

A Place Apart Short Guide

A Place Apart by Paula Fox

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Overview

Thirteen-year-old Victoria Finch wants to know how to live in a world that makes no sense to her. She is an only child in a closely knit family who suddenly loses her father to a heart attack a few days after Thanksgiving.

She and her mother move to the small village of New Oxford where she feels isolated. Tory is flattered when Hugh Todd, a high school junior, takes an interest in her and her writing, and for a while she finds some meaning in life as her friendship with him grows.

Hugh befriends her only to help him be special, unique, and original. She is hurt when she realizes she is being used by Hugh; he feels no apparent loss when she ends their friendship.

The relationship between Tory and her mother fluctuates between closeness and isolation, close when they curl up in bed and watch old Marx Brothers movies that were favorites of her dad and isolation when she tries to adjust to her mother's announcement of marriage to Lawrence Grady.

Hugh's move to Boston and the impending sale of Tory's home in New Oxford pushes Tory to make some choices for herself.

About the Author

Paula Fox was born April 22, 1923, in New York City to Paul Hervey and Elsie de Sola Fox. Her father was an itinerant writer, and when she was born, he was trying to earn a living as a play fixer. In the beginning, Fox did not live with her parents; for the first six years of her life, her home was with a Congregational minister who had been a newspaperman. He was an avid historian of the Revolutionary period, focusing particularly on the Hudson Valley area. He wrote daily, producing sermons, columns, essays on battles, sonnets and a book.

Nearly every room housed books.

She says of herself during that time, "Often he would read something to me from his own work. He talked of the difficulties of writing a sonnet. I could hardly have understood, but the word sonnet itself stirred me . . . He taught me to read, and I memorized a poem myself, 'If by Rudyard Kipling.'"

Fox lived in California for a couple of years after leaving the minister's home, then moved to a sugar plantation in central Cuba where she attended a one-room school and learned to speak Spanish fluently. Her next move was to New York. She rarely lived in one place more than a year and hardly ever saw her parents.

As a young adult, Fox found jobs that enabled her to travel. After spending some time in Europe, she returned to New York, married, had two sons, attended college, taught for a while, divorced, remarried, and finally started writing when her children did not require so much care. Her first book for children was *Maurice's Room* in 1966.

Fox has won numerous awards. *Portrait of Ivan* was chosen as a Child Study Association of America's Children's Book of the Year in 1969.

Awards received by *The Slave Dancer* include the Newbery Medal, 1974; being named one of *School Library Journal's* Best Books of the Year, 1973; and being named to the Special Hans Christian Andersen Honor List, 1979. *A Place Apart* was chosen as a *New York Times* Outstanding Book, 1981, and as one of *School Library Journal's* Best Books of the Year, 1981. *One-Eyed Cat* was a Newbery Honor Book, 1984, and received the Christopher Award, 1985.

The Moonlight Man was selected as a *New York Times* Notable Book, 1986, and *The Village by the Sea* received the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for Fiction, 1989.

Paula Fox writes about young people's emotions, drives, desires, goals, and needs with understanding and sensitivity. Many of her themes come from her own life, although she says, "I have never written—and do not intend to write—the 'story of my life.'"

Yet my childhood was in many ways uncommon, and I have written about parts of that."

Setting

A Place Apart is set in New Bedford, a small community whose downtown is dying because businesses have moved to a mall on the outskirts of the village.

The story moves from Thanksgiving to May, a year and a half later.

Victoria and her mother move to New Bedford, to start over, following the death of Victoria's father. They move from a large, roomy house into a small house that seems very ugly to Victoria and is crowded with their things. Victoria has left her best friend to go to a place where she must start over, a difficult challenge for her.

Social Sensitivity

Fox's theme of the search for self and meaning in life is a fact of life for contemporary young people. In a society that seems topsy-turvy and lacking in significant signposts to help young people make positive choices, they will find a kinship in Tory's search.

There is no neat little package answer for Tory, just as there is none for today's youth. Fox lets the reader see the complexities of life and friendship that Tory encounters. As Tory works through them, she is left with a hint of hope that she knows what she does not want, thus hinting of what she does want. Fox writes with an understanding of the needs of young people, knowing that there are no pat answers to their problems.

Literary Qualities

The first-person account reveals the inner struggle Victoria has with her search for self and a place to belong.

Fox makes use of flashbacks to help her audience understand the happier days Tory and her mother once had.

Her use of metaphorical language creates vivid impressions for the reader.



Themes and Characters

Fox develops strong themes in *A Place Apart*. Victoria Finch, nicknamed Tory, feeling deserted and lacking direction, looks for someone to explain the perplexities of life to her. She feels deserted, first by her father when he dies suddenly, then by her mother when she starts dating Lawrence Grady, whom Tory detests, and then by Hugh, when she discovers he is only using her to make himself important.

The novel's theme has its beginnings in a discussion with Uncle Philip about a dream. When Tory tells him about the dream Uncle Philip says, "Your dream means that what you must do is find your own country." Tory does search for her own identity and learns she must be herself apart from the molds others would press her into.

This is a theme common to young people as they strive to know themselves and fit in with the crowd, too.

The primary theme in *A Place Apart* is Tory's feeling that she does not belong anywhere. She does not belong in their home in Boston without her father or in the new home and school in New Oxford. She does not belong in the lives of those she thinks are closest to her: Mom, Elizabeth, and Hugh.

They all seem to have lives that exclude her.

Victoria starts searching for that symbolic country Uncle Philip suggested she needed to find. She is an uncertain, vulnerable high school freshman, who is flattered by the attention of Hugh Todd, a high school junior. She rides an emotional roller coaster as she tries to win his favor. In the process, she develops a strong friendship with Elizabeth Marx. Tory is a strong character who becomes more discerning of the feelings and behavior of others and how they influence her life. As the story progresses, she struggles and succeeds in standing up to Hugh Todd and his manipulative behavior.

Tory's mother, Linda, although important to the development of the story, plays a lesser role. She is struggling to make a home for Tory and herself, a woman with a smoking habit that Tory detests, a woman determined to make a new life for herself and Tory.

It is a determination that sends her back to school and allows her to risk living again. She does love Tory and has an understanding of her daughter that Tory does not realize.

Hugh Todd, a high school junior, is a strange person. He finds others a little beneath him and only cultivates friends who can contribute to the facade he has built up around himself. He thinks of himself as a very special person. Others do not like him and think of him as a greedy, self-serving fake. He collects *A Place Apart* 3839 friends one at a time and drops them when they no longer suit his needs. On the other hand, Elizabeth Marx quickly becomes Tory's best friend in New Bedford. They talk about everything to

each other except Hugh Todd. Elizabeth has known him all her life and has always disliked his superior, betterthan-you attitude and manipulative behavior.



Topics for Discussion

1. The story begins in a flashback.

What is a flashback? How does it contribute to your understanding of the story?

2. Paula Fox uses a great deal of metaphorical language throughout *A Place Apart*. For example, look at page 20 and 21 when she describes the Matcha River: ". . . The Matcha River curled and mumbled on its course ... " and "...

the air was fragrant and cruel as though the river had whacked it."

What kind of a picture does that paint for you?

3. Victoria's father has died quite unexpectedly. In Chapter 1, page 6, Victoria says her mother sounds angry at her father for dying so young. Why would she feel this way?

4. In Chapter 2, Tory compares two of her teachers, Mrs. Tate and Mr. Mellers. She feels Tate is sincere and interested in all her students except her.

Mellers is trying to be a buddy. Which kind of teacher do you like? Why?

5. In Chapter 3, Tory feels Hugh is insulted that she talked to Frank Wilson. Why would this insult Hugh?

6. Why do you think Tory is attracted to Hugh?

7. What do you think Tory is searching for in life?

8. The play is a private thing for her that she really only discussed with her teachers and Hugh, but Hugh told several others about it without asking permission. How would that make you feel if you were Tory? Why? What is Victoria's play really about?

9. Hugh draws Victoria into his strange behavior in Chapter 4 at the beaver pond on his property. Victoria joins in his frenzy without thinking. He has a great deal of influence over her.

What do you think makes him tick?

10. Immediately following the above episode Victoria admits to herself that she has a worshipful attitude towards Hugh. Why would she worship him?

What does she mean?

11. Elizabeth is Victoria's best friend, but they cannot talk about Hugh. Why?



Have you had two best friends who did not like each other? How did you handle the situation?

12. How does the friendship between Victoria and Elizabeth change when Elizabeth starts dating Frank Wilson?

Why?

13. When Victoria's dad died, she lost someone very important in her life.

She does not want Lawrence Grady to take his place. How would you advise Victoria to act toward him now that she knows her mother intends to marry him?

14. When the drama club demolishes Victoria's play, how does Elizabeth comfort her? Do you think she did the right thing? Explain your answer.

15. Ma says that Victoria's play is Hugh's dream, not Victoria's, and that Tory only went along with Hugh because she was afraid he would not like her. Why would anyone behave that way just to get someone to like him or her?

16. Victoria finally realizes she is suffering but does not know why. Why do you think she is suffering?

17. Near the end of the story Elizabeth, Frank, Tom, and Victoria endanger their lives by going to the top of the mountain in Frank's car. Tom and Tory talk about their fears when she visits Tom in the hospital. Is being afraid a terrible, disgusting thing? Are we not all afraid sometimes? What scares you? What do you do with that fear?

18. The relationship between Hugh and Tory seems to be platonic rather than romantic. What does this mean?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Victoria's mother smokes. Victoria and her Uncle Phil both try to get her to stop. Research the effects of smoking and second hand smoke on the human body. Write a report about your findings.

2. In Chapter 3, Hugh and two of his friends visit Tory. The guys discuss a variety of topics involving war, why human beings kill each other, life on other planets, and religion. Do you and your friends have such discussions?

How do you feel during such discussions? Tell how you think Tory feels during their discussion, especially since she is not included.

3. When summer vacation starts, Victoria and her best friend, Elizabeth, are unable to find summer jobs, so they start their own play group to care for young children in the mornings. Write an ad for the newspaper that they might use for their new venture.

4. If you could start your own summer business, what would it be and how would you start it? Formulate such a plan. Plan a logo for your business.

5. Elizabeth feels her home life is so difficult that she plans to run away. As her friend, write a letter to persuade her not to run away and give her some advice for dealing with her mother.

6. Holidays are difficult for people who have lost loved ones. Make a tape recording, pretending it is a phone call to Tory, and talk to her about what she might do to ease the pain of Thanksgiving without her father.

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Related Titles

Fox writes about absent fathers in *The Moonlight Man*, where Catherine's father is absent from the family because of divorce; in *How Many Miles to Babylon?* where ten-year-old James Douglas learns to survive without father or mother; and in *Blowfish Live in the Sea*, where Ben lives with his mother and stepfather, wondering about his own father's need for him.



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