

Peace, O River Short Guide

Peace, O River by Nancy Garden

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Overview

Kate Kincaid, returning to River View, Massachusetts for her junior year in a regional high school, discovers that much has changed since she moved away in the sixth grade: students from affluent River View and working-class Hastings Bay across the river are feuding. The feud heats up when a nuclear waste disposal site is planned for one of the two communities. Kate becomes friends with Pippa Brown, a Hastings Bay girl, and the two begin one-on-one to end the feud and hope that a common adversity, the nuclear waste dump, can bring the warring factions together. Kate's best friend, Jon Westgate, who has tried to stay neutral, becomes embroiled in the feud. Kate's attempts to make peace are often disastrous.

About the Author

Nancy Garden started writing at the age of eight. An adventure story she wrote at age twelve prompted her English teacher to suggest that she become a writer. Along with writing books for children and young adults, she has written for and edited magazines for adults. Her hobbies include raising dogs, gardening, cross-country skiing, and weaving.

Garden earned her B.A. and M.A.

degrees from Columbia University.

Interested in the theater since high school, she has had jobs as an actress and lighting director. She has also taught at all levels, including adults.

Writing was something she felt she could continue to do regardless of what other kind of career she had.

Ideas for her books come from people she has known, places she has been, experiences she has had, although she says that most of the people and places are not recognizable once she has finished writing and rewriting a book.

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, Garden lived in New York City for fifteen years. Like Kate in *Peace, O River*, she has returned from the city to a small town—Carlisle, Massachusetts. This town may be similar to one of the towns in *Peace, O River*; on the dedication page she thanks the Town Moderator for information on the procedures for holding town meetings and the wording of legal documents.

Garden has written more than a dozen books for young adults. *Annie on My Mind* was selected as one of the Best of the Best Books for Young Adults, 1970-1982, and was listed in the *New York Times Parents' Guide to Best Books for Children* in 1988.



Setting

Wealthy River View and less affluent Hastings Bay, towns on opposite sides of a river in present day Massachusetts, are both possible sites for a nuclear waste disposal plant.

The all-pervasive feud between River View and Hastings Bay, is described by Jon when Kate first moves back to River View: "They're supposed to hate us and we're supposed to hate them. . .

It's . . . well, dumb." Less evident when students went to elementary school in their respective towns, the animosity is clear when students from both towns attend the same regional high school.

Whenever anything bad happens in one town, students from the other town are blamed. River View students exhibit a snobbery that clearly puts Hastings Bay students beneath them. The rivalry has existed for as long as people can remember. Jon explains that "it's like some kind of holy war, going so far back people just concentrate on their differences and clash with each other without thinking much about why.

Who knows what the first thing was or who did it?" Even the adults from the two communities find it impossible to form a coalition against the state to fight the nuclear waste plant.



Social Sensitivity

In several places in the book, Kate and other underage persons drink beer, and at one point she is offered a joint which she refuses. Kate does insist on walking when Nick has had too much to drink, but she, too, has been drinking beer. Other significant issues far outweigh this aspect of the book. Even so, the issue of underage drinking could be a topic of discussion. Why does Kate, who is so concerned with doing the right thing, choose to disobey the law?

The issue of conscientious objection may offend some readers, but the book treats the subject in a way that helps readers understand the beliefs of conscientious objectors and the consequences of resisting military service. It raises questions about war in a setting which does not involve war.

Literary Qualities

Garden fully develops her characters, showing both their strengths and flaws. Nick, for example, can be both a boastful, chauvinistic leader and a tender, respectful friend. Pippa, seemingly unafraid of anything, chokes up when discussing her sister's leukemia and withdraws from people completely after an attack that nearly ended in rape. Kate is not perfect and does not always make the wisest choices. The characters are believable, the situations realistic.

Garden uses figures of speech effectively. For example, she justifies Kate's friendship with a girl who has "thoughts that went deeper than the words of the latest popular song."

Kate, herself, is a writer who tries to organize her thoughts in a poem. There are several appropriate quotations from Shakespeare, including a comparison of Kate Kincaid to Kate in *Taming of the Shrew*.



Themes and Characters

Kate Kincaid, nicknamed "Bossy Kate" by family and "Peacemaker" by classmates, makes ending the feud between River View and Hastings Bay a personal crusade. The disastrous results of most of her attempts force her to examine her motives and to look at the effects of her actions on the people around her. Kate becomes aware of some cultural differences between the two towns. To River View students college is a given, an Ivy League college at that; her brother is a freshman at Harvard. Hastings Bay students see themselves as getting jobs following high school; college is a remote possibility for most of them. Kate recognizes some of her own snobbery, especially when she realizes her surprise that Hastings Bay citizens are also concerned about the nuclear waste site.

Jon Westgate, Kate's best friend since they were six, is a pacifist, sometimes referred to as a wimp by other characters. However, he stands firm on his convictions. His friendship with a Hastings Bay boy their freshman year resulted in very cruel treatment from River View classmates and he withdrew from involvement on either side.

He is loyal to Kate and serves as her sounding board and supporter. His efforts to remain neutral in the feud are thwarted when Kate becomes involved; the results are tragic.

Pippa Brown and Kate become friends through a shared interest in running, in spite of the fact that they are from opposite sides of the river and Pippa's brother, Nick, is the leader of Hastings Bay's faction. Nick was the driver of the other car in an accident in which a popular River View girl was killed. Although Nick was not at fault, River View students cannot forgive him. Pippa arranges for Kate to come to dinner so that she can talk to Nick about the feud and enlist his help in ending it. The prospects took good until Pippa is attacked, presumably by a boy from River View.

Both towns have hot-headed characters, ready to fight, unwilling to compromise: Skid from Hastings Bay and Rab from River View. Kate's older brother, Dan, falls victim to an attack by someone who warns him that his sister should not mess around with Hastings Bay people.

Kate's mother, raised as a Quaker, is a conscientious objector. Kate, too, is a pacifist who opposes war. In several places in the book there are discussions about whether or not war actually ever settles anything. Her eighteen-year-old brother, Dan, struggles with his sense of duty in registering for the draft because it is the law versus doing something he does not believe in—signing up to fight if there is a war. Kate sees inconsistency in Dan when he suggests that she learn to fight because she might need to defend herself. Sixteen-year-old Jon states firmly that he will not sign up for the draft when he turns eighteen. Kate is thankful that as a girl she will not have to make that decision, because women are not required to register for the draft. Put to the test would her pacifism overcome her claustrophobic fear of jail?



When Kate's mother questions whether achieving the goal of making peace between the two towns is worth sacrificing friends and family, Kate feels that her mother has compromised her principles. She calls her mother a traitor and there is an uneasiness between them. Her mother explains that being a pacifist is not always easy or uncomplicated. Kate begins to learn some grownup lessons and realizes that she can still look up to her parents, even when they are not as ideal as she had once thought they were.



Topics for Discussion

1. In what ways are the Hastings Bay and River View kids different? How are they alike? Is loyalty to your own town a form of snobbery?
2. Is the feud between the two towns senseless or is there a real basis for it?
3. Is it possible to break the chain of "inherited hate" as in civil or religious wars that have gone on for generations, where children inherit a war started by their ancestors?
4. Are the police from both towns insensitive and unfair to the kids from the other town, or are their suspicions justified?
5. Making peace becomes Kate's personal crusade. Why? Why is this important to her even before her brother is beaten?
6. Is it possible to remain neutral or uninvolved in a feud as Jon tried to do? What are the consequences of not getting involved?
7. The term "traitor" is used many times in the book. Jon is branded as a traitor by Rab for making friends with a Hastings Bay boy. Is he a traitor? Is Kate a traitor to her friends and family? Is Kate's mother a traitor to her pacifist beliefs?
8. Kate is accused of sacrificing friends and family to achieve her goals.

What is the extent of her responsibility for what happens to Jon at the end of the book?

9. Why was Kate surprised that Hastings Bay is also concerned about nuclear waste disposal? Does this reflect her view of Hastings Bay? Does she have a prejudice she does not admit?
10. Very few high school students attend the town meeting to discuss the site for the nuclear waste plant. Should high school students become involved in community affairs? Why or why not?
11. Pippa points out to Kate that while neither site is suitable in her mind for a nuclear waste dump, if forced to make a choice she would fight to keep it out of her town. Is it possible to make a decision such as this without being influenced by loyalty to one's own family and community?
12. Can you explain Nick's popularity? Why do others look up to him and follow his lead?
13. Nick says that Kate's mother is a pacifist because she is a woman, that "women don't understand fighting." Is fighting a "male thing?" Are women predisposed to be peacemakers?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research nuclear waste disposal.

Are there safe ways to handle it? What are the dangers? Are the benefits of nuclear power, medicine, and scientific experimentation worth the potential hazards?

2. Propose ways for students to become involved in significant political issues of concern to your community.

3. Governments can exercise the "right of eminent domain" to take property needed for public or government uses, such as nuclear waste plants, roads, and parks. Find out whether or not this right has been used in your community and for what purpose. Did the citizens protest? What were the results?

4. What happens to persons who are conscientious objectors? Are they drafted? If so, must they fight in a war?

What happened to "draft dodgers" who fled to Canada in protest against the War in Vietnam?

5. How do you know when you are in love? What is the difference between "being in love and loving," a question Kate asks herself. Interview males and females of different age groups and compare and contrast their answers.

6. Kate and Pippa discuss what they want in life. What are your dreams for your life?

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*. Vol. 12. Detroit: Gale Research, 1977. Contains a biography of Nancy Garden with interesting details about her childhood.

"Garden, Nancy." In *The Young Reader's Companion*. Edited by Gorton Carruth. New Providence, NJ: R. R. Bowker, 1993: 199. A short summary of Garden's publications for children.

Review. *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* 39 (April 1986): 147.

Likes "the double indictment of hostility."

Rosenberg, Merri. Review. *New York Times Book Review* (March 2, 1986): 29. Calls *Peace, ORiver* an "unrelievedly message-driven novel."

Related Titles

In the fantasy *The Door Between*, Melissa is caught between Celtic superstition and the modern world. She must visit the "Otherworld" in order to save her present-day town of Four Corners.

Award-winning *Annie on My Mind* is a sensitive, believable story of a college freshman who reflects on the previous year when she met and fell in love with Annie. This romance deals with another controversial subject, the feelings of homosexuality.

Garden became interested in vampires while doing summer theater, and wrote a series of four books on the occult for Lippencott's "Weird and Horrible Library": *Devils and Demons*, *Vampires, Werewolves, and Witches*. She also wrote *Prisoner of Vampires* (1986) and *My Sister the Vampire* (1992). A series of monster hunter mysteries for audiences in grades four to six includes *Mystery of the Night Raiders* (1987), *Mystery of the Midnight Menace* (1988), and *Mystery of the Secret Marks* (1989).

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