

# Princess Ashley Short Guide

## Princess Ashley by Richard Peck

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## Overview

Starting high school in a new town, Chelsea Olinger has decided to remain strictly anonymous and not get involved with people. Her plan changes dramatically when wealthy, self-assured Ashley Packard decides to become Chelsea's friend. Through her sophomore and junior years Chelsea overlooks Ashley's true colors and motives and is thankful that she has the good fortune to be in high school society's inner circle. Only after a senseless tragedy does Chelsea see her friend for what she really is and come to understand what true friendship means.

## About the Author

Richard Peck was born on April 5, 1934, in Decatur, Illinois. He attended schools in the United States and England, earning a bachelor's degree in English from DePauw University in 1956 and a master's degree in 1959 from Southern Illinois University. He received less formal training, although it was just as important, while traveling among foreign cultures and during his stint in Germany with the U.S.

Army. Before he turned to writing, Peck edited textbooks, poetry, and nonfiction anthologies for young adults and taught school. He would have continued to teach had he not become discouraged with the educational system, the watered-down curriculum, and teaching itself that metamorphosed, as Peck says, into something resembling "psychiatric social work." Instead, he decided to reach young adults through a different medium—the written word.

His experiences in the classroom taught him to listen to young people and understand their concerns. This focus on their needs has given him the ability to touch the hearts and minds of his readers.

His first young adult novel, *Don't Look and It Won't Hurt* (1972) focuses on a young girl who is unmarried, pregnant, and hates the thought of giving up her baby for adoption. His subsequent novels, averaging about one a year, also touch on personal problems of today's youth. Rape, divorce, suicide, teen-age pregnancy, and death are topics in Peck's various realistic novels. His timeless themes of friendship, loneliness, and relationships with peers and family appear in all of his books. Peck does not moralize or preach, he entertains. Yet in each of his young adult novels, someone has to grow up. The paths taken to maturity differ, as does the subject matter, but steps are taken toward responsible adulthood.

Peck received the second School Library Journal Author Achievement Award in 1990. S. E. Hinton was the first recipient in 1989. The award recognizes authors whose books help adolescents understand themselves and their role in society. Many of Peck's young adult novels have received awards and honors. *Princess Ashley* was selected as one of the American Library Association's Best Books for Young Adults in 1987. Two other books also received that honor: *Close Enough to Touch* in 1981 and *Remembering the Good Times* in 1985. The American Library Association's Best Books of the Year distinction has gone to *Representing Super Doll* in 1974; *Are You in the House Alone?* in 1976; and *Ghosts I Have Been* in 1977. *Are You in the House Alone?*

was selected one of School Library Journal's Best Books of the Year in 1976, as *Ghosts I Have Been* was in 1977, and *Remembering the Good Times* was in 1985. Recipients of School Library Journal's Best Books for Young Adults awards are *Close Enough to Touch* in 1981; *Remembering the Good Times* in 1985; and *Blossom Culp and the Sleep of Death*, 1987. *Dreamland Lake* and *Father Figure* were each chosen one of School Library Journal's Best of the Best for 1966-1978. *Are You in the House Alone?*

and Ghosts I Have Been were each selected one of the Young Adult Services Division of the American Library Association's Best of the Best Books for 1970-1983. Peck was selected Illinois Writer of the Year, 1977, by the Illinois Association of Teachers of English.

# Setting

Chelsea Olinger, her parents, and their fat dog Lucy have driven over a thousand miles from Bloomington, Illinois to settle in an unnamed southwestern community. Only through descriptions of the climate and the Spanish names of other high schools does the author communicate the location.

This contemporary novel covers a twoyear time span and pinpoints time by referring to the various fads and musicians popular during Chelsea's sophomore and junior years.

## Social Sensitivity

The issue of drinking and driving is never discussed outright, only the consequences are mentioned. When a drunken Craig drives fast and recklessly from the Christmas dance, Chelsea and Pod follow and find Chelsea's dog dead, but still warm, beside the road from a hit-and-run driver. Chelsea never admits it was Craig, she did not actually see his car hit the dog, but the thought creeps unbidden into her mind.

When Craig is brain-damaged and paralyzed from drinking and driving the night of Senior Summer, Chelsea is spurred into action to make sure that other students get help instead of heading out of control like Craig. Although she does not have much effect, and her mother resigns her counseling job anyway, Chelsea understands cause and effect from bad choices.

Permissively reared children, like Ashley and Craig, have a problem with heroes. They do not look up to people.

They are in control and they only look down on their parents and teachers as servants. Peck says, "The permissively reared child is the hero." Such children may be governed only by their selfish desires, which can result in disaster for themselves and others.

## Literary Qualities

Peck's strength lies in his ability to create strong individual characters. By choosing Chelsea as the first-person narrator of the novel, he presents an honest storyteller, and a perfect one for easy reader identification. Having the entire story told through a flashback gives Chelsea the opportunity not only to relay experiences, but to understand the important effects they have on future events.

Peck uses musicians to convey period of the events, and this device works well: "Was it the Michael Jackson year or the Prince year? No, it was the Madonna year." Since Peck mentions well-known people who are still producing records, he does not set his book in two specific years, but lets the reader set the time frame. Peck also uses popular words to represent each year. During Chelsea's sophomore year "awesome" was the big word. "Sleaze" was popular during her junior year.

He also employs the universal "they" to represent the other students and the power of peer pressure: "they said," "everyone said," "everybody said," "we all said," and "people said." Since the entire narrative is Chelsea's, Peck does not use flowery phrases or many poetic devices. Instead he gives her words that a teen-age girl would use and expressions, lively dialogue, and descriptions that fit her personality.

They are most effective: "I tell you what I thought: that all my life I'd been watching on a black-and white set. And now I had a small part in the production, and it was in full color."





## Themes and Characters

Chelsea Olinger, the narrator of the story, is fifteen when she begins school at Crestwood High. Like many adolescent girls, Chelsea has an ambivalent relationship with her mother as she tries to find her own identity and assume more responsibility for her own actions. Her plan of remaining anonymous and slipping quietly through school life changes when she is befriended by Ashley. As one of Ashley's chosen people, Chelsea metamorphoses as she picks up character traits from her new friends, a way of walking from one, a hand gesture from another, a new hair style from Ashley. She reaches the point where she thinks, "I'd almost forgotten who I'd been."

Chelsea meets Pod Johnson in the registration line on the first day of school. By his manner, his speech, and his dress, Pod gives the impression of being a cowboy, but that affectation is merely his way of being different from the rest of the crowd. Pod is a throwback to common sense in a world of clones and peer pressure. As the school days pass, he and Chelsea evolve into a couple. Pod sees through Ashley and her group, and on occasion warns Chelsea about her friend. Although Chelsea believes what Pod says about Ashley, she does not want to admit it to anyone and only secretly wonders at some of Ashley's motives.

Wealthy Ashley Packard is in charge.

When she walks by a mirror, she does not glance in it. When she walks into a classroom, she becomes the controlling agent. Instead of sitting in a row with the other students, she pulls her desk out of line and angles it toward them.

A smart manipulator, Ashley does not do well academically because she is above having to study. Her bad grades are another way of proving that she is the one who decides what is important and what is not. She controls her father and is so self-involved that she denies the existence of her step-mother, calling Celia her father's friend.

Craig Kettering is the male counterpart to Ashley, although he is even more of a controller. He acts as if he owns all he sees and as if there is a spotlight following his every move. In junior high, Craig ran the school. As a lowly sophomore in high school, he sets out to leave his mark and gain the power he is used to holding. As a junior he infiltrates the secret senior club, the C-Stars, and in the process develops a drinking problem. He never makes it to his senior year.

Miss Larrimore, alias Mrs. Olinger at home, is one of the counselors at school. Chelsea does not want anyone to know that Miss Larrimore is her mother, and not until the middle of the book is their relationship dramatically revealed. It is because of Miss Larrimore's new job that the family has moved.

Chelsea's father trains hunting dogs, an occupation he can practice in any location. Chelsea resents the fact that her mother's job is more important than her father's, and



through most of the book, she resents anything pertaining to her mother. In Chelsea's eyes there is a competition between her mother and herself, and she always comes out second best. Her mother has a better figure, tans better, is smarter and more clever. This secondary theme of the difficult parent-child relationship is intertwined throughout the primary theme of peer pressure. Chelsea's friends' parents, although playing minor roles in the narrative, are characterized in their relationships with their children: Ashley controls her father and step-mother; Craig's parents do not want to know too much about his situation, they are more concerned with keeping his problems private; and Pod's parents, throwbacks to the sixties and the hippie movement, want him to be happy. By the end of the novel, Chelsea realizes the importance of her mother's job as a counselor because her friends are drifting and need direction they are not getting from home. Chelsea has matured and wants to build a better mother-daughter relationship.

Chelsea also matures in her ability to defy peer pressure. A favorite theme of Richard Peck's, peer pressure is an important issue that faces youth and influences their teenage choices, which can have lifelong repercussions. Chelsea's strength to resist peer pressure grows slowly, but by the end of the book she is able to deny Ashley's request for help with the secretive junior party. However, Chelsea does not tell her parents that the party will be held on their property. This withheld information is a silent way of lying that Chelsea must live with as she tries too late to stop the tragic flow of events that lead to Craig's accident. As she prepares for her final year in high school, Chelsea has made great strides toward individualism and independence, as illustrated by her last meeting with Ashley. As she walks away, Chelsea does not turn to watch for Ashley's wave.



## Topics for Discussion

1. In one scene Mrs. Olinger catches her husband as he falls after he has had one drink. Another time he reacts strangely to Pod and Chelsea's 1960s costumes. What is wrong with Chelsea's dad?
2. Describe Pod Johnson and Chelsea's first impression of him. Does her opinion of Pod change as she knows him better? Why?
3. Why did Craig, the Gremlin, pull the stunts on the seniors?
4. "They said." Who is "they?" Why does Peck use that pronoun over and over?
5. Why does Ashley deny knowing Ruthie Baines?
6. Describe how the students discover Chelsea's relationship to Miss Larrimore.
7. Rarely does someone challenge Ashley, but Lauren faces off with her.

What happens and why?

8. Craig and his step-father talk to Mrs. Olinger at her home about Craig's arrest for selling alcohol to minors.

Read the selection aloud and decide who was in charge during the conversation.

9. Pod tells Chelsea that she was not important to Ashley and Craig. Is that true? Defend your answer.
10. Discuss the last time Chelsea saw Ashley. How did they end the friendship?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Chelsea feels a strong competition with her mother. Why? In what ways does she compete? Is this a normal mother-daughter relationship?
2. "The problem isn't what rich kids have. It's what rich kids are." Explain Mrs. Olinger's comment by using examples from the book.
3. Describe Chelsea's relationship with Ashley. What was Chelsea's first impression of Ashley? How did their friendship develop?
4. Craig has power over people, especially over the three boys who run around with him. Why did they confess to being Gremlins? Give other examples of Craig's power over people.
5. When Chelsea's mom is in the hospital, Chelsea turns to her dad for support and finds that she is really in charge now. How did Chelsea feel when she discovered his weakness?

What sort of relationship did they have?

6. Contrast Gloria Raymond's rebellion and her control of her mother with Ashley's behavior and her control of her parents.
7. Although Chelsea knew it was Ashley on the other side of her front door, she looks surprised when she opens it. The two girls allow themselves a squeal or two. Give other examples of planned behavior and tell why the girls act this way.
8. Phillip Ogden Davis wrote articles that upset the juniors. Who was the writer and what did he write that upset them?
9. Peck's description of Lucy's death is a moving narrative. Describe it and how Pod, Chelsea and her parents reacted to the dog's death.
10. How is Chelsea's non-involvement in the Senior Summer party a silent way of lying?

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Wilson calls the novel one of Peck's best.

## Related Titles

Although the characters in Princess Ashley are not series characters, the timelessness of their struggles through the teen-age years are threads that run through Peck's young adult novels. In all of his books someone has to grow up, to leave the cruel conformist period of adolescence and accept responsibility for his or her own actions.



# Copyright Information

## 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