

# Permanent Connections Short Guide

## Permanent Connections by Sue Ellen Bridgers

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## Overview

Sue Ellen Bridgers knows a great deal about people and how they feel and act. Readers care about her characters because they are believable and interesting and because a Bridgers novel explains the situations the characters face in such a way that the readers have a better understanding of their own lives. Bridgers's novels might also be called a medium for modeling some of the best solutions and happiest endings that can plausibly be expected for the families she writes about. Without compromising her honesty about human nature, she reasonably points out the areas where hope and improvement might be found.

## About the Author

Born in Winterville, North Carolina, in 1942, Sue Ellen Bridgers is a southern writer whose books reflect her knowledge of the various regions of North Carolina and their history and life. Her southern family with long family memories and strong maternal figures provides important sources for her writing in general, and *Permanent Connections* in particular. In "My Life in Fiction," Bridgers discusses the power of the creative imagination and the mystery of why certain memories become fiction and others, perhaps even more obviously source material, are not conscious to her as she develops her stories and characters.

In talking about the writing of *Permanent Connections*, Bridgers mentioned that a friend's description of the onset of agoraphobia had merged with her childhood memories of watching clouds when she came to describe Coralee's illness. She also said that of the characters in the novel, she first recognized that Ginny's character contained something of herself. The conflict of personal ambition and family that is explored in Ginny (and to some extent Davis) is a recurrent Bridgers theme, discussed most uncompromisingly in *Notes for Another Life*. But it should be noted that the sadness and bitterness of Ginny's daughter Ellery also are honestly and sympathetically portrayed in this novel and that her needs are in some ways seriously compromised by her mother's freedom. Although Bridgers is well known for her portrayal of loving maternal figures, she is also sensitive to the situations in which love is not enough.

Bridgers finished her college career at Western Carolina University the same year *Home Before Dark* was published, sixteen years and three children after her freshman year. She lives with her husband in Sylva, North Carolina.

## Setting

Setting is very important to *Permanent Connections*. The main setting of the novel is a farm house six miles from Tyler Mills, North Carolina, in the southern Appalachians. The young adult characters, Rob and Ellery, are both in the mountainous rural area under protest: Rob Dickson has been sent from suburban Montclair, New Jersey, to take care of his injured uncle because the location is too remote and the family too cantankerous to find local help. Ellery Collier is living with her mother, who left a successful banker husband in Charlotte to pursue weaving and her own identity on the mountainside above the Dickson house.

Ellery misses her now-broken home, her friends back in Charlotte, and her music lessons. Both are unhappy outsiders in the region and in school, in a place where everyone else appears to be settled and secure.

Bridgers is too good a novelist to make this in many ways beautiful and idyllic mountain country a simple place to know. It is beautiful, but it is also the setting of both real and imagined dangers: Grandpa easily gets lost and injured; Coralee is afraid to leave her house. Its remoteness facilitates exporting homegrown marijuana to the streets of Indianapolis. The valley retains provincial and stifling attitudes as well as promoting the stability of family ties.

A final location of importance is the parking lot of the Holy Family in the Valley mountain chapel. Visited originally as a good place for a couple to park, it is the scene of Rob's breakup with Ellery, the place to which Rob drives in a thunderstorm when overcome with worry about the legal trouble he may have caused his friend Travis, and, finally, the place he is drawn to before his trial, when with the help of the Episcopalian priest, he re-establishes his identity as an erring, but valued and valuable, person.



# Social Sensitivity

Permanent Connections is, like all of Bridgers's novels, a hopeful book with warm messages about the value of unconditional love and the strength to be found in human relationships. It is the story of the redemption of the main character from a life of slipping down and failure to a sense of wholeness and purpose. Because it is a realistic book, as well as a hopeful book, the characters do a number of things which many young people do but which their parents do not approve of. Leanna and Travis, who have gone together for years, are sexually active in a responsible way. Bridgers conveys this indirectly within the framework of Leanna's uneasy relationship with her mother and her own wistful feeling that in loving Travis she has mortgaged her own future—that she has made her choices too early. But certainly Travis and Leanna have a loving, warm-hearted relationship; they may well be happily married one day.

Travis is a good friend to Rob, the sullen newcomer, from the moment that they meet. A clean-cut athlete with a good sense of humor, Travis makes allowances for Rob's inability to be pleasant and has more faith in Rob than Rob has in himself. Unfortunately, Travis's older brothers are growing large quantities of marijuana on the remote acreage of their tree farm (which their ancestors used for distilling white lightning), so Travis's college career and his ability to court Leanna, a child of a Southern Baptist home, could easily be jeopardized if the narcotics agents find the crop.

Within the novel, it is clear that Rob should not be dabbling in alcohol and drugs. Every drug-clouded memory is a memory of inadequate forgetfulness, bad grades, sleazy associates, and failure to live up to his own expectations.

It is a sign of grace in Rob, however, that he is sick with dread that he may have given Travis's family secret away.

It is his fear that he has talked too carelessly while under the influence of the marijuana that first brings Rob to a sense of his own responsibility for his actions and life. "It wouldn't matter that he hadn't meant to do anything wrong. He could have ruined Travis's life, changed Leanna's future forever.

Without intending to, he would have hurt people he really liked." Rob's sensitivity to the plight of his friend, at a time when he is bristling with hostility toward his own family, leads to his gradual change and more hopeful future.

It is clear that Travis's family is behaving irresponsibly, but the real emphasis in the novel is on the terrible anxiety of being pursued by a law officer who wants information and is willing to terrorize to get it. The deputy sheriff, Gatewood, who tries to make Rob talk, is much more a villain than Travis's family. Rob thinks of passages from the prayer book "your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" when the falsely, sickeningly, genial Gatewood reminds him again and again that the only way he can avoid being sent to prison is to tell him about the location of the



drug crop. Certainly, Bridgers portrays the weeks before the trial date, including the sleepless night that precedes it, with moving conviction.

Finally, some people might object to the religious climax that changes Rob and leads him to different and better relations in his life. However, Rob's religious orientation appears to be like that of many young people of his age.

The priest, whose matter-of-fact acceptance of Rob's delinquency slips past Rob's defenses, uses non-sectarian expressions, advising, "Maybe you should think about prayer as talking to the God in yourself, the holy place within," and "there's nothing you can discover in yourself that God doesn't already know. There's nothing that He doesn't forgive. You would do well to forgive yourself," a point which goes to the heart of Rob's problem of feeling like his family's hopeless failure. Although not every reader is Episcopalian—indeed, Rob's own grandfather thinks everyone who is not Baptist is a heathen—the need for acceptance and love, as well as a sense of worthiness, is so universal that the story can be understood on a psychological level by those who do not perceive it as a spiritual one.



## Literary Qualities

Bridgers's style in this novel is particularly notable in her ability to convey confused states of mind by metaphor, her understanding of power exchanges in conversation, and her use of touch to define the characters' varying relationships. Hugs, slaps on the back, handclasps, the laying of hands on shoulders and arms are a way of measuring the changes that have taken place since characters last saw each other or the resilience of their affection even when it is not verbally acknowledged.

In *Permanent Connections* it is also necessary for Bridgers to convey many of Rob's recollections of earlier times by flashback, because they offer some clues to the person he hides from other people. In his memories of the garden flowers, the few family visits his estranged father ever paid, and fragments of the liturgical services of his youth, we understand what the people around him cannot: that he had a tenderness for his family that their different circumstances and his unhappiness have not changed; that he has a quick empathy for other people's emotions and desires to treat them well, even when he does not; that his feeling that he is not worthy to live in the world can be helped by someone who can convey his value to him in the words of his childhood religion.

As in Bridgers's other novels, music is used to convey information about the characters' states of mind. Rob is a "deadhead," a fan of the popular music groups Grateful Dead and Pink Floyd, but within the novel the sincerity of his interest in Ellery is indicated by the nights he plays classical music from the school library or inquires about her favorite opera records. Although the kinds of music Ellery and Rob prefer are not alike, they are both fond of their choices partly because they distinguish them from other people, and because both kinds of music are often violent and unhappy—music that fits their angry, sad, forsaken states of mind. Ellery listens to as much music about death and betrayal as Rob does, although she has more educated musical tastes. And her flute solos floating down from her bedroom window, which pierce other people with their loneliness, form a counterpoint to the rhythm of her mother's weaving downstairs, "the loom groaned as-it moved, gathering the pattern she had set while she and her daughter wove their hurts into a song devoid of harmony but played together just the same."

Rob and Ellery are also united by their appreciation for poetry. The first words they say to each other are quotations from Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall," Ellery rejects Rob reluctantly with Sylvia Plath's "You have seen me through that black night when the only word I knew was NO," and Rob diagnoses his dream world while awaiting trial, "Much Madness is divinest Sense,—" from the Emily Dickinson paperback he carries as a shield.

Although both are exasperating people to be with, their mutual desire for beauty and attentive alertness to find it tell us that if they had more faith in their futures, if they could deal more successfully with the pain of living, they would have unusually rich lives and an unusually rich friendship. We can also see why both would be betraying their best selves by a thoughtless relationship, though both need simple comforting.





## Themes and Characters

Bridgers's characters in this novel can be seen in two groups. The first consists of the two families of Rob and Ellery, both of which have produced troubled offspring. Ellery's family has split up and Rob's appears picture perfect, but the result has been the same.

Bridgers's exploration of the relations between Ellery and her mother and Rob and his father and grandfather is a careful weighing of the desire for power, the pull of personal needs, and the fundamental affection in each; the equal time and consideration that she gives each point of view explains why her unusually optimistic novel about the possibility that family ties can work and family can be a source of strength is credible and feasible. Fairlee, the injured uncle whom Rob has come to help, has never married. From outside the antagonism of the generational wars around him, he offers perspective and love to both families.

Bridgers's other major concern appears to be the patterns made by the women characters: Ellery and her mother, Ginny; Coralee and Rosalee, Rob's aunts; and Leanna, his teen-aged cousin. Ellery's character is the focus because Ellery's rejection of Rob's desire to have a casual sexual relationship with her is the immediate cause of his trouble with the law. Her assertion of the right not to sacrifice her body and feelings to his misery led Rob to acquire drugs, become arrested, nearly implicate the friend who reluctantly supplied the marijuana, and unwittingly cause his grandfather's serious accident. Since Ellery loves Rob, her standards for their relationship test the boundaries of selflessness and selfishness with which all the women characters are attempting to deal.

Ginny is drawn to Coralee and her agoraphobia (fear of going outside) because, in spite of her much greater sophistication, she sees that they both have been victimized by other people's expectations. Ginny says of her life, "I didn't make a decision all my own until I was almost forty. I went from cleaning my room at home to cleaning a dormitory room to keeping house. You don't grow up that way—you just get better at cleaning. Now I'm trying to do what I need to do for myself, but it's hard. I don't have much experience at it."

Coralee says, "I just thought I'd reach the time when I didn't have to take care of nothing but me . . . I want that feeling one day before I die." Both are drawn to the idea that life has something better to offer them and that they ought to have a chance to make some decisions about how they will spend the rest of it, but both are afraid of failing obligations, being selfish, and not being safe. As Ginny says, "the demons that devour women are all the same," but she manages to get Coralee out onto the porch, helping her to make more decisions and go to more places.

Rosalee and her daughter, Leanna, are foils to Ginny and Ellery, and Leanna's decisions are also a source of anxiety in the book. While Ginny has to live with Ellery's constant attacks because she would not keep Ellery's idea of the family together and found that she had to have time for herself, Rosalee energetically became her own idea



of the traditional mother figure. She fries two chickens and boils a ham before she goes to Sunday school, she runs all the lives in her household, and she is the outspoken advisor to all of her family connections. She has wholeheartedly accepted the idea that woman's place in the family is to take care of every daily aspect of family life.

However, Rosalee has entirely failed to be the nurturing heart of her family.

Although she may, in fact, love her relations, she only annoys them with clutching and criticism until her good offices are entirely forgotten. She is jealous that Ginny got Coralee out of the house, but does not realize that reassurance and love will accomplish what telling Coralee that she was crazy did not. She holds on to her children, not wanting them to leave. She is dissatisfied with the choices that other family members make, and is apparently heading for a nervous breakdown over trying to monitor them. Ginny's daughter, Ellery, has ambition and the ability to be self-assertive, even when it hurts. Leanna, Rosalee's daughter, has many fine qualities, but appears to be in trouble.

Leanna is determined to resist her mother's pressure to remain at home during her college years—she'll work three jobs for a chance to go away—but she is not as successful in escaping her boyfriend Travis. Travis seems to be a wonderful boy, but his love for her is leading her into a future that she has not planned. Accepting a sexual relationship with him as inevitable (although it certainly would be a shock to her mother), she sees Travis's plan for an early wedding, an apartment during college, and happy-ever-after preventing her from experiencing any life other than that she has seen for sixteen years in Tyler Mills. "Travis and I used to argue a lot more than we do now.

I'd just get sick, I mean physically ill, when we had a fight. I decided it wasn't worth it, so I just started giving in."

On the surface, Leanna and Travis are much more sane and good humored than Rob and Ellery, but the more honest, awkward couple may have the brighter future.

Bridgers's work celebrates the nurturing of family and the kind of relationship that rocks the baby, sustains the adult, and cossets the old, but she is honest about the effort the family lifestyle entails and the need to get rewards as well as responsibility from it. Rob begins to heal in the family home that has seen generations of loving concern for family members within its walls, but the arms that will sustain him during the last difficult years of adolescence are the arms of people whom he has come to appreciate as individuals, and who will not give him more tolerance and shelter than he will give them.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Why is Rob so miserable, even though his home is a happy one and he is a smart, good-looking young person?

Cite references in the book that help explain why he is miserable.

2. Is Ellery right about Rob's lack of real interest in her? Why does she draw back from their relationship? Did she do the right thing?

3. Ginny finds it easier to be a helpful person to Rob and Coralee than she does to Ellery. What are the issues that stand between them? What goes wrong in the conversation in Chapter 47?

4. What role does Travis play in the book? Do you think Leanna ought to marry him? If you were Travis, how would you feel about the family business? How does Travis feel about it?

5. Would Rob have changed in New Jersey? Are there some reasons why his change took place in North Carolina?

6. At the beginning of Chapter 61, there is a remarkable passage about Monday morning, the day of Rob's trial, coming into his bedroom. Read the first three paragraphs. Have you had one of these mornings? Are there aspects of this kind of anxiety you would have added to Bridgers's description?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Weaving and sewing, Ginny's and Coralee's occupations in the novel, may tell us more about the people they are or how they define their roles. Look at these references. Why does Coralee make "edges"?

2. There are a great many references to weaving in literature, such as "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver," "The Lady of Shalott," The Odyssey (Penelope), the Greek myth of Arachne, Native American stories about weaving, and the picture book Annie and the Old One. Read another work containing a weaving motif and compare it to this novel.

3. The cover of the paperback edition of Permanent Connections is completely inaccurate in its portrayal of the girl who is probably supposed to be Ellery.

How does Ellery differ from this picture? Why does it make a difference in the novel?

4. Ellery's clothes, hair, and makeup are some indication of her state of mind. Describe her look and some reasons why she chooses it. Note that Rob understands her reasoning.

5. Running becomes important in the last paragraph of the book as Rob runs home. Explain the importance of the running scenes to the novel. Would it be different or would we know less about characters if these scenes had been left out? What is the author's purpose?

6. Rosalee and Leanna both have things kept from them. What don't they know? Why don't their loved ones tell them? Is this an indication of strength or weakness in their characters or relationships?

7. Grandpa is a difficult old man, and increasingly forgetful, but he is a human being. What are Grandpa's strengths and weaknesses as a family member?

8. Rob has a vision of his grandma nurturing the family around the table.

If this role was a good one for his grandmother, and it seems that it was, why does it not seem to have worked for Coralee? For Rosalee? What would make the difference?

9. Describe what you know about the four young characters from the kind of music they like. (See Chapter 38.)

10. Rob's court experience is an interesting and arguably realistic one. How does it contribute to your understanding of the criminal justice system in America?

## For Further Reference

Andrews, Martha. "Music in the Novels of Sue Ellen Bridgers." *The ALAN Review* 18, 1 (Fall 1990): 14-16. A discussion of the use of music to enhance characterization; Andrews's conclusions on *Permanent Connections* are somewhat different from the ones mentioned here and might lead to good discussion. The *ALAN Review* dedicated its whole Fall 1990 volume to Bridgers.

Bridgers, Sue Ellen. "Young Adult Books." *Horn Book* 64,5 (September/October 1988): 660-662. Bridgers explains why her portrayal of parents in young adult fiction may differ in some ways from that of other authors, and discusses the parents in *Permanent Connections*.

———. "Facets." *English Journal* 76 (March 1987): 14. Bridgers writes about her creative process and what she does during the "year off" she plans between her novels.

———. "My Life in Fiction." *The ALAN Review* 18,1 (Fall 1990): 2-5. Important discussion of the relation of memory and imagination in the creative process and the writer's analysis of the roots of her own themes and preoccupations.

———. "A Bridgers Sampler." *The ALAN Review* 18, 1 (Fall 1990): 6-7.

Favorite passages from her novels selected by the author.

Carroll, Pamela Sissi. "Southern Literature for Young Adults: The Novels of Sue Ellen Bridgers." *The ALAN Review* 18,1 (Fall 1990): 10-13. A fourfold definition of what is meant by "Southern literature" and a discussion of those four attitudes and methods in the Bridgers novels.

Christenbury, Leila, and Robert Small.

"From the Editors: A Look at Southern Writer Sue Ellen Bridgers." *The ALAN Review* 18,1 (Fall 1990). An introduction to the special issue on Bridgers, with the thoughtful note that Southern writers, even those who are thought of as exclusively adult authors, are drawn to the use of adolescent protagonists.

Hippie, Ted. "Sue Ellen Bridgers: An Appreciation." *The ALAN Review* 18,1 (Fall 1990): 8-9. Hippie outlines some reasons that Bridgers is a popular writer.

———. *Presenting Sue Ellen Bridgers*.

Boston: Twayne, 1990. Full-length study of Bridgers's life and work.

## Related Titles

Bridgers's novels share some similarities. None of them, for example, is concerned only with the young people in the book; all of them explore the problems and feelings, as well, of the older people. Music is another thread in most of her stories. Bridgers's characters are people who love music, and both the songs and their singing contribute to the theme and characterization of the books.

*Home Before Dark* is a novel about a family that moves from an isolated migrant existence to form bonds with the relatives that the prodigal father left behind and with the village friends of his youth. His fourteen-year-old daughter, Stella, is the main character.

At the beginning of her own experience of romance and courtship, she feels the bond with the family land more deeply than the rest of her family and has the most to learn about the intricacies of the loving ties that transcend this.

In *All Together Now*, Casey, who is twelve, comes to stay the summer with her grandparents while her father is a flyer in the Korean War and her mother is working as a nightclub singer in his absence. The summer sees the marriage and reconciliation of family friends, a serious illness, and the rescue from an institution of her close baseball-pitching friend, Dwayne, a retarded man who also had been a friend of her father when they were boys of twelve together.

*Notes for Another Life* recounts a summer in the life of another set of grandparents and grandchildren, as they try to live with the serious mental illness of the children's father and their mother's determination to live her own professional life without them. Wren's and Kevin's own new relationships are inevitably affected by their background, as Kevin's girlfriend's distancing herself from his serious problems contributes to his suicide attempt and Wren, resenting her mother's ability to be happy without them, realizes that her music might draw her, too, away from her boyfriend, Sam.

*Sarah Will*, which might be considered an adult novel, presents the satisfying interweaving of two families and two generations that occurs when Fate Jessop brings his sixteen-year-old unwed niece, Eva, her baby, and finally her rejected suitor, Michael, to the home of two sisters, Sarah Will and Swanee Hope, whose dead sister was once married to Eva's father. While the older members of the family shelter Eva from having to make decisions before she is ready, their task reclaims the lives and heals the wounds of the older generation.

*Keeping Christina* is set during the rehearsals and performances of a high school production of *Kiss Me, Kate*. The story is experienced by Annie, a privileged and developing character, who takes a new girl, Christina, under her wing so that she can perform in the musical. Already unsettled by the changing roles of her best friends in her life, Annie is bewildered by Christina. Christina is not nice in a world of nice people, but her seamless lies and poverty make her difficult for Annie to denounce or confront. In a

departure from earlier novels, this one sees the adults almost entirely through adolescent eyes.



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## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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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

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