

# **The Nanny Diaries Study Guide**

## **The Nanny Diaries by Nicola Kraus**

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# Contents

<a href="#">The Nanny Diaries Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Introduction.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Author Biography.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Historical Context.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Critical Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Criticism.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Critical Essay #1.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Critical Essay #2.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Further Study.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Further Study.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Bibliography.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>

# Introduction

*The Nanny Diaries: A Novel* (2002) is a humorous but revealing novel by two former nannies, Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus. Drawing on their many experiences as childcare providers while in college in New York City, the pair created a work of fiction based on actual events they experienced or heard about. The result is a comical yet poignant peek into a world of privilege, giving a modern illustration of the timeless truth that money does not buy happiness.

The novel focuses on a college student and part-time nanny, called Nanny or Nan, who is hired by the X family to care for their four-year-old son, Grayer. She soon becomes Grayer's surrogate mother as his parents neglect their son to focus on more pressing issues, such as extramarital affairs and fostering social status. Though Mrs. X becomes increasingly demanding of Nan's time, focus, and energy, Nan stays with the family for Grayer's sake, until she is fired during a family vacation to Nantucket.

*The Nanny Diaries* was a hit, spending more than thirty weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list. The novel eventually sold more than two million copies and was translated into at least thirteen languages. Critics and readers alike praised the novel for its comic touches, especially those related to the materialistic and pretentious X family. Readers were allowed a close-up glimpse of the lives of the Park Avenue rich, warts and all. Many former nannies confirmed *The Nanny Diaries's* reflection of many of the realities of nannying in the United States, including the issues of worker exploitation, treatment of nannies from foreign countries, and dysfunctional rich families.

The novel prompted speculation about the true identity of Mr. and Mrs. X (though the authors insisted that they are not based on any one couple that they worked for), as well as discussion about the nature of the relationship between parents and nannies. Referring to the latter, Kraus told Melissa Biggs Bradley of *Town & Country*, "Our intent was a literary journey. We wanted to give people a great laugh and a good cry. But we are thrilled that the book is inspiring so much discussion about a topic we believe there was far too much silence on."

## Author Biography

Emma McLaughlin was born in 1973 and Nicola Kraus was born in 1974. McLaughlin was born in Elmira, New York, and raised in Rochester, New York, where her father was a philosophy professor and her mother owned a landscape design company. She attended Connecticut College before transferring to New York University (NYU). Kraus was raised on Park Avenue in New York City's Upper East Side. Her parents owned a bookstore, Ursus Books and Prints, which specialized in art and rare books. Like Nanny in the *The Nanny Diaries: A Novel*, Kraus attended Chapin, an exclusive prep school in New York City, as well as Brown University before transferring to NYU.

McLaughlin and Kraus met while they were both seniors at NYU. They realized they shared the experience of working as part-time nannies and had many funny stories about it. Before both women graduated from NYU, McLaughlin and Kraus worked as nannies for about thirty wealthy families over a combined eight years (four years for each woman), sometimes working for two families at one time. After graduation, Kraus continued to work as a nanny while trying to launch an acting career. McLaughlin worked as a business consultant for educational nonprofits while working on her master's degree at Columbia.

In 1999, McLaughlin came up with the idea to write a book based on their experiences as nannies, and the pair began working on a manuscript in 2000. One source of inspiration was a common complaint they heard from parents who claimed it was hard to find quality nannies to take care of their children. The pair wrote much of the text of what became *The Nanny Diaries* via e-mail while working at their other jobs. The women signed a deal with St. Martin's Press and obtained a \$25,000 advance to finish their partially completed manuscript.

With the success of *The Nanny Diaries* in 2002, both quit their other jobs to become full-time writers and continue collaborating. McLaughlin and Kraus soon signed a deal with Random House to produce two more novels together. Difficulties soon arose when the publisher rejected the manuscript for their next novel. Random House ultimately canceled the contract after more trouble emerged between the authors and the publisher.

The pair's next novel, *Citizen Girl* (2004), was ultimately published by Atria Books. Though *Citizen Girl* sold relatively well, the novel did not have as many positive reviews nor was it as much of a literary sensation as *The Nanny Diaries*. *Citizen Girl* is another social satire about life in New York City, focusing on the workplace exploits of an idealistic recent college graduate, Girl. She tries to maintain her feminist ideals by finding work at a nonprofit women's organization, but ends up working in a soul-crushing job in corporate America.

As of 2006, McLaughlin and Kraus still live in New York City, do some public speaking, and continue to work together as authors on novels, short stories, and screenplays.



# Plot Summary

## Prologue: the Interview

At the beginning of *The Nanny Diaries*, Nanny (also called Nan) describes the interview process she goes through each time she applies for a nanny position in New York City. Nan notes that each mother's figure, hair, and clothing look the same. Each home is also strikingly similar. Nan exposit, "This is my first impression of the Apartment and it strikes me like a hotel suite—immaculate, but impersonal."

During the interview, Nan and the mother talk about why Nan is there, with the implication that she is a nanny for fun, not as a job. Nan presents herself the way the mother wants to see her: as a non-threatening, child-rearing savant. Next, the mother shows Nan around in a tour that emphasizes the importance of keeping the child from disturbing anything in the home. While the kitchen is huge and stocked with healthful child-friendly food, the mother neither cooks nor eats there. There is always a long list of rules about the child's diet.

Nan then meets the child, whose room is often in the farthest corner of the apartment. As the mother nears the child's room, the child gets excited and tries to hug her, but the mother nimbly avoids the embrace, causing the child's hands to clap together around nothing in front of his or her face. Nan calls this move the "Spatula Reflex," something she sees often as a nanny. Then, as the mother watches, Nan plays enthusiastically with the child. Finally, Nan and the mother talk about the mother's life, while Nan shares information about herself. At the end, Nan realizes that living up to the mother's expectations—becoming the perfect stand-in mother—is what inevitably causes her to lose the jobs.

## Part 1: Fall

## Part Two: Winter

## Part Three: Spring



# Characters

## Alex

Alex is a classmate of Grayer. They have a play date in chapter 2, but it does not go well.

## Alexis

Alexis is the volunteer receptionist at the Parents League, where Nanny posts her ad for a nanny position.

## Allison

Allison, the adopted Chinese daughter of a gay couple, is a girl from Grayer's class who comes over around Christmas for play date.

## Butters

Mrs. Butters is Grayer's nursery school teacher.

## Caitlin

Blond, Australian Caitlin is the nanny that Nanny is hired to replace. Grayer was attached to Caitlin, who worked for the Xes for some time. Mrs. X fires Caitlin because she wants too much vacation time. Nanny learns from another nanny that Caitlin was trying to save money to visit her seriously ill sister at home.

## Charlene

Charlene is Nanny's roommate. Charlene works as an airline stewardess and is often away from home.

*The Nanny Diaries* was adapted as an abridged audio book by Random House in 2002. It is narrated by Julia Roberts.

As of 2006, a film version of *The Nanny Diaries* was being produced. The novel was adapted for the screen, and Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini directed the film. It stars Scarlett Johansson as Nanny, Laura Linney as Mrs. X, and Paul Giamatti as Mr. X.



## **Lisa Chenowith**

See Ms. Chicago.

## **Chicago**

Ms. Chicago is the managing director of the Chicago office of Mr. X's company. She is first seen when she comes to the Xes' apartment to do the seating arrangement for the company dinner party. Nanny and Grayer later catch her in an intimate moment with Mr. X in his office during the company Halloween party. The affair Ms. Chicago and Mr. X are having threatens to break up the Xes' marriage and puts Nanny in an awkward position several times.

## **Connie**

Connie is the X family housekeeper. She worked for Mr. X long before he was married to the current Mrs. X. Mrs. X fires her when Connie cannot find a specific bowtie of Grayer's.

## **Dylan**

Dylan works at New York University's main computer center and reluctantly helps Nan print out her thesis.

## **George**

George is Nanny's pet cat.

## **Jane Gould**

Jane Gould is the long-term development consultant Mrs. X hires to handle the crisis of Grayer not being accepted to Collegiate.

## **Grace**

Grace is the puppy the Xes buy for Grayer in Nantucket, even though Grayer has no real desire to own a dog. When Mrs. X fires Nan, she is instructed to take the dog as well. Nan decides to keep her and names her.



## **Grandma**

Grandma is Nan's paternal grandmother. She is loving and supportive of her granddaughter, to the point of helping her get a Valentine's Day reservation for Mr. and Mrs. X at an upscale restaurant and buying a Christmas tree so Grayer has somewhere to hang his handmade ornament.

## **Grover**

See Grayer X.

## **Hairy Pilot**

Hairy Pilot is Charlene's boyfriend. When he decides to move in with Charlene, Nanny is forced to start looking for a new apartment.

## **Harvard Hottie**

Harvard Hottie, also known as H. H., lives in the same building as the X family. He is a student at Harvard, and, over the course of the novel, he becomes romantically involved with Nanny. Like nearly everyone else in her life, he urges Nanny to quit her job with the Xes.

## **Henry**

Henry is one of Allison's "two daddies." Mrs. X is surprised to learn that they do not use nannies to help raise their daughter.

## **Caroline Horner**

Caroline Horner is married to Jack Horner and is a friend of the Xes. At her party in Nantucket, she treats Nan like a guest, not an employee.

## **Jack Horner**

Jack Horner is a shoe designer, married to Caroline Horner, and is a friend of the X family. Nanny catches a ride on the Horner family plane to Nantucket after her graduation. During the family's stay there, Nan is treated as a guest at a party thrown by Jack and his family. Jack asks about Nan's life, and Nan's honest response earns a rebuke from Mrs. X.





## **James**

James is the doorman at the Xes' building.

## **Jones**

Jones is a high school friend of H. H. Jones is obnoxious to Nanny when she runs into H. H. and his high school friends at a bar one night.

## **Josh**

Josh is Nanny's friend. He helps Nan out in a crisis and is sympathetic to her many X family-related problems.

## **Julio**

Julio is the man Mrs. X hires to decorate the family's Christmas tree.

## **Justine**

Justine is Mr. X's office assistant.

## **Lizzie**

Lizzie is Carter Milton's English nanny.

## **Longacre**

Mrs. Longacre is Mrs. X's friend. Nanny overhears Mrs. X telling Mrs. Longacre about the hidden camera she has installed to secretly observe Nanny.

## **Maria**

Maria is the South American housekeeper Mrs. X hires to replace Connie.

## **Max**

Max is H. H.'s dog, an aged yellow Labrador retriever.



## Carter Milton

Carter is the boy with whom Grayer has a messy play date in chapter 8.

## Tina Milton

Mrs. Milton is the mother of Carter, who starts a frosting fight during Carter and Grayson's play date. She is a former beauty queen with a substance abuse problem.

## Murnel

Murnel is Alex's West Indian nanny.

## Nanny

Nanny is the primary character of the novel, the first-person voice through which all the events are filtered. She is a senior at New York University, studying child development. Nanny, also known as Nan, is also a graduate of a prestigious private school, Chapin. She has chosen to work as a nanny part-time to make money while a student, and she has been babysitting since the age of thirteen. Nanny enjoys working with kids.

After meeting Grayer and Mrs. X in Central Park one day, Nanny agrees to become Grayer's nanny. While she becomes very attached to the boy, she does not like the way Mrs. X treats her. As Mrs. X's demands increase, Nanny thinks about quitting, but she does not want to abandon Grayer. Nanny is insulted by her Christmas gift from Mrs. X—earmuffs and no bonus—and uncomfortable with her first-hand knowledge about Mr. X and Ms. Chicago's affair. She finds solace in her relationship with her family and friends, as well as the romantic attentions of H. H.

## Nanny's Father

Nan's father is an English teacher. He has a close relationship with his daughter, and he offers her advice on how to handle Grayer and the Xes.

## Nanny's Mother

Nan's mother works as a lawyer. While she is supportive of her daughter, Nan's mother believes she should get out of the childcare business. She also believes that Mrs. X is taking advantage of Nan and tries to get her daughter to confront Mrs. X or quit. Despite her disapproval, she gives Nanny advice on how to help Grayer when he is sick.



## **Ramon**

Ramon is an employee in the Xes' building.

## **Reena**

Reena is the executive director of Communities Against Conflict, which works in conflict resolution in New York City schools. She helps with Nanny's interview, then tells her, "We're really not looking to hire white women right now."

## **Richard**

Richard is the artistic director of Communities Against Conflict, a group which works in conflict resolution in New York City schools. He is part of an odd interview Nanny has for a position there.

## **Sarah**

Sarah is Nanny's best friend. They attended Chapin together. Sarah is supportive of Nan's difficult situation with the Xes and helps her on several occasions.

## **Sima**

Sima is Darwin Zuckerman's nanny. She is from El Salvador, where she was an engineer. She works as a nanny to support her husband and children back home. Nanny later learns that she was fired when her employer caught her grabbing Darwin's arm on a nanny cam.

## **Sophie**

Sophie is the dog owned by Nanny's family. She is an older spaniel.

## **Carson Spender**

Carson is the daughter of one of the X family friends. She is spending the weekend at the Xes' summer rental the first weekend Nan arrives. Carson is one of the many children Nan must care for the first day she is in Nantucket.



## Elizabeth X

Elizabeth X is the mother of Mr. X and the grandmother of Grayer. Mrs. X invites her to stay at their cabin in Nantucket so that Mr. X will stay there instead of leaving for what he says are the demands of his business.

## Grayer Addison X

Grayer is the blond four-year-old son of Mr. and Mrs. X and Nanny's sometimes charming, adorable charge. Her nickname for him is Grover. He attends nursery school and has a full schedule of lessons and play dates. Grayer is prone to acting out, but he is very attached to his nannies, especially Caitlin and Nanny. He is generally ignored by his parents unless they are forced to care for him or there is a prestige-related crisis at hand, such as his not being accepted to Collegiate.

## Mr. X

Mr. X is the husband of Mrs. X and the father of Grayer X. He is an important businessman, whose job is demanding. His marriage to Mrs. X is often filled with tension, and he has at least one affair during the course of the book, with Ms. Chicago. Mr. X is not particularly interested in Grayer as a person and spends no time with him unless the family is on vacation. He is rude to Nanny and other employees.

## Mrs. X

Mrs. X is the wife of Mr. X and the mother of Grayer X. Mrs. X is very distant from her son, and she seems more concerned with her personal and social life and saving her marriage than with Grayer. She is also a demanding employer. While Nanny is supposed to be only a part-time nanny to Grayer, Mrs. X soon pushes the boundaries of Nanny's employment to include running errands, procuring restaurant reservations, taking constant phone calls and notes, and working far more hours than Nanny originally was hired for.

## Darwin Zuckerman

Darwin is the physically aggressive classmate Grayer has a play date with in chapter 7. Grayer and Darwin also play at Darwin's birthday party in chapter 9.

# Themes

## Parental Love

Much of *The Nanny Diaries* focuses on families and parental love. In her own life, Nanny has two parents who love her, advise her, and pay attention to her, even though she is a young adult. Both her mother and father are concerned that her nanny job for the X family is not right for her because she is being taken advantage of by Mrs. X. Despite their apprehension, Nan's mother and father support her as best they can. For example, when Nan is left alone with an ill Grayer, she calls her mother in the middle of the night for advice on what to do with the coughing, feverish boy. Her mother tells her how to make him comfortable and relieve his symptoms, then wants Nanny to call her back in an hour to update her about Grayer.

In contrast, Mr. and Mrs. X do not seem to care much about Grayer as a person at all. Mrs. X has had nannies to take care of him since he was born, though she does not work and spends most of her time shopping, attending various functions and seminars, and making schedules for her son and employees. She discourages Grayer from touching her or hugging her. There is next to no physical contact between mother and son, and little time spent having fun together. During the few times she is alone with him while he is awake, such as during a vacation in which promised childcare is not available, Mrs. X does not know what to do with him. Mr. X is even more distant from Grayer, as the father is rarely home and spends no time with his son unless they are on a family vacation. Grayer wants his parents' attention and love, and he is often disappointed and upset because he does not get it.

Nanny tries her best to make up for the Xes' attitude towards Grayer, even staying on the job when Mrs. X repeatedly takes advantage of Nan and her time. In the end, Grayer faces heartbreak as Nanny is dismissed while he is sleeping and has to leave without saying goodbye.

## Compassion and Caring

Throughout *The Nanny Diaries*, the authors contrast the indifference of Mr. and Mrs. X, and others of their social status, with the sensitivity and kindness of Nanny and others in her profession. While Mrs. X cares that her son gets in the right school, takes the right kind of lessons, and participates in the right kind of social activities, she is not as concerned with relating to Grayer as an individual. She is indifferent to him as long as he is properly behaved and doing what she believes he should do. Mr. X takes this treatment to another level, as Grayer only gets his attention when they are away from home. In contrast, Nanny cares very much about her young charge, spending time making him happy, all the while imparting good manners, setting boundaries, and defining appropriate actions and feelings. On Valentine's Day, she takes him out for pizza and a movie as an unexpected treat, something his parents would never do.



Mrs. X treats the people she considers her social inferiors the same way as or worse than she treats her son. Though Nan was only hired to be Grayer's part-time nanny, the university student is soon called on to do much more. In addition to spending many extra hours taking care of Grayer, she also has to buy items for a party Mrs. X is planning, get last-minute Valentine's Day reservations at a high-end restaurant for the Xes, and help Mrs. X pick out an outfit. Mrs. X is indifferent to Nanny's needs. She makes Nan miss a class by returning home late one night, and she later jeopardizes Nan's thesis defense by making her late. Mrs. X calls Nan repeatedly early in the morning on New Year's Day to convince her to cut her vacation short. Mrs. X decides to fire Nan when she dares to prioritize her own college graduation ceremony above the X family vacation.

Though Nan resents Mrs. X's constant demands and notes, she sticks with her job primarily for Grayer's sake. Nan continually ensures that Grayer gets all the attention, kindness, and respect that she can muster. Nan goes out of her way to make up for the indifference of Grayer's parents. He makes a special Christmas ornament he calls Al, but it is not allowed to stay on the designer-decorated family tree. Nan's grandmother helps, buying a tree just for Grayer to hang his ornament on and arranging a special afternoon for the boy. Nan also always finds a way to entertain the many extra children she has to care for, especially in Nantucket. She is never indifferent, even to the pain Mrs. X feels as she deals with her husband's infidelity.

## Marital Strife

The havoc caused by the problems in the Xes' marriage drives much of the story. While Nan's mother and father seem to have a solid marriage, Mr. X can be as indifferent to Mrs. X as she is to their son. Nan learns from H. H. that their relationship started out as an extra-marital affair during Mr. X's first marriage.

Within a few months of Nan's employment by the X family, she figures out that Mr. X is having an affair with Ms. Chicago. The marriage of the Xes seems in jeopardy, with Mr. X cutting short or avoiding many family events. This stress causes Mrs. X to demand more and more of Nanny, as well as of Connie the housekeeper, and act more coldly to her son. She does everything she can to hold on to her marriage, including getting her husband's mother to join their vacation so that he stays with the family instead of returning to his mistress, as well as becoming pregnant with a second child.

While the marital discord causes distress for Mrs. X and Grayer, it also puts Nan in a difficult position as the emotional fallout on the mother and child results in more work for Nan. Also, because Ms. Chicago knows who Nan is, where she lives, and what she knows about the affair, Ms. Chicago pressures Nan to become her ally. Nan becomes a reluctant pawn in the marital drama of Mr. and Mrs. X.



# Style

## Protagonist-narrator

Nanny is the protagonist of *The Nanny Diaries*. She is the central sympathetic character in the novel, and all the action and themes in the book involve and revolve around her. Nan tries to act with integrity at all times, especially for Grayer, but also for his parents and their marriage, while maintaining her own life as a student, daughter, friend, and girlfriend. She is supportive of and sympathetic to many of the people she encounters while acting as Grayer's nanny, especially other nannies, housekeepers, building employees, and the like. By trying to meet Mrs. X's endless demands on her time, energy, and sanity, Nan believes that her actions do matter to Grayer and his mother, even if she is a paid employee. Though in the end Nan cannot live up Mrs. X's impossible standards and gets fired, Nanny always behaves according to her ideals.

Nanny is also the narrator of *The Nanny Diaries*, which is written in first-person point of view by McLaughlin and Kraus. All the action and circumstances are filtered through Nan's perspective. Through a first person or "I" point of view, readers only receive Nan's opinions and observations of events and people. While this perspective limits some information, it also allows readers to fully understand Nan's motivations and feelings. Making Nan the narrator and using the first-person point of view underscores Nan's role as heroine and protagonist in the novel.

## Conflict

*The Nanny Diaries* features many conflicts—oppositions between characters and/or ideas in a novel that shape and stimulate the plot's action. Conflict can happen within a character as well. The primary conflicts in the novel are between what is right for Nan as a person and what is right for Grayer. As Mrs. X asks more and more of Nan (including duties that have nothing to do with her role as nanny), and respects her less and less (as shown by her lack of concern for Nan's needs as a student), Nan and those who love her ask why she stays in Mrs. X's employ. Nan repeatedly explains that she does not want to quit and abandon Grayer. Despite increasingly trying circumstances, Nan does the best she can as a nanny until she is fired during the vacation in Nantucket. Though the conflict is not resolved by Nan sticking up for herself directly to Mrs. X, she does get the final word by recording a message on the "nanny cam" the Xes set up in Grayer's room. Nanny walks away with her integrity intact.

## Setting

The setting of *The Nanny Diaries* is a key component of the story. The setting is the culture, time, and place where the events of a story take place—in this case, New York City in the early twenty-first century. Many specific landmarks of New York City are mentioned in the text. For example, Nanny and H. H. have their first "date" on the steps



of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. While the X family lives on Park Avenue, a famous boulevard where many wealthy people live, their specific address is fictional.

McLaughlin and Kraus had experience working as nannies for the upper-class families in New York City who live on streets like Park Avenue. They drew on that expertise in creating situations and characters like the upper-crust mothers and fathers who focus on their social lives more than their children, and the nannies and the wealthy children they take care of. The authors also depict the kind of activities such children participate in and their cycle of life as residents of the city. Both of the authors attended New York University while nannying, like Nan does, and their experiences as college students also inform the settings of Nan's life outside of work.

## Prologue

The prologue is the section that introduces a literary work, such as a novel. In the prologue to *The Nanny Diaries*, Nan explains what it is like to interview for a job as a nanny for the children of wealthy families in New York City. Separate from the rest of the story save for Nanny's presence, the prologue outlines what it is like to go for an interview for such a nanny position, the kind of women who hire nannies in this setting, what their homes are like, and how their children act. This prologue reveals how Nanny sees herself as well as the people she works for, setting the stage for the conflicts and actions that ensue in the primary story.



## Historical Context

While the term "nanny" often brings to mind childcare for the bygone upper classes in England and the United States, the profession and its place in society were evolving in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In the last twenty years of the twentieth century, there was a vast increase in the number of household workers, including nannies, in the United States and Great Britain. The Center for the Child Care Workforce estimated that at least 1.2 million people worked as child-care workers in the United States in 2005, though the exact number who worked exclusively as nannies was unknown. In 2006, the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper's website, [telegraph.co.uk](http://telegraph.co.uk), reported that in Great Britain alone, at least one hundred thousand people, mostly women, were employed as nannies.

There were several reasons for the rapid growth in the employment of nannies. More women were joining the work force in professional and executive positions. When they had children, many chose to return to work after only a brief maternity leave, often for professional or financial reasons. Employing a nanny became a more accepted childcare solution when both parents worked. In *Newsweek International*, Emily Flynn further explained there was "a growing reliance on [nannies] as societies continue to move away from the traditional two-parent, stay-at-home-mom household. Furthermore, few people live near their extended family anymore, eliminating a reliable source of child-care support."

For some two-income middle-class families, hiring a nanny was sometimes cheaper than paying for day care, where a child would not receive as much personalized attention. One emerging trend in this time period was the sharing of nannies between friends, neighbors, or those families with mutual needs. In these arrangements, one nanny cared for the children of two to five families, sometimes by rotating through each household or by watching all the children at once in one central home.

The education and certification of nannies was also evolving, especially in the United States, as nannying came to be seen as a professional occupation. A number of community colleges throughout the United States offer such training. There are also a few specific institutions dedicated solely to training nannies, such as the Ohio-based English Nanny & Governess School, which offers a live-in three-month program. In Great Britain, Norland College is a well-regarded early childhood-oriented institution. The International Nanny Association offers a "Nanny Credential Exam" and works with groups that offer short training courses for nannies.

While such programs produce highly sought-after nannies in some areas of the United States, most nannies are immigrants who earn much less than their certified, American counterparts. Salaries for nannies could range from less than minimum wage to fifty thousand dollars per year. Many nannies are hired through dedicated employment agencies that perform a background check on each applicant. However, because the nanny industry lacks regulation and many nannies are still paid "off the book," many are vulnerable to exploitation. Despite such problems, more people look at working as a

nanny as a serious full-time job. Former nanny of the year Michelle LaRowe told Cesar G. Soriano of *USA Today*, "Today's professional nanny is an educated woman with a genuine love of kids who wouldn't want to do anything else."



## Critical Overview

Many critics found *The Nanny Diaries* to be a humorous yet thought-provoking look at the life of the wealthy inhabitants of Park Avenue through the eyes of an educated, put-upon nanny. Echoing the sentiments of a number of critics, Cassandra Jardine of the *Daily Telegraph* called it "*The Bonfire of the Vanities* crossed with *Bridget Jones's Diary*—a funny, but shocking view of privilege and idleness." Writing in *USA Today*, Deidre Donahue saw the book in the same vein, noting that "Although *The Nanny Diaries* is screamingly funny, it's also painfully sad. A very effective combination." Carole Goldberg of the *Grand Rapids Press* found the product of two authors' labor worked well, commenting "The writing is remarkably smooth for a collaboration, the humor is sharper than a stiletto heel, and the outrage is palpable."

Specific characters, the way they were drawn, and their effectiveness garnered much critical attention, primarily Nanny and members of the X family. Janet Maslin of the *New York Times* described Nanny as "a vastly entertaining narrator and impromptu social critic," while *Time's* Belinda Luscombe concluded, "the novel's niftiness lies in Nanny's keen eye for detail. She's Mary Poppins channeling Dorothy Parker." Commenting on the X family in *People*, Danielle Steel wrote, "The Xes are too one-dimensionally awful to seem real, but the authors manage a poignant, nuanced portrayal of Grayer, a sweetly funny boy." In contrast, the reviewer in *Publishers Weekly* found McLaughlin's and Kraus's touch with Mrs. X effective, writing, "Especially impressive is the author's ability to allow the loathsome Mrs. X occasional flashes of humanity and pathos."

However, some critics found much to dislike about *The Nanny Diaries*, with a number of reviewers believing the story loses energy when it focuses on Nan's life outside of work. Alona Wartofsky of the *Washington Post* wrote:

The characters are clichéd and the fun grinds to a halt whenever the Xes are out of the picture. Nanny's family, parents and grandparents are cloying, and her life away from the Xes is profoundly uninteresting. And at times, it seems that Nanny is just as materialistic as her employers.

Despite such negative reviews, many with personal experiences as nannies believed the novel reflected reality. Kathy Murphy, the president of the Chicago-area North Shore Nannies, told Paige Smoron of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, "I think it's pretty accurate in describing that particular slice of life. For wealthy people, this is just another service they are using."

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2



# Critical Essay #1

*Petrusso is a history and screenwriting scholar and freelance writer and editor. In this essay, Petrusso compares and contrasts The Nanny Diaries: A Novel with perhaps the most famous nanny story in literature, Mary Poppins, arguing both authors put nannies and their charges on a pedestal, while de-emphasizing the role of the parents who hired the caregivers.*

Nearly every nanny in literature, and perhaps reality, has to live up to the literary archetype created by P. L. Travers: Mary Poppins. In *Mary Poppins*, the nanny blows in with the east wind, wins the hearts of the four Banks children, and leaves months later when the wind blows west. While the book is a fantasy targeted at children, Poppins is a caretaker many people really want for their children. Even the fictional Nanny in Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus's book *The Nanny Diaries: A Novel* feels the burden of expectations created by Travers. In the prologue to *The Nanny Diaries*, Nan describes the routine interview for a nanny position in New York City. After Nan tries to impress her future employer as she describes her expertise in child development and her success with previous clients, she thinks, "I feel my eyes twinkle and imagine twirling my umbrella à la Mary Poppins." After jumping through a few more hoops, Nan inevitably gets the job.

Though *The Nanny Diaries* is a work of general fiction written by two former nannies in twenty-first century America and *Mary Poppins* is a young adult novel set in Great Britain and originally published in 1934, the books have parallels in how they treat their characters and the situations in which they find themselves. The authors idealize the nannies at the centers of the stories, showing their magical touch with the children they care for. However, the parents who hire the nannies as caregivers are marginalized and are not depicted as a central part of their children's lives. Both novels also touch on sensitive issues for nannies such as hiring practices, duties and responsibilities, their relationship with the children, and the end of tenure in the household. In the end, both books dramatize the positives and negatives to bringing a nanny into a home.

Key areas of nanny life are presented differently in *The Nanny Diaries* and *Mary Poppins*, such as the hiring of the nanny, how she is treated in the household, and the tasks she is to perform on the job. Nan is an expert at saying the right thing to get hired as a nanny by Park Avenue families. She understands what the wealthy women who interview her for a position are looking for, and, as an educated white woman, she offers what they believe to be an attractive, safe package. Nan notes in the prologue: "Nanny Fact: in every one of the interviews, references are never checked. I am white. I speak French. My parents are college educated. I have no visible piercings."

The lack of references are a key point of Poppins initial appearance at the Bankses' household as well. After the family's previous nanny, Katie Nanna, quits abruptly, Mrs. Banks advertises in the paper for a replacement. That same day, Poppins arrives on the Bankses' doorstep. After a brief conversation with Poppins, Mrs. Banks asks for her references. Poppins refuses to supply them, telling Mrs. Banks "Oh, I make it a rule



never to give references." Though Mrs. Banks is perturbed by her refusal, Poppins plays on Mrs. Banks' desire to be modern by telling her such a request is "Very old-fashioned. *Quite* out of date, as you might say." When Mrs. Banks offers her the job, Poppins does not accept until she is satisfied with the Banks family.

Poppins's attitude remains self-assured throughout the book, unlike Nan's. Though Nan is confident about how to get hired as a nanny, she is less so managing the job and she soon lets Mrs. X walk all over her. Nan was only supposed to be a part-time nanny to Grayer X, but often acts as Grayer's full-time and occasionally all-time nanny. Nanny also spends much of her own time running endless errands for Mrs. X, who continually complains that Nan has not bought or done things correctly. Nan also has to make dinner reservations for Mr. and Mrs. X's Valentine Day, something she takes care of far away from the Xes' apartment. Nan's family and friends often remind her that many of these tasks have nothing to do with childcare, but she puts up with Mrs. X's excessive demands for Grayer's sake.

Poppins would not tolerate such treatment by her employers. Poppins knows her duties, and she executes them with authority. She is never depicted as being taken for granted by Mrs. Banks or anyone else. Indeed, Poppins insists on more regularly scheduled time off than Mrs. Banks would like, but she is negotiating from a position of power. Poppins is in charge of her clearly defined work sphere, while Nan allows her work sphere to be defined by Mrs. X, creating a dysfunctional working relationship and unnecessary havoc in Nan's personal life.

Though Nan and Poppins have different relationships with their respective employers, McLaughlin, Kraus, and Travers depict the nannies as having ideal rapports with the children in their care. The bond between nannies and children in these books is never in doubt, and it seems to be the best relationship in the children's lives. While Grayer X initially rejects Nanny for replacing his previous, beloved nanny Caitlin, Nan patiently wins him over. He becomes extremely attached to Nan, and he is anguished when she is abruptly fired. Nan believes she is the only person who truly loves and cares about Grayer. While this may be accurate, Nan's concern with meeting Grayer's needs allows Mrs. X to take advantage of her and for Nan to be something of a martyr for tolerating the X family. While Nan frequently says she wants to quit because of the situation in the X household, more often she says that she does not want to abandon Grayer. Nanny endures much mistreatment for the young boy until the Xes decide they have had enough of Nan in their lives.

Like Nan with Grayer, Poppins is an ideal nanny for the four Banks children. She cares about the children's well-being, insists on them acting appropriately, and wants them to have fun. Poppins sets clear boundaries with the children, especially with the eldest two, Michael and Jane, who know not to question her. Her magic is in her ability to understand and talk to animals, take Michael and Jane to the four corners of the Earth with a special compass, get them into an enchanting after-hours party at the zoo, and have their paper stars glued into the sky above. While such examples are fantastic, Poppins always knows what to do and what to say. There is no hint of doubt about her.



Such self-assurance lends credence to every action she takes as a nanny and makes her an idealized childcare giver.

In contrast to the nannies, the parents in both *The Nanny Diaries* and *Mary Poppins* are depicted as deeply flawed. Both sets of parents do not seem to care much about their children as people nor spend much time with them. The only parent who comes close is Mrs. Banks. She is depicted as comforting her one-year-old twins, John and Barbara, one time when they begin crying because of the words of a bird. Though Mrs. Banks cannot console them, she spends time "patting her children gently, first one and then the other, and murmuring words that were meant to be reassuring." Other than this incident, Mrs. Banks is depicted only as a marginal figure in her children's lives. She does not work but does not spend time with the children. When Poppins is not available, other servants employed in the household look after them. Mrs. Banks makes a few decisions on what the children are to do, including allowing Michael and Jane to visit their father at work for a special treat as he requests. This incident marks one of the few times Travers even hints that Mr. Banks interacts with his children, but it is more direct, seemingly loving attention than Grayer X ever receives from his parents.

McLaughlin and Kraus draw Mr. and Mrs. X as reserved, shallow, and selfish, and concerned only with themselves, their work, and their social lives. Like Mr. Banks, Mr. X is a successful businessman, an executive with a demanding position at a company. Mr. X exists in the story in terms of work and his affair with Ms. Chicago, only making longer appearances on vacations that Mrs. X insists they take together. Like Mrs. Banks, Mrs. X does not have a job but focuses on running the household as well as maintaining her social status.

Mr. and Mrs. X spend no time getting to know their son, with whom they are rarely alone unless they are traveling or he is sleeping. Mr. X had apparently taken Grayer skiing when the family was on vacation, while Mrs. X takes him to occasional school-related functions and a shopping trip or two alone. However, she tries to prevent her son from touching her at all. When Grayer is ill soon after returning from his Christmas vacation, neither of his parents takes care of him. Nanny has to care for Grayer around the clock when he needs his parents the most. Neither parent calls to check on him. They do not seem to care about their son, which underscores the idea of Nan as the loving but mistreated victim of the Xes.

At the close of both *The Nanny Diaries* and *Mary Poppins*, the nannies' tenures with the families come to an abrupt end, due to very different circumstances that reflect both nannies' personalities. The readers of *The Nanny Diaries* can see that Nan has put up with increasingly difficult circumstances created by Mr. and Mrs. X to provide Grayer some sense of love and stability. However, by the last chapter, Mrs. X does not believe that Nan is providing them the quality of care and dedication they need, in part because Nan asks to join their family vacation a day late to attend her college graduation. Nan is abruptly fired when she tries to ask to return a day or two early to New York to find a place to live. Though Nan gets the last word in when she goes to their apartment and leaves them a message on their nanny cam, she has allowed the situation with the Xes to control her, not the other way around.



Poppins has no such difficulties. On the "first day of Spring" when the west wind blows, Poppins decides its time to leave the Bankses' employ. Though Nan is not afforded an opportunity to say goodbye to Grayer, Poppins simply leaves the Banks children presents and a note but offers no face-to-face closure. Although she epitomizes the perfect nanny, Poppins does not give her employers any notice. Mrs. Banks is rightfully upset that Poppins just flies off. Jane and Michael immediately miss and defend Poppins to their mother.

Poppins creates a division in the Banks family, precisely what McLaughlin believes a nanny should not do. McLaughlin told Susan Phinney of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, "In our opinion, a nanny's role is to allow a family to care for itself." Nan also distracts Grayer from the reality of his family, though she does add problems to the already unhappy family. Both nannies act as they believe they should, adding to the air of righteousness that permeates McLaughlin, Kraus, and Travers's tales of domestic dysfunction.

**Source:** A. Petrusso, Critical Essay on *The Nanny Diaries: A Novel*, in *Literary Newsmakers for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.





## Critical Essay #2

*In the following excerpt, Haden-Guest interviews the authors, discussing their experiences as nannies as background for the novel.*

[Text Not Available]

*Bergdorf Blondes: A Novel* (2004) is a novel by Plum Sykes that focuses on the lives of wealthy heiresses who live on Park Avenue.

*Citizen Girl* (2004) is the second novel by McLaughlin and Kraus. The novel focuses on Girl, a recent college graduate trying to make her way in New York City and live up to her feminist ideals in corporate America.

*The Devil Wears Prada* (2003) is a novel by Laura Weisberger. Based on Weisberger's experience as an assistant to *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour, the fiction focuses on the difficulties new college graduate Anna Sachs faces when she becomes the assistant to an extremely demanding high-end fashion magazine editor.

*You'll Never Nanny in This Town Again: The True Adventures of a Hollywood Nanny* (2005), by Suzanne Hansen, is a balanced memoir about Hansen's experiences working as a nanny for three Hollywood luminaries.

[Text Not Available]

[Text Not Available]

**Source:** Anthony Haden-Guest, "Took Care of the Kids (And Very Good Notes)," in the *New York Times*, February 7, 2002, p. F1.

## Topics for Further Study

- Read another story about a child of privilege, such as the "Eloise" books for children. Write a paper comparing and contrasting the life and attitudes of the child featured in the other story with that of young Grayer X.
- There have been several incidents in which high-profile nominees for important federal government positions, such as Attorney General nominees Zoe Baird and Kimba Wood in 1993, withdrew their nominations because of irregularities with their nannies. More recently, in 2004, a nominee for the Secretary of Homeland Security, Bernard B. Kerik, withdrew after it was revealed a nanny in his employ might have been an illegal alien and that he did not pay taxes on her salary. Research such cases and the issues they raise, including use of illegal aliens as nannies and domestic workers. Working with a partner, present a classroom debate on both sides of the issue, touching on such issues as worker exploitation, pay, and taxation.
- Each chapter of *The Nanny Diaries* begins with a quote from a famous work of fiction featuring a nanny or governess. Read one of the books cited and discuss its relationship with the text of *The Nanny Diaries* in a paper.
- Have groups of students watch one of the many movies or television shows featuring a nanny, such as *Nanny McPhee* (2005), *Spanglish* (2004), *The Nanny* (CBS, 1993–1999), or *Mary Poppins* (1964). Have each student group present their observations on the nanny, the family she works for, and the circumstances of her life as compared with the world depicted in *The Nanny Diaries*. Consider such ideas as the effectiveness of the nanny as an employee and the realism of the depiction of the nanny and the family.
- Nanny seems to feel that she is the victim of an impossible situation, but do you agree? To what degree, if at all, is she responsible for her circumstances? Do you think she may have managed her relationship with Mrs. X better from the start, or is Mrs. X unmanageable? Discuss the lessons about happy employment (or lack thereof) in *The Nanny Diaries* and come up with a "List of Do's and Don'ts for On-the-job Happiness" based on examples in the novel.

## Further Study

Cancelmo, Joseph A., and Carol Bandini, *Child Care for Love or Money?: A Guide to Navigating the Parent-Caregiver Relationship*, Jason Aronson, 1999.

This nonfiction handbook offers advice for parents as well as nannies and other childcare workers on how to have an effective working relationship.

Carolton, Susan, and Coco Myers, *The Nanny Book: The Smart Parent's Guide to Hiring, Firing, and Every Sticky Situation in Between*, St. Martin's Griffin, 1999.

*The Nanny Book* draws on interviews with parents and childcare givers to offer practical advice on nearly every aspect of employing a nanny.

Gross, Michael, *740 Park: The Story of the World's Richest Apartment Building*, Broadway 2005.

*740 Park* is a social history of a prestigious apartment building on Park Avenue and its many famous residents.

Merchant, A. M., *The Nanny Textbook: The Professional Nanny Guide to Child Care 2003*, Writer's Showcase Press, 2003.

This nonfiction work is a standard text used in the training of nannies.

Roiphe, Anne, *1185 Park Avenue: A Memoir*, St. Martin's Griffin, 1999.

This memoir looks back at a childhood of privilege from the perspective of a woman who was the product of an unhappy marriage and raised by nannies, and its effect on the rest of her life.



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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Book**

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's "For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently



studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

### Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

### How Each Entry Is Organized





Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

### Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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“Night.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

### We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: [ForStudentsEditors@gale.com](mailto:ForStudentsEditors@gale.com). Or write to the editor at:

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