

Pay as You Exit Short Guide

Pay as You Exit by Katie Goldman

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Overview

Pay as You Exit examines, realistically and sensitively, a high school girl's first sexual experience with a moody twenty-two-year-old man and the resulting effects upon her and upon her relationship with her mother. Sarah gives in to the pressure put on her by the older but less mature Dane, and the novel shows that sex may be experienced very differently by an adult male and by an adolescent female, especially when the two are temperamentally mismatched. Even more significantly, the novel develops the importance of a healthy, trusting relationship between a mother and daughter, and how that bond can be strengthened through adversity. Furthermore, the novel shows that parents' concerns about their children's choice of dating partners can be justified, but it does not preach the infallibility of parental judgment, for the mother, Joan, makes a similar mistake in her own love life. The characters of Sarah, Dane, and Joan are all portrayed believably, and the sexual material is handled frankly yet tastefully. Finally, the novel conveys considerable emotion without becoming melodramatic.

About the Author

Katie Goldman was born in New York City in 1960 and grew up in Los Angeles, where she attended public schools, skipping one grade. As a child, she was influenced by her mother, Susan Goldman Rubin, who has published several books, including two novels for young adults. Rubin bought her children books regularly and encouraged them to develop the library habit.

Thanks to this encouragement, Goldman was always a great reader. She also showed an early interest in writing: after being heartbroken over the ending of *Dr. Doolittle*, she wrote an additional chapter to provide a more satisfying conclusion. In high school, she took creative writing classes, where her short stories always came out reading more like first chapters of novels.

After high school, she chose to attend the University of California at Santa Cruz because that institution's loosely structured curriculum allowed her to pursue her interest in writing novels.

Goldman wrote her first, highly autobiographical novel, *In the Wings*, while she was a college sophomore.

She chose to write a book for young adults because, being only eighteen years old herself, it was the genre with which she was most familiar. She knew how to structure such novels from having read a large number of them as a teenager, so her writing technique developed in large part from her reading experiences.

During her junior year, Goldman wrote *Pay as You Exit*, and the following year, she published *In the Wings* (1983). That same year, while Goldman was working full time, Dial Books purchased *Pay as You Exit*, which came out in 1985. Goldman's writing pace slowed during the next five years because of her marriage to writer/editor Norman Kolpas and the birth of their first child. She has recently completed her first, as-yet-unpublished adult novel a love story set against the backdrop of the computer industry in San Jose's Silicon Valley. Although this book features adult characters, Goldman sees no stylistic difference between it and her first two novels, and she may write for young adults again.

Setting

The story takes place in present-day Santa Monica, California, an area where high school students like Sarah enjoy sunny beaches, movies, rollerskating, Disneyland, and other "healthy" settings and activities. Sarah shares all these with Dane during the early development of their relationship. It is only after she begins to spend time in his shabby apartment, with its bare, transient look that contrasts sharply with her own home, that her disillusionment begins.

Although the beach area of Southern California is often depicted in literature as an artificial environment, for Sarah it represents vitality and reality, whereas she perceives her lover's depressing and claustrophobic flat as an alien environment that adds to her growing sense of discomfort with the melancholy Dane.

Social Sensitivity

The most important social issue discussed in the book, teen-age sex, is handled responsibly by Goldman.

When Sarah decides to sleep with Dane, after weighing the pros and cons, she and her friend Angie go together to the Women's Health Collective to get a diaphragm. This scene, which includes a description of a pelvic exam, could serve to inform young readers, showing them that serious choices are required of those who wish to become sexually active.

The actual lovemaking scene between Sarah and Dane, which is preceded by Sarah's comical struggle to insert the diaphragm, is described realistically but without titillation. In fact, Sarah feels little except pain during intercourse, showing that sex can be more trial than bliss for someone not ready for it, especially if the partner is only interested in his or her satisfaction. Sarah even recognizes that it was not until she found herself in an adult situation that she realized she was not yet an adult.

Sarah is, however, able to confess her deceit and unwise behavior to her mother, who, although disappointed that her worst fears have been realized, can still empathize with Sarah, especially in view of her own romantic misadventures. This understanding sends a positive message to readers about the importance of communicating with a parent. In short, Goldman presents a balanced view of sex between a teenager and an "older" man, without moralizing or giving blanket approval. Her purpose is not to whet the appetite but to satisfy the curiosity of high schoolaged girls faced with the same dilemma as Sarah.

Literary Qualities

Although *Pay as You Exit* is a novel about a high school girl written by a woman barely out of her teens, the writing shows considerable poise and *Pay as You Exit* 3803 maturity. At the same time, the authentic voice of an intelligent teen-ager comes through, not the voice of an experienced woman writing about her adolescence in retrospect. As a result, an adult can enjoy this novel as a window into the realistic world of a seventeen-year-old in the 1980s, and teens can find a clear articulation of some of their most important concerns about reaching maturity.

The first-person narrator freely discloses her feelings throughout the novel; yet even during Sarah's moments of despair, the prose never lapses into maudlin excess. Goldman trusts the situation and her simple descriptive words to convey the emotion of the moment. Throughout the novel, the author creates scenes that bring to the reader roller rinks, boring high school lectures, prom preparations, and other situations that advance the plot and develop characters effectively.

Although the story is generally told in a straightforward manner, a few subtle symbols do emerge. For example, during one date, Dane takes Sarah to Los Angeles International Airport to watch the planes land. The scene is significant because it occurs at a time when lovestruck Sarah is being brought back down to Earth: she thinks that she has lost her friendship with Bob, and her relationship with Dane is becoming more uncomfortable. And to the questioning reader, the fact that Dane owns a "pickup" might indicate his attitude toward Sarah.

In another episode, Bob invites Sarah to an all-night Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers film festival, an appropriate choice of movie genre in that these films were originally created to provide an escape for Depression-era moviegoers. Indeed, Bob is creating his own fantasy about his relationship with Sarah, no doubt identifying with the common man (but most uncommon dancer!), Fred Astaire. The film fest turns out to be a ruse, for Sarah learns that Bob's real plan is to take her to the prom, where he hopes to turn fantasy into reality. Bob hopes that Sarah will repay his help with her chemistry studies by acting on the "chemistry" that he perceives between them.

Additional symbols emerge at the Sunrise Productions Studio, where Joan is working with Tripp on a Disneyesque film called *Korkus the Seal*. Joan seems at times to be following Tripp around like a trained seal, performing 3804 *Pay as You Exit* tricks for a reward. Furthermore, repeated references to Disneyland are appropriate in that the characters spend a great deal of their time in individualized fantasylands.



Themes and Characters

Pay as You Exit features three main characters and a few others who serve the plot in important ways. Sarah is a bright, mature high school senior who seems to have much going for her, including an active social life, acceptance to a good college, and a solid relationship with her mother, Joan. Joan is intelligent and open, and she generally treats Sarah as an adult. Widowed, she begins dating a co-worker, and although she tries to break up the budding romance between Sarah and Dane, thereby creating a gulf between herself and her daughter, she is unable to see the problems in her own relationship.

Like Joan, Dane is a skillfully drawn character. In contrast to Sarah, who has a loving mother, Dane has not seen his mother since he was five years old, a situation that no doubt contributes to his dour personality and his difficulties in relating to women. At twenty-two, he has already given up on his dream to become an artist and is mired in an unsatisfying job—he seems as dried up spiritually as the Arizona desert in which he grew up. As a result, his physical attraction to Sarah assumes great importance, and he tries to use her to compensate for all the deficiencies in his life. The little we learn about him is enough to allow us to understand the motives for his actions, which show him to be a lonely, self-centered young man who is unable to contribute to Sarah's life.

In addition to these three characters, the novel features three others who play important supporting roles. Angie, Sarah's best friend, provides a sympathetic sounding board for Sarah's dilemma, and she has her own problem—her parents are trying to force her to attend the prestigious University of Southern California instead of her school of choice, the Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara. Angie's parents oppose her choice because they believe that her interest in photography is a passing whim. Unfortunately, the reader never finds out if this is true or not. Also, because her problem is resolved suddenly as a quickly tied up loose end, Angie's parental conflict does not complement Sarah's as well as it might.

Sarah's friend Bob, by contrast, works very well as a supporting character. He cares for Sarah as a person and is everything that Dane is not. He is also the one whom Joan wishes Sarah would date. Although not as socially skilled as Sarah, Bob is not portrayed simply as a nerd but rather as a good-hearted friend whose romantic feelings for Sarah are, unfortunately for him, not reciprocated. It is to Goldman's credit that she does not settle for the pat happy ending of having Sarah discover, after breaking up with Dane, that she has really loved Bob all along.

Joan's love interest, Tripp, is the most unlikable character in the novel.

Although arguably no more selfish than Dane, he appears simply as a man unwilling to commit himself, and his behavior is not even partially explained or excused by a difficult family background. One can see why Joan would initially find him attractive, as they share a professional interest in filmmaking and he seems to care for her. But when he

suddenly backs off, Sarah learns that a forty-year-old can misjudge a lover as completely as a sixteen-year-old can.



Topics for Discussion

1. How would you describe Sarah's relationship with her mother, as compared with Angie's relationship with her parents?
2. How does Sarah's lacking a father affect the story?
3. Why does Sarah's mother try to encourage her daughter to date Bob instead of Dane? What does she not seem to understand?
4. Describe Dane. How do you think he came to have problems relating to women?
5. How does Dane's apartment seem to reflect his personality?
6. Why does Dane seem so reluctant to talk about himself?
7. How might the name Sunrise Productions, the studio where Joan works, be significant?
8. What significance do you see in the fact that Sarah is weak in chemistry and gets help from Bob?
9. The description of Sarah getting dressed for the prom (with her mother's help) is nearly twice as long as the scene of Sarah and Bob at the prom.
How do you explain this apparent imbalance?
10. Discuss the significance of the book's title.
11. Does the novel have a moral? If so, how would you express it?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What similarities do you see between Joan's relationship with Tripp and Sarah's relationship with Dane?

What do these similarities suggest to you?

2. How and why does Sarah deceive her mother? Discuss any shift that occurs in their relationship as a result of Sarah's sleeping with Dane.

3. In what ways does Joan treat Sarah as an adult? As a child? Do you think she is either overly protective or too permissive? Why?

4. Describe the relationship between Angie and Sarah. Do they understand each other's problems? How do they support each other through difficult times?

5. How does Sarah mature during the course of the novel? Examine the changes in her thoughts and actions and then outline a chapter that tells of Sarah's life after she goes on to college.

6. In his final meeting with Sarah, Dane says, "Do you think I haven't been through changes?" What changes do you think he has been through as a result of his relationship with Sarah?

Outline a chapter detailing what you think will happen to Dane after Sarah goes to college.

7. Sarah repeatedly mentions the novel *Mary Barton* (by nineteenth-century writer Elizabeth Gaskell), which she is forcing herself to read for a class. Research the book and report on why you think Sarah might dislike it.

Consider how Gaskell handles moral problems as compared with Sarah.

For Further Reference

Review of *In the Wings*. *Booklist*, (December 15, 1982): 563.

Related Titles

Pay as You Exit shares some similarities with Goldman's previous novel, *In the Wings*. In both works, the teen-aged protagonist alienates a good friend through neglect: in the earlier novel, the main character Jessica is preoccupied with her role in the school play and the breakup of her parents' marriage. The mother's separation from Jessica's father echoes the similar problem faced by the mother in *Pay as You Exit*; her post-divorce dating woes help solidify her bond with her daughter through commiseration.



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