

# Promises Are for Keeping Short Guide

## Promises Are for Keeping by Ann Rinaldi

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## Overview

Promises Are for Keeping is a realistic novel which continues the story of Nicole (Nicki) DeBonis, introduced in Term Paper. Nicki is a fifteen-year-old girl who is struggling to grow up without parents. Her two older brothers serve as her guardians and share the duty of guiding a sister who is reluctant to be guided by any adult. Nicki gets into a number of scrapes, some of which she causes by lying or disobeying the directions of adults. Other situations are escalated by her inability to predict the consequences of her own actions. Although her relationship with her two brothers is somewhat turbulent, the siblings continue to love one another and never fail to be supportive of the efforts of the others.

## About the Author

Ann Rinaldi was born on August 27, 1934 in New York City, but lived most of her childhood in New Jersey with her father and stepmother. She describes her childhood as an unhappy one, because she did not get along with her stepmother. Even though Rinaldi's father was a newspaper man, he tried to prevent her from becoming a writer, even though she wrote poetry, short stories, and won essays during her high school years. After graduating from high school, she was not permitted to attend college, but was sent to secretarial school instead. It was not until after her marriage that Rinaldi sought a career as a newspaper columnist. She became an award-winning feature writer and columnist, writing for her local papers for more than twenty years, and syndicating her column.

Rinaldi's first published novel was *Term Paper*, which emerged from a short story she had written years before. Both this novel and its sequel *Promises Are for Keeping* deal with the positive influences of older siblings such as Rinaldi had in her own family as the youngest child of five. Rinaldi says that she writes about real life, as she knows it, and tries to treat the young adult audience as valuable people by writing "good stuff" for them.

She is most noted for the historical fiction novels which she has written for the specific purpose of bringing history to the teen-age audience. Rinaldi's interest in history stems from her involvement with an American Revolution re-enactment group. It is this personal sense of living history which Rinaldi succeeds in incorporating within her novels of fictionalized history.

Each of Rinaldi's historical fiction novels is noteworthy for presenting an intriguing story filled with strong characters, often young women of decisive action, as well as accurate historical data and settings.

## Setting

The story is set in the early 1980s and the characters must deal with the issues of that era: teen-age drug pushers, pot smoking, the distribution of birth control pills to teenagers, the legality of abortion, teen-agers experimenting with premarital sex, and child abuse. In addition to having to deal with these timely issues, the characters must survive the restrictive atmosphere of life in the small town of Runnymede, New Jersey, where gossip and rumors run rampant. Because Nicki's brothers are both important men in town, they are the target of town gossips. Tony, the high school teacher and football coach handles the rumors by ignoring them, causing a situation which advances the plot. The rumors are widely spread that Eric, the football star, must be Tony's son by an extramarital affair. Because of the uncertainty created, Eric himself believes this rumor and seeks attention in unacceptable ways. Larry, the physician, attempts to conform to the rules of small-town life by living his life within the constraints set by the town. This adopted lifestyle which values responsibility to others is at odds with his previous fun-loving life and provides the basis of Nicki's current discontent with him, since his change in attitudes affects his approval of her activities.

# Social Sensitivity

Since this novel is a product of the 1980s, it touches on a number of concerns of that era that might be handled differently by today's teen-age population. The small town in which this story is set exists on the fringe of the problems which are spilling over from the nearby big city of Philadelphia.

Both the teen-agers and adults in this novel are somewhat naive in their knowledge of these problems. In using this book with a class, it would be important to note that the issues Nicki and her friends confront head-on, including birth control, premarital sex, selling and using of drugs, teen-age use of alcohol, child abuse, and procedures relating to juvenile delinquents, are issues teen-agers still face, but which are much more a part of our common knowledge through open discussion within the school curriculum, and much more a focus of the daily news than they were in the 1980s.

The difference may be that in this novel, the adults are firmly in charge: drug pushers are immediately punished; families handle the problems of minor thefts and rule infractions through firm discipline after each incident; juvenile offenders receive the attention of both officials and the community; and local businessmen confront drug and alcohol offenders. In effect, Nicki and her acquaintances are always punished for their misconduct and do not get away with anything, allowing no chance for the potential impact of negative role models. Both parents and teachers need to be aware that reading this book will definitely open the conversation as to how families and community agencies should handle these problems, as well as the escalated problems of the 1990s.



## Literary Qualities

The strongest feature of Rinaldi's work is the conversational tone of the dialogue. Because the story is told through the dialogue and narration of only one character, the teen-age protagonist, Nicki, the reader is placed in the interesting position of hearing the story through the perspective of a character who is known to be a liar. Can she be trusted to portray the events accurately, or should the reader be wary and read Nicki's interpretations of the events with care? To encourage the reader to believe Nicki's narration, Rinaldi has established a very matter-of-fact tone to both the description and the dialogue, almost stating to the reader: this is what happened.

The plot is built around a group of characters who are very active. It is through the device of viewing the characters in action that the reader comes to know their attributes, as the amount of action leaves little time for pure description. There is also little time for the characters to express their feelings about the events; instead, the reader depends on the characters to talk about their feelings to Nicki.

One unusual strategy Rinaldi employs is to provide problems for the adult characters as well as the teen-age protagonist and her friends. The result is a more realistic and believable book, since the adult characters are fully depicted as real people with many dimensions to their personalities, rather than limited characters against which the teenager acts and reacts.



## Themes and Characters

Rinaldi places three fully defined characters before the reader. Nicole (Nicki) DeBonis is a fifteen-year-old girl entering her sophomore year in high school. It is her voice which tells the story of her life: she never knew her mother and now that her father has died, she has been placed in the joint custody of her two older brothers. As a character, Nicki does not always demonstrate her most endearing qualities, and in this respect, perhaps she is depicted as a typical teen-ager. The reader sees that Nicki has the potential to be kind and understanding to others because she provides her friends with unqualified support and works to help them, even when this requires that she lie and steal. Nicki is at her worst when she is defiant and sassy to adults, when she deliberately ignores the instructions of adults, and when she lies about her actions. This behavior helps the reader understand that Nicki does indeed need to grow up and think about the consequences of her own actions; it is clear that if she strives toward maturity, she will become a strong and likable person.

The lives of Nicki's two brothers are explored in equal depth to Nicki's own.

Her older brother Tony, is a teacher at her school and the football coach. He and his wife Carol, a children's counselor, have had custody of Nicki for the two years since the death of Mr. DeBonis. Tony and his wife seem to understand how to handle Nicki because they both have jobs which deal with children daily, yet neither of them is able to assume the close role attributed to parents. Being responsible for Nicki has placed a strain on their marriage, since Carol often disapproves of Tony's handling of Nicki, yet resists saying so.

She hates to hear them argue and will often leave the room, rather than step into the family squabble. In an attempt to gain assistance and also to provide additional responsibility for Larry, the second brother, they ask Larry to assume joint custody for Nicki.

Larry is a family practitioner who still makes house calls and maintains an office in his home. He and Nicki have always been close; he alone calls her the special nickname of Gypsy, and they often know what the other is thinking. They are familiar with the foibles of one another and it is this familiarity of behavior patterns which Nicki uses to save Larry's life during the dramatic conclusion of the story.

Because Larry has accepted this new responsibility, he is viewing himself with different eyes and is changing into a more mature adult, an attitude that Nicki finds unacceptable because Larry has become more of a rule-enforcing parent, and less of a fun-loving friend. She may not realize it, but Nicki too is changing as she matures.

Both brothers agree that Nicki is causing her own problems by being resistant to their authority and through her unwise actions and lack of thought about the consequences of her behavior. Although her brothers are attempting to guide her life the best they can,





Nicki's actions often show a lack of restraint which may be attributed to the fact that her brothers often are not sure where she is, or who she is with.

In Nicki's view, she is to blame for most of the problems she is having with her brothers, because she thinks she has a knack for messing up relationships. In reality, the relationships of the three siblings are natural and solid, and the recent changes are due more to the changes in their own lives and attitudes than in their feelings toward each other.

The minor characters in this novel are not fully depicted, but it is through the needs and actions of these characters that the reader comes to know more about Nicki's motivations and thoughts. It is for her best friend Meredith that Nicki attempts to steal birth control pills and must later enlist Larry's assistance to repair a botched abortion. When Nicki's boyfriend Eric is arrested for selling drugs to other students, she must defend him and his actions to her brother. In a misguided attempt to reunite her brother Larry with his girlfriend Molly, Nicki enlists the help of Jeremy, a juvenile offender for whom Larry serves as a parallel parent, breaking the terms of his parole. In all these actions, the reader sees that Nicki has acted with the best of intentions, but with no regard for the resulting repercussions to herself, her friends, and her family.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Both Tony and Larry told Nicki that she needed to become more responsible. Tony approached this need by asking Nicki for increased cooperation in household duties; Larry approached this need by forcing Nicki to accompany him to work at the hospital and to visit Jeremy in the state school for boys. Can responsibility be taught?

Were their views of how one gains responsibility realistic?

2. Nicki was guilty of any number of rule infractions which her family treated as very serious: stealing birth control pills for Meredith, lying about her whereabouts, influencing Jeremy to disobey, and asking Larry to lie to Meredith's mother about her condition.

In each case, Nicki was punished and left alone to think about her actions. In your view, might Nicki have been better handled by her guardians? Are they expecting an immediate change in attitude and behavior that Nicki is incapable of making?

3. Larry and Nicki have a serious, late-night conversation about the abuse of Meredith and the difficulty of reporting suspected parental abuse. Since neither Larry nor Nicki attempts to confront this abuse, what purpose does the author have in causing readers to consider this issue?

4. When Eric is arrested for selling uppers and downers, Nicki is questioned as a possible accomplice, yet claims she had no knowledge of Eric's activity. Is it possible to be as close as Eric and Nicki were and yet remain untouched by the actions of one another? Reread the questions the principal and police detective asked Nicki.

Should Eric's behavior have alerted her to Eric's activity?

5. One of the least attractive character attributes Nicki displays may be that of lying. Look back to the incidents where Nicki was caught in a lie.

Is lying ever defensible as the correct behavior?

6. The final incident of Larry being held hostage by robbers searching for drugs presents Nicki with an opportunity to change her ways. Based on her response to this event, discuss Nicki's future problems. Is there an easy remedy for them? How will the relationships of these three siblings progress now?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Trace the changes within the maturing character of Nicki from the beginning to the end of *Promises Are for Keeping*. These changes might be categorized as emotional, as those dealing with adults and authority, and as her ability to take responsibility for herself.

You may want to read Term Paper and trace the changes in Nicki over a greater period.

2. Compare and contrast the differences in the emphasis placed on teenage issues during the decades of the 1980s and the 1990s. This might mean the change in public policies, numbers of crimes, public agencies developed to handle teen-agers, or in the school curriculum. Have the changes always been the result of adult action, or have teenagers also played an important role in bringing about needed changes?

3. Examine Rinaldi's use of dialogue as a means of developing Nicki as a character well-known to the reader.

Are there parts of the dialogue which are more effective than others? What makes dialogue seem realistic to the reader?

4. Because we only see the action and events through the eyes of Nicki, we may have a very lopsided view of the real events. Write a missing dialogue between two characters whose conversation could not be known to Nicki: for example, when Tony closes himself in the room with Eric after his arrest; the conversation in which Larry explains Meredith's illness to her mother; or a potential future confrontation between Tony and Larry over their differences in handling Nicki.

## For Further Reference

Gallo, Donald R., ed. "Ann Rinaldi." In *Speaking for Ourselves, Too: More Autobiographical Sketches by Notable Authors of Books for Young Adults*.

Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1993. This book and its earlier companion, *Speaking for Ourselves*, provide two-to-threepage entries written by a wide variety of authors who write for the adolescent audience. Each includes a photograph of the author and a comprehensive list of his or her works.

Although the content of the entries varies, most describe how the authors came to writing as a career.

## Related Titles

Promises Are for Keeping is the sequel to Term Paper. This first novel uses the same device of first-person narration by the main character, Nicki DeBonis.

In this book, Nicki's family, including her father and a maternal aunt, is explored in order to give the reader of better sense of Nicki's anger and confusion in dealing with adults. This first book provides a better sense of who Nicki is and enables the reader to understand the motivations behind her actions in Promises Are for Keeping.



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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