

P.S. Longer Letter Later Short Guide

P.S. Longer Letter Later by Paula Danziger

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

P.S. Longer Letter Later Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	9
Topics for Discussion.....	12
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	13
For Further Reference.....	14
Related Titles.....	16
Copyright Information.....	17

Overview

P.S. Longer Letter Later is a novel written in letters, depicting the friendship between twelve-year-old pen pals. Paula Danziger and Ann Martin, as authors, portray Tara and Elizabeth. Tara (portrayed by Danziger) has moved to another town, but the two girls maintain their relationship through letters and continue to share their thoughts and feelings. Tara and Elizabeth are compatible, but different in many ways. Tara is outspoken and free spirited and Elizabeth is shy and reserved. Tara comes from young parents with little money or assets and Elizabeth comes from older, stable, wealthy parents. During the course of the novel, however, the girls' situations change. Each of them struggles with problems as they learn to adjust to life without each other, to cope with the pains of growing up, and to make sense of the changing events within their households. A reviewer for Publisher's Weekly calls the book "a celebration of friendship." Through the girls' correspondence, Danziger and Martin create a poignant, realistic novel that chronicles the joys and pains of adolescence.

About the Author

Paula Danziger was born on August 18, 1944 in Washington D.C. and was raised in New York. She wanted to be a writer as early as second grade, but became a teacher first, and worked teaching high school, junior high school, and college. Danziger studied to be a teacher at Montclair State College and graduated in 1967. It was in graduate school that Danziger wrote her first novel, *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*, which became a best-seller and endeared her to young adult readers. Eventually she chose writing over teaching, and dedicated herself to her writing full-time. Danziger remains active traveling around the country giving lectures and talking to school groups.

In part because she bases her stories on her own life experiences, particularly as a teacher, Danziger succeeds in portraying adolescent life realistically, and with empathy and humor. She deals with common difficulties young teenagers face growing up, such as the struggle for self-acceptance, problems with friendships and boyfriends, and the pain of dealing with difficult family situations. Today, Danziger has a long list of titles to her credit and has won multiple awards, including the Parents' Choice Award, the Children's Book Council Award, the IRA-CBC Children's Choice Award, and the California Young Readers Medal. She has a home in London where she is a guest contributor and host of a segment on books for children on the BBC's "Live and Kicking," and has become one of today's most popular novelists for young adults.

Ann Mathews Martin was born on August 12, 1955 in Princeton, New Jersey.

She, too, was a schoolteacher before becoming a writer, and has worked in the book publishing industry as an editorial assistant, a copywriter, an associate editor, and an editor. Martin has been a freelance writer and editor since 1985, and today is one of the most prolific best-selling novelists for young adults. She says that she has loved to write since childhood, and she took creative writing classes at a young age. Like Danziger, Martin injects humor into her writing but she touches on serious themes such as coping with physical disabilities and dealing with divorce. Martin says that she draws on her excellent memory to reach into the past and weave memorable personal experiences into her novels.

Martin is dedicated to her writing, producing one or two novels a month. She is perhaps most noted for the popular "Baby Sitter's Club" series and its spin-offs, twenty million copies of which are in print today.

Recently Martin has begun a new series written in diary format, called "The California Diaries," starring Dawn of the Babysitter's Club as the main character.

Some of Martin's books have been translated to foreign languages and various "Baby Sitters Club" books have been produced as television programs, board games, and videos. Martin channels much of her money into community services and into the Ann M. Martin Foundation, established to help children and homeless people and to fund education and literacy programs.

Setting

The novel consists solely of letters and spans the course of seventh grade, a difficult time for both Tara and Elizabeth, particularly because they are apart from each other and can rarely communicate by telephone. Tara has moved to Ohio and is adjusting to life in a new school. Elizabeth is adjusting to life in her old school without Tara to help her through the aches and pains of her newly tumultuous home life.

Danziger says she likes to write about school settings because all teens can relate to them. Tara speaks to Elizabeth about the different groups or cliques in her school and the girls share stories of their school experiences. But the home setting plays a large part in the novel, too. Elizabeth lives in a large, expensive house during the first part of the novel, then she moves into a small apartment after their family loses their money. Tara has always lived in a small place, as her parents are just beginning to save money to buy a house. The authors use the girls' home settings to contrast their socioeconomic status and to help define their differences as characters.



Social Sensitivity

Tara and Elizabeth come from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and Danziger and Martin make it a point to express that these differences are not a barrier to their friendship. It is never clear why Elizabeth's father dislikes Tara, but we have to wonder whether his hostility toward her stems from her lower socioeconomic status or from Tara's rather unconventional ways. But it is Elizabeth's father's character that comes into question. We find out that he was never able to save money, relies on alcohol to escape from his financial problems, and deserts his family, leaving his wife and children to struggle with these problems alone. So Elizabeth is left to reevaluate her perceptions of him.

Elizabeth is also forced to reevaluate her perceptions of her mother. Elizabeth is proud of her mother when she takes charge of her life and gets a job to support the family. The strength of this woman is inspirational to Elizabeth, and she emerges from the ordeal feeling positive and empowered. Danziger and Martin clearly seem to be giving young girls the message that women are strong.

They are capable of pulling their lives together, tapping their strengths, and doing what is necessary to get themselves back on track when things go wrong. Once Elizabeth realizes this, she is able to accept that their lifestyle will change, and she can handle it with maturity. Not that Danziger and Martin intentionally criticize men, but in this situation, the woman proves to be a source of strength and the man a model of weakness.

Tara's mother also proves to be a source of strength. Despite the fact that this woman had her daughter at the age of seventeen, she accepts responsibility, pulls her life together, and acts as a loving, available, communicative mother. Elizabeth turns to her for support. Tara trusts her opinions. This woman may have not been ready for motherhood as a teenager, but she rose to the occasion. Then she waited to have another baby until she was older, more experienced and stable, and more confident in her parenting ability.

Danziger and Martin succeed in showing empathy and sympathy for young adult problems, and they inject humor into their dialogue to make these problems seem surmountable. As mentioned previously, Danziger has been criticized for making light of serious situations, but teens do get the message that they can overcome serious difficulties. They learn that it is okay to have problems and to share their feelings about them. In this novel, Danziger and Martin cover two of the most prevalent challenges young people face today: moving from close friends and familiar surroundings and dealing with divorce. These situations trigger strong emotions and introduce major changes, and the friendship between Tara and Elizabeth weathers both.

It becomes clear as the girls share their thoughts and concerns, that communication makes coping with change much easier.



Literary Qualities

Biographical information written about Danziger and Martin reveals that their personalities are much like the personalities of the girls they portray. It appears that developing a voice to connect to their characters came easily for both writers, then the plot simply fell into place. The first-person narrative flows easily, and the authors have no problem creating strong voices that readers can easily distinguish. Perhaps because of the spontaneity of the character's interchange, they are able to carry the plot and introduce the various plot twists effectively.

Suspension builds as the girls' letters get more serious and their lives and their friendship threaten to explode.

The spontaneous dialogue allows Danziger and Martin to develop a realistic account of a friendship between two adolescent girls.

The authors incorporate their individual styles to create two contrasting personalities, and the letter format allows Tara and Elizabeth to define the characteristics of other people in their lives in their own words. Readers come to know the girls' parents even though these characters never speak. It is true that we only see the parents through the eyes of their children, but this allows Danziger and Martin to stress the confusion the girls feel about their relationships. The letter format also helps the authors to clarify the intensity of the girls' feelings. Letters give the authors an advantage in a way, because they know that the girls writing the letters have the opportunity to think through their thoughts more clearly than they could if they were speaking. Yet the letters are conversational and incorporate typical teenage expressions.

It is unclear whether Danziger and Martin intentionally use irony as a literary device, but certainly the adults in the novel act in ways that seem inconsistent with their images. Elizabeth's father, cast in the role of successful breadwinner, presumably acts stable and responsible but turns out to be the most irresponsible adult of all. Elizabeth's mother, who has always assumed a passive role in the family, turns out to be the one capable of taking charge and pulling it together when things get rough. Tara's parents, who were young and not emotionally prepared to have children when they did, rise to the occasion and prove capable of providing for Tara's emotional needs.

Their carefree and rather unstructured lifestyle does not, as it would be easy to assume, lead them to act irresponsibly.

The authors tell their story through the protagonists' viewpoints, alternating between voices to create lively dialogue. Distinct characters emerge early in the novel as Danziger and Martin breathe life into their letters to create two vibrant individuals who appear amazingly real. Their conversations are animated and reveal familiar teen emotions. The authors have said that they began this novel by beginning to write their own letters to each other in the voices of Tara and Elizabeth. In the beginning, the writers had only a basic knowledge of the plot, then developed characters strong

enough to propel the story to its conclusion. The story moves through a linear plot and letters are the only style of narration the authors use to present a situation, introduce a series of conflicts, and arrive at a resolution.



Themes and Characters

Elizabeth and Tara are opposites in many ways. Tara is outgoing and impulsive, and she wears unconventional clothes and streaks her hair purple. Elizabeth is shy and reserved and prefers jeans and loafers to anything chic. Tara has young, free-spirited parents who are just learning to become responsible adults and earn a steady income, and Elizabeth has older, upper-middleclass parents who make enough money to hire maids and gardeners and live in a sixhundred-thousand-dollar house. Early on in the novel, Tara appears to have a rather unstable home life and Elizabeth appears to have security and stability. Then the girls undergo a reversal of fortunes. Over the course of the novel, the girls' situations change drastically, and by the end of the story, the authors have defined the nature of true friendship.

The girls remain close despite their differences because they continue to show each other respect, kindness, empathy, and genuine concern for each other's happiness. These similarities far outshine their differences. Yet the contrasts in the girls' lives move beyond their personalities and socioeconomic status as these characters begin to deal with their reversal of fortunes.

Both girls' lives change significantly during the course of the novel, and the authors successfully chronicle their characters' responses to the changes. No conversations take place in the novel except between Tara and Elizabeth, yet through their letters, much is revealed about their relationships with other people. We come to understand their relationships with others because the authors so successfully express their characters' feelings. The only other character in the novel who has an active voice at any point is Tara's mother, who writes to Elizabeth to express her concerns and give her support when Elizabeth experiences hardship.

Tara and Elizabeth share a special kind of friendship and they manage to remain close despite the distance between them.

These girls love each other and trust each other, yet they have the typical arguments best friends have in seventh grade. Their relationship begins to dissolve when the girls become volatile because of their tense home situations and they exchange angry words. Tara's frustration at not knowing how to help Elizabeth understand her father increases the tension. But neither long distance, nor petty arguments, nor angry words over sensitive issues undermines their friendship. They use each other as sounding boards, testing their own actions and reactions to life's complexities. Readers recognize much of what transpires between Tara and Elizabeth from the close friendships in their own lives. The authors make it clear that close friendships, like any longterm relationships, involve ups and downs, pains and joys. They convey the message that friendships are not always easy, but if two people respect and genuinely care about each other, they can resolve their problems together.

Some of the difficulties the girls face in the novel are typical adolescent problems that arise in school situations everywhere.



Tara worries about making friends in her new school, for instance, and Elizabeth worries about navigating through her old school without Tara. They both discuss situations that arise with boys. But some of the problems the girls face are serious and disturbing. Change in itself can be disturbing for young teenagers, and having a best friend suddenly move miles away is a big adjustment. The girls must soon make other adjustments to situations within their families. Elizabeth becomes disillusioned by her father's irresponsible behavior, and Tara becomes worried when she sees her parents settling into patterns that feel unfamiliar.

Both of these girls experience rude awakenings when they recognize that things are not always as they seem and change is inevitable and not always positive.

The authors underscore the difference in the girls' lives from the start of the novel.

Before Tara moved away, Elizabeth's life was always predictable, and she always felt that her family's financial situation was stable and her parents had a good, solid relationship. Then her parents' finances and their relationship disintegrate. Her father loses his job and abandons his family. Elizabeth knows there are problems even before her father leaves, but she can not positively identify them. Her fear escalates as her parents continue to suffer, but neglect to tell Elizabeth the full story. She expresses her concern and her confusion to Tara, and the girls try to analyze the situation together.

Although Elizabeth's life was stable before these changes occurred, Tara's life was rather chaotic. Tara's parents begin to settle down just as Elizabeth's stability begins to crumble. Tara's parents begin to act more responsibly, set household rules, and make plans to have a baby. It becomes clear early in the novel that Danziger and Martin intend to make change a primary theme. As adolescents, Tara and Elizabeth are in a natural state of change, but the events that turn their homes inside out make the passage from childhood to adulthood particularly difficult.

As the girls progress through the passage, they struggle with conflicting emotions and their relationship becomes volatile. So not only do the girls' lives change, but their friendship changes as well. What Tara and Elizabeth appear to fear most is that their relationship could die as they each establish new friends and lives in different cities. As Tara and Elizabeth share their joys and hardships in their letters, the process of navigating through their lives seems to parallel the process of navigating through their friendship. In both cases, the girls' emotions evolve through the stages of contentment, confusion, disillusionment, and renewal. They undergo tests of loyalty, strength, and perseverance in both their home situations and in their relationship with each other. The story begins with the girls' physical separation and ends with their emotional union. The conflicts in their lives begin with the fracture of set patterns and end with a rebirth of security and selfconfidence.

Tara and Elizabeth learn how to cope with their problems by giving each other sympathy and support. But they also learn how to cope with their problems by observing their parents' methods of coping with them. When times get rough in Elizabeth's house, her father turns to alcohol and abandons his family, while her mother takes action to solve



the problem rather than retreat from it. She gets a job for the first time and takes over the role of breadwinner. Elizabeth gains a new kind of respect for her mother when she witnesses this. As a result, Elizabeth quite naturally follows suit and settles rather comfortably into her small apartment, learns how to cook, and tries to act maturely and help her little sister through this confusing time.

Danziger and Martin deal with the issue of parenting in the novel, as the actions of the parents teach Tara and Elizabeth lessons in responsibility. Tara's family struggles with money, but her mother is communicative with her daughter and with Elizabeth and is sensitive to their needs. Perhaps, in part, being such a young mother led to her sensitivity, but Tara's mother also appears to be naturally empathetic and sympathetic.

Elizabeth has a much easier time talking to Tara's mother about her problems than she does talking to her own mother. An examination of Tara's relationship with her mother and Elizabeth's relationship with hers forces the issue of what is important in life—possessing material things or the freedom to express feelings. This applies to the relationship between Tara and Elizabeth, too. It does not matter that one is rich and one is poor, or that one is shy and one is outgoing.

What matters is that they respect each other as individuals and take the time to communicate with each other.

Danziger is often criticized for offering simple solutions to complex problems. Her books are humorous and upbeat, yet she often deals with disturbing issues; Elizabeth's father resorts to alcoholism to cope and abandons his family, leaving them bankrupt. But the authors do not seem to be offering any simple solutions to these problems; they seem to be stressing that people can tap into their own strengths and survive most difficulties. By the end of the novel, the girls have navigated through their hardships, dealt effectively with the rifts that occurred in their friendship, and emerged as stronger people and better friends.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why do you think Tara is so upset about her new baby brother or sister?
2. What lessons do Tara and Elizabeth learn about responsibility?
3. How does Elizabeth react when she learns that her father is leaving?
4. What lessons does Elizabeth learn from her mother?
5. Why do you think Elizabeth's father is so hostile to Tara?
6. The novel clearly outlines the differences in the girls' personalities. What personality traits do they have in common?
7. Think about the disagreements the girls have. Do they serve a purpose?
8. How do you feel about Tara's reaction to Elizabeth's problems? Do you think Elizabeth was justified in getting angry about Tara's hostility toward Elizabeth's father?
9. Why do you think the girls' relationship nearly deteriorated?
10. Contrast Tara's relationship with her parents with Elizabeth's relationship with hers.
11. Write a character analysis of Elizabeth's father. Based on your observations, how do you think he will act in the future? Will he resurface and act more responsibly?
12. Discuss the theme of change the authors address in the novel. What kind of changes do the girls experience in their lives?
13. Discuss the ways each of the characters in the book exhibit strength.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Do you know anyone whose parents are divorced? How do you think it affects their family? Their friendships?

2. Write a character analysis of either Tara or Elizabeth and explain what you believe influenced them to think and act the way they do.

3. Analyze the arguments the girls have in their letters and explain what you believe causes their angry reactions.

4. Research the problem of alcoholism in the United States. How does it relate to divorce? Financial problems? How does it affect families? What else does it affect?

5. Research school culture. What's it like being new to a school? How do some individuals try to fit in? Talk about the various groups and cliques in schools.

Compare American schools with schools, say, in Europe or India or China. How are they different?

6. In our present society a lot of mothers are working. Discuss how this changes the family environment. How does this impact the mother-daughter relationship? What about the other relationships in the family? The financial situation? What about the mothers themselves?

7. Write a short story in a series of letters between you and an "imaginary friend."

Give your characters strong voices, allow them to speak with clarity and emotion, and develop a plot from there.

8. Based on the relationships in the novel and the problems that arise, write a paper on the importance of communication.



For Further Reference

Authors and Artists for Young Adults, vol. 4.

Detroit, Gale, 1990. A biographical essay about Paula Danziger.

Children's Books and Their Creators. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995. Contains information about Ann M. Martin.

Children's Literature Review, vol. 20. Detroit: Gale, 1990. Contains information about Paula Danziger's books.

Comerford, Lynda Drill Lynda. "A True Test of Friendship: Epistolary Fiction Written by Ann M. Martin and Paula Danziger."

Publishers Weekly (March 9, 1998): 26.

An article about the challenges of coauthoring books.

Contemporary Authors, vol. 115. Detroit: Gale, 1985. A biographical essay detailing Paula Danziger's life and work.

Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series, vol. 32. Detroit: Gale, 1991. A biographical essay detailing Ann M. Martin's life and work.

Contemporary Literary Criticism, vol. 21.

Detroit: Gale, 1982. A compilation of reviews relating to Paula Danziger's work.

Elders, Ann. Review of P.S. Longer Letter Later. School Library Journal (July 1999): 54.

Koertge, Ron. "Please Mr. Postman." New York Times Book Review (May 17, 1998): 27. A review of P. S. Longer Letter Later.

Krull, Kathleen. Presenting Paula Danziger.

New York: Twayne, 1995. An in-depth look at Paula Danziger and her writing.

Nilsen, Alleen Pace and Kenneth L. Donelson.

Literature for Today's Young Adults. Second edition. Scott, Foresman, 1985. Contains a discussion of Paula Danziger's books.

The One Hundred Most Popular Young Adult Authors. Englewood, CO: libraries Unlimited, 1996. Discusses Ann M. Martin.

Review of P.S. Longer Letter Later. Publishers Weekly (June 7, 1999): 53.



Rochman, Hazel. Review of P.S. Longer Letter Later. Booklist (June 1,1998): 1765.

Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature, 1975-1991.

Detroit: Gale, 1992. An essay about Ann M. Martin's work.

Something about the Author, vol.70. Detroit: Gale, 1993. A biographical essay about Ann M. Martin and her books.

Something about the Author, vol. 102. Detroit: Gale, 1999. A biographical essay about Paula Danziger and her writing.

Steinberg, Renee. Review of P. S. Longer Letter Later. School Library Journal (May 1998): 141.

Twentieth-Century Young Adult Writers. First edition. Detroit: St. James Press, 1994. An essay about Paula Danziger's life.

Related Titles

In the sequel to P.S. Longer Letter Later entitled Snail Mail No More, Tara and Elizabeth continue their correspondence through e-mail. The girls are in eighth grade now, and their lives are changing once again.

Tara's mother is pregnant, and Elizabeth's father has returned and is causing problems in his family's lives. Again, this is an analysis of friendship, as the girls share their joys and troubles and navigate through the ups and downs of life.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996