, gentle, loving, and as giving to Bettina's needs as she had always been to men around her. In fact, he is willing to put his career as a



successful theater critic in second place behind Bettina's growing success as a playwright.

This appears to be the perfect relationship, but Steel suggests otherwise.

There is no spark, no fire, no tension between two equally vivid and dynamic individuals. Bettina needs a man as powerful and successful and special as she is, a man like her father as she is now a woman like her father, and Steel contrives that she be free and ready to fall in love when this ideal mate appears in the final chapter of the book.

Loving is a compendium of traditional female fantasy relations, celebrated so often in romance, and Steel takes each one and shows how it is potentially a trap for a woman, particularly one who has not learned much about her own needs, her own personality. Yet the book is not anti-male.

There is never any suggestion that the entire system is geared by men to exploit women. Rather, women are responsible to learn about themselves, to grow up, and if need be, to experiment with relationships until they are capable of loving as fully and maturely as possible.

In this book, as in several others, Steel explores relationships which, traditionally, have been frowned upon.

In this case, Bettina is a much divorced woman, yet her experiences are shown in a sympathetic light, so that the reader understands how such things might come about, without either judging harshly or glorifying unduly.

Crossings Crossings (1982) is set during World War II, and although relationships between men and women remain Steel's dominant concern, the social and political realities of the period are also explored. Liane is happily married to her French husband Armand de Villers at the beginning of the novel, so that when she first meets Nick Burnham, unhappily married to the spoiled Hilary, she offers him sensitive sympathy only. Nick realizes that this is the sort of woman he considers ideal: a good mother, a loyal wife, and gently, purely beautiful as opposed to his own wife's flaunted sexuality. Nick's marriage is held together only by his concern for his son, but Liane's much stronger relationship is torn apart by external pressures. Armand is returned to France at the beginning of the war and then, at the fall of France, is forced to choose between his love of his wife and children and his love for his country. He chooses to send his family back to America and remain in Nazi-occupied France, apparently cooperating with the Germans but secretly assisting the underground. Liane, in turn, remains loyal to her husband despite the public knowledge of his collaboration and the cruel prejudice of her old friends. Even her family attempts to force her into a divorce, but she remains married to Armand. Besides the external pressure, there is a private conflict; Liane and Nick have met again, fallen in love, and now struggle to suppress their passion in loyalty to her husband and in hopes of saving his son from a messy divorce.



Steel presents a tortured love affair, where neither of the lovers is wicked, where both try to do the best they can, and yet where people are still hurt, where tragedy cannot be avoided. The novel suggests that actions should not be judged unless one knows all the facts; an apparent traitor may be a loyal citizen sacrificing all, and an errant wife may be caught between loyalty and passion and be simply trying to hurt the fewest number of people.

*Changes Changes* (1983) explores the problems of a working woman juggling children and a challenging career. Melanie Adams seems to have it all: a high-profile and high-paying job as anchor of a national news broadcast, and attractive and well-adjusted teen-age twin daughters. But at what price? She has not allowed herself to risk deep involvement with a man since the father of the twins walked out on her years before the story begins. When she does meet a special man, all sorts of questions are raised which she and her lover must answer.

Peter Hallman has an equally successful and glamorous career; he is a heart surgeon, and he, too, is leery of falling in love as he is still recovering from the death of his wife. But despite their uncertainty and a lengthy courtship, they finally must admit that they are in love. And now the trouble begins. Melanie and Peter explore the sorts of compromises which make a mature relationship survive. This story doesn't end with the marriage ceremony, for Steel is very interested in just how one lives happily ever after.

She shows the tensions which exist between husband and wife, no matter how loving they might be. The situation for Melanie and Peter is complicated by the new extended family; Melanie's two girls must share their mother with Peter and his three children.

Steel explores some of the problems parents must face. The youngest boy is lost in the mountains over night. Then Peter's son and Melanie's daughter begin a relationship, and a pregnancy results. Neither Melanie nor Peter deal with these problems perfectly, which endears them to the reader. In fact, there is no perfect solution, because the daily tensions, large and small, cannot be eliminated except in fantasy.

Underlying all the tensions, though, is a single problem which is finally addressed and solved, giving hope for a smoother life ahead. Both Peter and Melanie are afraid of change, but Melanie conquers her fears and commits herself to a new life. Peter, however, is less willing to change, to compromise, to adjust his life to accommodate his new partner. Finally Melanie leaves him for a time, and he realizes not only what she means to him but also how limited he has been in his growth. Life demands constant change, and rigidity can only destroy the positive aspects of living and loving.

Melanie and Peter are both, on the surface, stereotypes of contemporary fantasy characters. Melanie is the new superwoman, a success as mother, in her career, respected, financially secure as a result of her own hard work, and also beautiful, warm, loving and loved.

Yet readers see the flaws in her otherwise perfect life, the emptiness at the center. And when she chooses change and chance over secure success, they applaud her growth.



Peter first appears as the attractive doctor of romance, dedicated to work, but also lonely and longing for love. Beneath this surface lies the truth that the very things that make him a good doctor make him a poor husband; he is rigid, unwilling to change, and he cares so much for his patients that his family suffers. As his character unfolds, the reader likes him more, for his fears and weaknesses make him a more believable and approachable character.

Family Album At first glance Family Album (1984) appears to be set in the familiar mode of Hollywood saga of stardom, scandal and secrets. But Hollywood is merely the background for the relationships of family members. In this case, the tension between parents and children is even more central than the working out of the love between husband and wife.

Faye and Ward Thayer have their ups and down as a couple, but their children experience some of the problems which worry parents from California to New Jersey and beyond. Lionel, their oldest son, is a homosexual, and Steel presents his search for identity and love sympathetically. Faye and Ward, particularly Ward, are horrified by the discovery, but Steel asks her readers not to judge but to understand.

She also presents tasteful sexual scenes and a homosexual marriage situation, a first in her writing and perhaps a surprise to many of her readers. Steel avoids stereotypes in Lionel, and places no blame for his sexual preference. Rather, it is presented as simply an aspect of his character, and he, like everyone else in the novel, is searching only for love and security.

Greg, the second son, is an all-American hero but, for all his success with women and on the football field, is a less appealing young man than his brother. With his character Steel explores another shared family experience, the loss of a son and brother in Vietnam. Both Lionel and Greg serve in Vietnam; Lionel volunteers after a lover is tragically killed and Greg is drafted when he flunks out of college.

He dies when he steps on a land mine two weeks after being sent overseas.

The cruelty of the loss, in the irony of the statistics, is brought home in this sudden and unexpected death.

Ward and Faye have twin daughters, Valerie and Vanessa, and with these two girls Steel explores various options in relationships and life choices for young women. Vanessa is the wild one, battling with her mother, sexually promiscuous, but finally fulfilling her promise and emerging as an outstanding actress. Valerie opts for college, where she finds a compatible, if not perfect, lover. In contrasting the two girls, Steel avoids judgments, but suggests that, despite their different avenues, both were seeking the same thing: fulfillment of their talents and energies as individuals, and only then a lasting, loving relationship.

The youngest child, Anne, presents the most problems for her parents, but Steel lays the blame firmly at Faye's door. When the other children were little, the Thayers had plenty of money, and Faye was able to devote herself to nurturing her family. But just



after Anne's birth, it becomes apparent that Ward has squandered the family fortune, and Faye becomes the sole supporter of the family. Suddenly, she is just too busy to pay any attention to her youngest child. Anne grows up in the shadows, and makes the most spectacular and sensational mistakes of the children. She runs off to Haight Ashbury and joins a cult which indulges in multiple drug and sex orgies. Her family rescues her, but she is pregnant, and Faye forces her to give the child up for adoption. Only near the end of the novel is Faye able to admit that she was wrong in this, although she did it for the best, and Anne is able to agree.

By this time Anne has followed a completely different route in her search for love and security. She has formed a relationship with the father of one of her friends, and this unconventional marriage turns out to be a suitable one for her.

Full Circle In Full Circle (1984) Steel presents another young woman living and growing and learning about herself and the nature of love between men and women. Tana observes and judges harshly her mother, caught in a long term affair with her boss who fails to offer marriage even after his wife has died. Tana's first encounter with sex is also negative: She is raped by this same boss's son, and her mother refuses to believe her. Tana slowly overcomes the scars of these early experiences, but in the course of her life makes her own mistakes. She maintains a close platonic relationship with one man, has a brief, passionate and ultimately untimely affair with that friend's father, and then finds herself in a situation which mirrors her mother's. She meets an attractive, compatible man with just one problem: He has just separated from his wife. Tana's mother warns her that he might not be emotionally separated, and sure enough, Tana becomes the other woman, left alone at Christmas, always waiting for the phone to ring. Tana, and the reader, must reevaluate the harsh judgment placed on the first mistress, and to understand how such things come about. Tana is able to summon the courage to end the relationship, and begin another based entirely on compatibility. This, too, is finally revealed to be a dead end, and in the final chapters of the book Tana has the good fortune of meeting and marrying a suitable man.

Tana's life raises another social issue, for she is a very successful lawyer, and a great deal of her conflict with her mother and with the men in her life centers on her enjoyment in her work and the traditional view of the role of women. Tana's mother wants her to marry for wealth, security and a place in society. Tana argues that she has achieved all these on her own. Her compatible lover is offended when Tana's career is more successful than his own, and subtly and overtly presents blocks to her advancement. It is only in her final relationship, and only marriage, that Tana makes the important discovery, with her husband's help, that she can have it all, a happy marriage, an exciting career, and a family, too.

Steel spans two full generations in this novel, showing the early years for Tana's mother during and after World War II, in an attempt to explain the older woman's options and choices.

This provides a contrast with Tana's life, and heightens the irony of Tana ending up in the same compromise relationship that her mother chose.





Steel also touches on contemporary political issues by having Tana attend a southern girls' college and be roomed with its first black student. Tana finds herself drawn into the civil rights movement, and tragedy occurs when both her roommate's brother and the young girl herself are killed. But this is just a brief interlude in Tana's life, and she does not remain involved in the civil rights movement.

Similarly, the war in Vietnam makes itself felt, as Tana's platonic friend allows himself to be drafted, to Tana's horror, and returns paralyzed from war wounds. But this too is a personal rather than political issue for Tana, and she marshals her considerable energies getting her friend interested in life again rather than fighting against the war. She has a brief sexual relationship with a student radical, but refuses to become involved in his activities, which is just as well because he is caught trying to blow up the governor's house.

These political and historical events ground the novel in American history, and thus lend the story credibility, but remain secondary to the main concern, which is Tana's growing understanding of the complexities of love.

Five Days In Paris In *Five Days In Paris* (1995), Steel returns to a romantic situation whose social commentary is based on the "duty" versus "passion" theme exploited so well in Robert James Waller's *The Bridges of Madison County* (1992).

As president of a major pharmaceutical empire, Peter Haskell has everything: power, position, a career and a family, which mean everything to him, and for which he has sacrificed a great deal. Compromise has been key in Peter's life, but integrity is the basis on which he lives. Olivia Thatcher is the wife of a famous senator who has given to her husband's ambitions and career until her soul is bone dry. She is trapped in a web of duty and obligation, married to a man she once loved and no longer even knows. When her son died, there was no bond left.

On the night of a bomb threat, these protagonists meet in Paris and their lives converge as Olivia carefully steps out of her life. In a cafe in Montmartre, their hearts are laid bare. Peter, once so sure of his path, so certain of his marriage and success, is suddenly faced with placing his professional future in jeopardy if he takes Olivia into his life.

Olivia is no longer sure of anything except that she can't go on anymore.

At home again, they both must pursue their lives, despite challenges, compromise, and betrayal, holding to their memories of Paris.

*Lightning* (1995) unfolds the story of a woman whose life is changed by one swift, unexpected stroke of fate. As a partner at one of New York's most prestigious law firms, Alexandra Parker barely manages to juggle husband, career, and the three-year-old child she gave birth to at forty. But Alex feels blessed with her life and happy marriage — until lightning strikes her.



Suddenly a routine medical check-up turns her world upside down when tests reveal shattering news.

Sam Parker is a star venture capitalist, a Wall Street whiz kid, and is as proud of his longtime marriage to Alex as he is of his successful career. As a major player in New York's financial world, Sam is used to being in control — until he is caught off guard by Alex's illness. Terrified of losing his wife and family, and haunted by ghosts from his past, Sam is unable to provide any kind of emotional support to Alex.

Unable to cope with her needs, Sam takes his distance from Alex, and almost overnight she and Sam become strangers. As lightning strikes them yet again, Sam's promising career suddenly explodes in disaster, and his life and identity are challenged. With their entire future hanging in the balance, Alex must decide what she feels for Sam, if life will ever be the same for them again, or if she must move on without him, now knowing the uncertainty of the bonds of love and marriage.

*Days of Shame* (1996) portrays families divided, lives shattered and a nation torn apart by prejudice during a shameful episode in American history.

A man ahead of his time, Japanese college professor Masao Takashimaya of Kyoto had a passion for modern ideas that was as strong as his wife's belief in ancient traditions. It was the early 1920s and Masao had dreams for the future — and a fascination with the politics and opportunities of a world that was changing every day. Twenty years later, his eighteen-year-old daughter Hiroko, torn between her mother's traditions and her father's wishes, boarded the SS Nagoya Maru to come to California for an education and to make her father proud. It was August 1941.

From the ship, she went directly to the Palo Alto home of her uncle, Takeo, and his family. To Hiroko, California was a different world — a world of barbecues, station wagons and college.

Her cousins in California had become more American than Japanese. And much to Hiroko's surprise, Peter Jenkins, her uncle's assistant at Stanford, became an unexpected link between her old world and her new. But in spite of him, and all her promises to her father, Hiroko longs to go home. At college in Berkeley, her world is rapidly and unexpectedly filled with prejudice and fear.

Within hours of the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese, war is declared, and suddenly Hiroko has become an enemy in a foreign land. Terrified, begging to go home, she is nonetheless ordered by her father to stay.

He is positive she will be safer in California than at home, and for a brief time she is — until her entire world caves in.

On February 19, Executive Order 9066 is signed by President Roosevelt, giving the military the power to remove the Japanese from their communities at will. Takeo and his family are given ten days to sell their home, give up their jobs, and report to a relocation center, along with thousands of other Japanese and Japanese Americans, to face their

destinies there. Families are divided, people are forced to abandon their homes, their businesses, their freedom, and their lives. Hiroko and her uncle's family go first to Tanforan, and from there to the detention center at Tule Lake. Steel's message is contained in the portrait of human tragedy and strength, divided loyalties and love. Set against the backdrop of war and change, the novel dramatizes the now-well told story of the betrayal of Americans by their own government and the triumph of a woman caught between cultures and determined to survive.

# Themes

Most of Steel's books follow a young woman's journey from youth to maturity, from ignorance in the art of loving, through a series of relationships with men, to self knowledge and a mature, balanced relationship.

The central concern of her novels is the search for a lasting love relationship. While the characters are uniformly wealthy, beautiful and involved in exciting occupations, events or experiences, beneath the surface level of plot and character description are the real key to Steel's phenomenal popularity. She uses all of the traditions of the formula, but they are secondary to the real focus, which are the uncertainties, conflicts, choices and mistakes that anyone could and most people do experience. Readers are treated to extraordinary, exciting and exotic events which provide escape from the daily grind of ordinary existence, and also ordinary, familiar and recognizable problems, which are not easily solved but which fail to destroy or defeat the love at the center of the story. Readers can make direct application of the choices and triumphs of the fictional characters to their own lives.



# Adaptations

The following is a list of the television movies that have been produced based on Steel's novels. Generally, the miniseries format has been faithful to the plot and emotions of the novels, and has done a great deal to further enhance Steel's popular reputation.

Changes, April 1991.

Crossings, ABC, 1986.

Daddy, October 1991.

Family Album, October 1994.

Fine Things, October 1990.

Vanished, April 1995.

Full Circle, Fall of 1996.

Zoya, September 1995.

Heartbeat, February 1993.

Jewels, October 1992.

Kaleidoscope, October 1990.

Message From Nam, October 1993.

Mixed Blessings, December 1995.

No Greater Love, January 1996.

Now and Forever, Australia, 1983.

Once In a Lifetime, February 1994.

Palomino, October 1991.

A Perfect Stranger, September 1994.

Remembrance, Fall of 1996.

The Ring, September 1996.

Secrets, April 1992.



Star, September 1993.

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