

Prom Night Short Guide

Prom Night by Nancy Springer

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Overview

Nancy Springer's *Prom Night* is an anthology of short stories about the high school Prom Night 325 prom, written by twenty-two different authors. Some of the authors are well known, others not so, but all of them have used the theme of the prom and created humorous tales that explore the emotions and tensions inherent in this social "rite of passage."

Most of the stories in Springer's collection are fantasy, giving a new meaning to the "magic" of prom night. Many of the stories feature characters who feel misplaced or awkward in the high school social arena, and most of the stories involve some traumatic experience, though with a fantastical twist. Characters include elves, fairies, aliens, and other magic beings, all of whom come together to present a unique take on the teenage dating scene.

About the Author

Nancy Springer has been a noted and prolific writer of fantasy and science fiction for many years and has written primarily for young adults. Springer was born on July 5, 1948, in Montclair, New Jersey, and she grew up in Pennsylvania. She earned a bachelor of arts at Gettysburg College in 1970, and then worked as a teacher from 1970 to 1971 and a writer from 1972 to the present day. She also worked as an instructor at several colleges and universities in the 1980s.

Springer has written nonfiction, poetry, short stories, and more than thirty novels for adults, young adults and children, and she has received numerous awards, including two Edgar Allan Poe awards from the Mystery Writers of America, one for her widely acclaimed young adult novel *Toughing It*. She has also received the James Tiptree Jr. Award for science fiction or fantasy that expands the roles of men and women, the Nebula Award from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, and the World Fantasy Award. Springer currently lives in Dallastown, Pennsylvania, and works as an instructor of creative writing at York College.

Setting

Though the specific setting varies somewhat from story to story, all of the scenarios presented take place in Anytown around the time of the Senior Prom. The fact that the details of the setting change with each new author does nothing to undermine the universality of this high school experience.

The feelings and worries Springer wishes to highlight occur in the minds of teens all over the country, in small high schools and large. The high school setting serves as a backdrop for all the stories and as a framework for the characters' thoughts and actions. Whether the action of each story takes place within the school itself or somewhere outside it, high school and all the emotions experienced by the attending teenagers define this collection.

Social Sensitivity

Everyone who went to high school, whether or not they attended the prom, can relate to prom night. This book addresses the sensitivity of various prom-related issues by making light of them. The protagonists in Springer's collection all worry about the prom—whether they will get a date, what they will wear, what kind of impression they will make on their date or their date's parents, and what will happen after the dance. But many of these kids are outcasts, somewhat like the fat girls and the nerdy boys who never expect to experience prom night firsthand. In Springer's collection and in real life, there is quite a bit of pressure to attend this once in a lifetime event.

Springer's characters are exaggerated, as are their situations, which allows us to ridicule the hype associated with the high school prom and cheer for the underdog who finds this event particularly stressful. Peer pressure is something all teens must contend with, and Springer's choice of stories makes it clear that the pressure to go to the prom is alone a significant stress factor in a teenager's life. The pressure to have sex on prom night is also significant, and Fred Saberhagen's story "The Senior Prom" presents a scenario in which having sex is expected and abstaining from it is frowned upon. Like Saberhagen, all of Springer's authors address the worries and concerns teenagers have during this time of their lives.

By taking true-to-life situations and exaggerating them, the authors validate the teenagers' feelings of insecurity and help them take prom night a little less seriously.

These stories, fantastical as they are, do not make fun of difficult times, but rather they confirm the existence of them. Anyone who reads Springer's Prom Night should easily identify with the prom-goers in the collection, even if they are from another realm.

These characters and the experiences they have help readers recognize that their own concerns and feelings are not so unusual after all.

Literary Qualities

Springer has compiled a humorous collection of prom stories that disguise not-so-humorous emotions. The predominant tone of the collection is light, and the contemporary language adds to the humor. Dialogue flows easily. The characters in the stories are likable, though odd, and the disguised concerns in their conversations are those that ordinary teens can easily recognize.

Though representative of typical American teenagers, the students in this collection are not typical prom-goers. They may be representative of outcasts, but these are not the fat or clumsy kids people know; rather, they are elves and witches, aliens and fairies. Perhaps by presenting such a unique take on prom night, Springer, as well as the individual authors of the stories, wishes to reveal the alien nature of the prom experience. Dressed in a monkey suit and expected to conform to standards that feel foreign to young people, prom-goers feel awkward and misplaced, as if they were, in fact, trapped in another realm.

Springer succeeds in conveying the notion that the prom can certainly feel like an alien experience, but she also succeeds in conveying the notion that this one notable night has been hyped to fairy tale proportions, so much so, in fact, that it often assumes the importance of Cinderella's grand ball. Several of the stories make overt references to the fairy tale experience. In "Happily Ever After," for instance, a fairy godmother saves the day for young Shelley, who wants desperately to respect tradition by wearing a tuxedo and arriving at the prom in a limo. So true to the original fairy tale, the fairy godmother helps Shelley create the fantasy night he desires by creating dress shoes from his cross-trainers and a limo driver from Shelley's sister's Ken doll.

In the story "Peggy Sue Got Slobbered," Lorelei Shannon also uses the Cinderella story to highlight the fairy tale nature of prom night.



Themes and Characters

All the stories in this collection confirm the hype associated with prom night. If one unifying theme ties these stories together, it is the seriousness with which teens view the prom event. The authors make light of this seriousness by taking prom scenarios into the realm of the ridiculous. The authors explore situations known to everyone familiar with the rituals of high school life, and they present scenarios that shed light on the teenage concerns that crop up in true-to-life prom dates.

The authors in Springer's collection explore not only the emotions associated with the prom, but they explore more universal emotions by putting them in the context of one noteworthy event with which most teens can identify. Tim Waggoner's "Meeting Dad," for instance, deals with the awkwardness teens often feel when meeting the parents of their dates. Kevin, the protagonist of this story, is nervous about meeting his date's father—and with good reason, we discover. His date's father takes care of Kevin in a way that ensures that his daughter's virtue remains intact throughout the evening. Though no real life highschooler will probably ever experience what Ken experiences that night, all real life highschoolers contend with Kevin's fears and desires. The pressures associated with young desire escalate on a night when romance is in the air and sex may be just around the corner. Teenage boys have sex on their mind and they worry about it. They also know that in the eyes of their date's parents their plans for the evening are a definite no-no.

The prom has assumed such significance in the life of highschoolers because it is, in essence, a rite of passage. It is a chance to dress and act like an adult, possibly for the first time in one's life. Part of the anxiety associated with the evening stems from having to assume this adult role while still feeling like a child. Not only do the sexual overtones of a romantic evening feel foreign for many teens; so do a host of other adult rituals that characterize the evening.

Add to the tension created by raging hormones the pressures of looking and acting appropriately and fears about prom night escalate.

Most of the stories in *Prom Night* bring to light the ritual nature of the evening. One of these rituals is that of dressing up in what teens consider uncomfortable clothing. Several of the stories emphasize the worries teens experience about dressing appropriately. Tuxedos are traditional attire for prom night, and so are high heels and makeup.

Kevin feels uncomfortable in his tuxedo, as do several of the other boys in the book. In B. A. Silverman's story "Happily Ever After," Shelley, the protagonist, feels that he must wear a tuxedo to the prom even though he cannot afford one, and that he must escort his date for the evening in a limo.

Prom night, of course, is just one example of a situation in which teens feel anxiety about their ability to look and act appropriately. This anxiety begins to surface with the



knowledge that prom night is just around the corner and that attendance at this function is an expected part of high school life.

Concerns over whether one will have a date can become overwhelming. In a story entitled "Omar's One True Love," author Gary Jonas takes these concerns to an extreme.

His desired prom date is dead, but he has the power to revive her. "Omar's One True Love" is just one of the stories in which the author makes light of intense emotions. The tone of this story is one of disguised seriousness. It covers themes such as suicide over young love and the belief that, if love is strong enough, it can overcome all obstacles.

Though they represent ordinary teenagers, the characters in Springer's Prom Night are far from ordinary. Ewan of "Omar's One True Love" is an elf, who, like a real person, feels he must secure a date for the evening. In Jonas's depiction of this predicament, the pressure Ewan feels stems from the fact that he must get a date as well as perform all sorts of other inane rituals in order to remain in the mortal world and not be returned to the faery realm. The situation Jonas creates and the emotions Ewan experiences emphasize the ritual nature of the high school prom. Attendance is expected, as is appropriate behavior, and teens all over the country get the distinct impression that this is one ritual that must be a part of their high school experience.



Topics for Discussion

1. Which of the stories was the most poignant to you and why?
2. What does B. A. Silverman's story "Happily Ever After" convey to you about the illusions inherent in prom night?

What lessons can be learned from this story?

3. What purpose does the UFO serve in Michael Menningston's story "Solid Memories Have the Lifespan of Tulips and Sunflowers?"
4. Name some other events and experiences that, like the prom, can be considered rituals of high school life.
5. Did you find any of the stories in this collection offensive or distasteful?

If so, why?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare the pressures felt by Morton in "Omar's One True Love" and Ewan in "Three Strands of her Hair." How do the authors show the escalating anxiety teens feel over getting a date for the prom?
2. In "Borrowed lives," by Richard Parks, how do the aliens in the story represent ordinary teenagers? What truths about teenage emotions does Parks wish to illuminate?
3. Fred Saberhagen, in his story "The Senior Prom," puts sex in the foreground by depicting a world in which sexual promiscuity is the norm and sexual abstinence the taboo. Discuss how hints of the allure of sexual abstinence surface in the story.
4. Choose one lesson in morality gained from the book, and discuss the way the authors in several of the stories attempt to teach this lesson.
5. Analyze the story "A Touch, A Kiss, A Rose," and discuss some fundamental truths the author wishes to convey.
6. Choose several characters from different stories in the collection, and elaborate on how they represent real teenagers.
7. Consider the high school prom as a rite of passage similar to walking over hot coals or some other "test" of adulthood performed by nontraditional societies.

Discuss the ritual nature of the high school prom, and elaborate on the ways teens feel pressure to pass the test.

For Further Reference

"Nancy Springer." In *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*, Vol. 32. Detroit: Gale, 2000.

Biographical information about Springer and critical information on her works.

"Springer, Nancy 1948-." In *Something about the Author*, vols. 65 and 110. Detroit: Gale, 1991; 2000. This profile provides biographical information about Springer and critical information on her works.



Related Titles/Adaptations

Springer's work is unique in that it is the only collection of fantasy short stories written about the prom. The real prom night, however, has created so much hype that every teenager understands the impact this event has on their social life and high school experience.

Amy L. Best conducted a study of prom night that she published in a book entitled *Prom Night: Youth, Schools and Popular Culture*. The book contains first-person accounts in the form of interviews with students and school personnel, primarily from schools in the Northeast, and it underscores the societal pressures associated with this ritual of young life.

Because prom night is such an important event, numerous other authors have written stories about the prom, though none quite like those in Springer's collection.

Prom Date, by Diane Hoh, is a suspense story surrounding the prom. It deals with familiar experiences and emotions, but concentrates primarily on killings that occur at Hoh's fictional prom and the question of who is responsible. Popular young adult horror writer R. L. Stine also created a fictional prom tainted by murder and mayhem. In his book, also entitled *Prom Date*, a young girl is forced to attend the event with a boy she considers a geek, and then finds herself caught up in an evil plot.

Todd Strausser wrote a humorous story about prom night, "How I Created My Perfect Prom Date" (previously titled "Girl Gives Birth to Own Prom Date"). This story is told from the alternating perspectives of Nicole, who finds herself without a date, and Chase, Nicole's geeky neighbor whom she decides to transform into her perfect escort.

Another humorous story about the prom is William D. McCants's *Much Ado About Prom Night*. In this book, seventeen-year-old Rebecca gives advice to her peers about their love lives while her own love life suffers—she cannot get a date to the prom.

This, like Strausser's story, is a humorous take on teen problems and concerns and gives a lighthearted look at the seriousness of prom night.



Copyright Information

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