

# Queenie Peavy Short Guide

## Queenie Peavy by Robert J. Burch

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## Overview

Queenie Peavy depicts some of the pressures of growing up in a small town during the Great Depression: supplies are scarce, and both adults and children must work hard to keep themselves clothed and fed. The book's greatest value derives from its portrayal of one teen-ager's triumph over emotional conflict at school and an unfortunate domestic situation. Most people perceive Queenie Peavy as a problem child. She is troubled and troublesome.

Eventually, by her own initiative, she works through her dilemmas and feels better about herself as a result. Queenie Peavy tells a universal story of the internal and external conflicts that most young people must resolve in order to leave childhood.

## About the Author

Robert Joseph Burch was born on June 26, 1925, in Inman, Georgia.

The seventh of eight children born to John Ambrose and Nell Graham Burch, he grew up on his mother's family farm in Fayetteville, Georgia, near Atlanta.

Burch attended public schools and, following graduation from high school, joined the U.S. Army. During World War II, he served in New Guinea and Brisbane, Australia. After his discharge, he attended college at the University of Georgia, receiving a degree in agriculture with a specialization in horticulture. Unhappy as a horticulturist, he took a civil service job as a clerical worker. His duties involved a visit to Japan, from which point he began a trip around the world aboard a Danish freighter. When Burch returned to the United States, he took up residence in New York City, where he studied writing under Dr. William Lipkind at Hunter College.

Burch began his writing career when he was thirty years old, and in 1960 he received a fellowship to the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference. His books have received many awards, and *Queenie Peavy* alone earned the Jane Addams Book Award, the Child Study Association of America's Children's Book Award in 1967, the Georgia Children's Book Award, and recognition as an American Library Association (ALA) Notable Book in 1971. *Queenie Peavy* was also selected for the George G. Stone Award in 1974 and the Children's Literature Association's Phoenix Award in 1986. *A Jungle in the Wheat Field* (1960) was an Honor Book in the New York Herald Tribune's Spring Book Festival, and *Skinny* earned the Georgia Children's Book Award in 1964. The Boston Globe Horn Book Award was given to *Ida Early Comes Over the Mountain*, which was also an ALA Notable Book.

In 1962 Burch returned to the South.

He now resides in Fayetteville, Georgia, in the home where five generations of his family have lived. He is best known for his stories of young people who live ordinary, yet eventful lives in historic rural Georgia. Writing is Burch's fulltime profession, but he also enjoys traveling, fishing, gardening, and raising his saluki dogs.

# Setting

The story takes place during the 1930s in Cotton Junction, a small town in Georgia. The farmers lead a spare, hardworking life typical of rural communities during the Great Depression.

Cotton Junction's business district consists of little more than the courthouse, post office, drugstore, cafe, and dry goods store. Because the town was one that "General Sherman somehow missed" on his destructive Civil War march through the South, Cotton Junction still boasts many handsome houses with large white columns and wide front porches. On the outskirts of town stand farmhouses and ramshackle homes.

Queenie says "one good puff from an angry wolf would splinter the two-room shack that she shares with her mother.



# Social Sensitivity

Although Queenie Peavy examines subjects such as juvenile delinquency, parental indifference, malnutrition, and the cruelty of children to one another, the book is, on the whole, uncontroversial. One troubling point is Burch's reference to the Corrys as "negroes" rather than as blacks; although this term was more common in 1966, when the book was published, readers should be aware that it is now considered offensive.

Despite the novel's somewhat bleak subject matter, Burch melds realism and optimism convincingly to yield a surprisingly upbeat portrayal of an adolescent struggling against great emotional odds. Queenie lives a solitary life; her mother works all day, and her father has never appreciated his daughter. To shield herself against possible hurt, Queenie assumes the persona of a self-sufficient, tough youngster who "doesn't care" about the results of her actions. Burch mixes scenes of Queenie as troublemaker with scenes of her entertaining the Cony children or helping her mother with chores. Burch suggests that Queenie is torn between the demands of bravado and those of decency, and thus he succeeds in painting an empathetic portrait of a juvenile delinquent.

Some readers may be disturbed by Queenie's callousness early in the novel; she hits a squirrel with a rock from the distance of some sixty feet and gleefully holds the dead creature by the tail for show. But this squirrel proves to be her only live target. Queenie refrains from killing birds at two later points in the novel and is exceedingly kind to the farm animals she tends at home. Burch does not make Queenie's transformation too abrupt; he notes in the final chapter that her "stone-throwing did not come to an altogether sudden end; she remained proud of her aim."

Although Queenie Peavy is the story of a juvenile delinquent, its protagonist in no way resembles the disaffected youth of many other young adult novels, and its ultimate theme affirms the value of the traditional social order. Burch sets his novel in a world governed by a strict moral code. Queenie's many trips to the school principal's office and her father's incarceration demonstrate the punishments meted out to those who fail to adhere to this code. Mr. Peavy's status as an outcast fuels Queenie's desire for revenge against the society that has rejected her father—but it also teaches her to fear the loneliness that accompanies societal disapproval. At first, Queenie is unable to acknowledge either this fear or its more positive corollary: the desire for respect and acceptance.

Although Mr. Peavy appears to be a shiftless and vaguely malevolent individual, Burch takes care to portray other adults in a more sympathetic light. Queenie's hardworking mother; her earnest school principal, Mr. Hanley; and the firm but thoughtful Judge Lewis all challenge Queenie—whether by spoken advice or unspoken example—to direct her talents and energies toward more productive ends. They teach her that a mature person is sensitive to both the needs and the faults of others. Thus, although Queenie Peavy is a novel of rebellion, all rebellion takes place within a closed system; Queenie's ultimate goal is not to be independent of but rather to be accepted by her society.



# Literary Qualities

Burch's descriptions of everyday life in a small town during the Great Depression are simple and well drawn. The narrative is credible, the dialogue natural, and the characters down-to-earth. The author also engages the reader with his subtle use of humor.

The understated wit in Queenie's thoughts and conversations provides entertainment as well as insight into her character. When, for example, Little Mother makes a particularly angelic statement, Queenie decides that "Little Mother not only wanted her friends to get along with each other but was now promoting good will and understanding for the whole world." Queenie's interactions with Dover and Avis are also important for their revelations of the soft side of her personality.

For the most part, Queenie Peavy is a straightforward narrative featuring a simple, episodic plot. One literary device that Burch employs is the use of song lyrics to reveal Queenie's moods.

Queenie often sings with the Cony children, and her choice of songs— "Foolish Questions" or "Work, for the Night is Coming"—often reflects her current state of mind. Music also serves as the vehicle through which Queenie first achieves public recognition of her talents. She overcomes her inhibitions and sings at a school assembly, and the audience enjoys her performance so much that it asks her to sing an encore.

Although the book is relatively free of symbolism, Burch does set up a symbolic contrast between the accuracy of Queenie's rock-throwing and the haphazard manner in which she approaches other aspects of her life. An intelligent girl, Queenie is, nonetheless, inconsistent; constantly in trouble at school, she seems unable to control her behavior or to direct her actions toward positive ends. But by the end of the book, Queenie has begun to focus her "deadly aim" on long-term goals, taking a part-time job in a doctor's office and expressing a desire to become a doctor herself some day. In one of the book's final chapters, Queenie decides against throwing a rock at a church: "Finally she unclenched her fist and looked at the rugged stone that had almost broken a church window." She drops the rock to the ground, where "it resembled any other rock in the world— except that its jagged edges reflected more sunlight."



## Themes and Characters

Queenie Peavy depicts one young woman's turbulent transition from childhood to young adulthood. Most of the townspeople of Cotton Junction view Queenie Peavy as a defiant tomboy, an eighth-grader who chews tobacco and throws rocks. Apathetic and impulsive, Queenie remains in constant trouble with school and town authorities. Queenie's father is imprisoned in the state penitentiary in Atlanta, and Queenie lives with her mother on the outskirts of town. Sadness over her father's imprisonment and anger over the frequent taunting of neighborhood children drive Queenie to frequent violent outbursts. Priding herself on her deadly aim, Queenie throws rocks at birds, squirrels, and buildings.

She plays a prank on the bully Cravey Mason that results in his breaking his leg. Despite this tough exterior, however, Queenie is a bright and kindhearted person. She excels in most of her classes when she is not being kicked out of them, and she delights in telling stories to or singing songs with the young children who live next door to her.

Martha Mullins, Queenie's best friend at school, is called Little Mother because she is so "growny." She comes from a poor but proud family. Because Martha is so often responsible for the younger children in her family, she has developed many qualities traditionally associated with mothers. Sweet, polite, unselfish, and optimistic, she plays the role of peacemaker at home and at school, and is willing to sacrifice her own wants and needs for the sake of others. Too saintlike to be completely believable, Little Mother nonetheless teaches Queenie many lessons—including the difference between pride and foolish pride, and the value of restraint in the face of antagonism—which acquire an edge of realism when played out against Queenie's more fully developed character. Avis and Dover Cony, Queenie's playmates at home, live on the farm that neighbors the Peavy place. The Corrys own their land and are one of the few successful black farm families in Cotton Junction. Avis is five years old and Dover is eight. Both are happy, curious children who idolize Queenie and vie for her attention. They especially enjoy the tall tales she tells about their dog, Matilda.

Queenie's classmate Cravey Mason is the leader of the children who tease Queenie about her father. His bullying causes her to retaliate in ways that later make her ashamed. Although Cravey is not a good student, he excels in sports and is admired by most of the children at school. Queenie hates him for his cruelty toward her but eventually realizes that her violent reactions merely encourage him and that, when others taunt her, she "must learn to consider it their own sadness," not hers.

Queenie idealizes her father, a convicted criminal who has been serving a prison sentence. Queenie envisions her dad as a loving father, misunderstood and wrongly accused. But upon his return home on parole, he disappoints her with his indifference. Queenie slowly comes to see that her father is cold, rude, self-centered, and vindictive.





## Topics for Discussion

1. The book is set in rural Georgia.

What does the novel reveal about the customs, mores, and culture of the South during the Depression era? What does it tell you about the economy and social customs then?

2. What are Queenie's positive and negative qualities? Which of these qualities make her a sympathetic character? Why does she allow her negative qualities to override her positive ones so often?

3. Cravey Mason is characterized as the antagonist. How does he influence Queenie? Why do you think he taunts her? Who else in this novel might be called an antagonist? Why?

4. Reconstruct the history of Queenie's relationship with her father. What role does Mr. Peavy play in his daughter's upbringing? Why did he go to prison?

How do the father and daughter relate to each other?

5. How is Queenie's mother characterized? How would you describe her relationship with Queenie as compared to Mr. Peavy's?

6. Why does the author include the Corry children in the story? What do Queenie's interactions with Avis and Dover reveal about her character?

7. Queenie has run-ins with several adults in authority positions. How do these adults react to her? How does she respond to them? Do their opinions of her change over time?

8. At what point do you sense a change in Queenie? Explain the change. What do you predict for her future? Why?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How are the historical, social, and economic references in the book significant to its plot development?
2. Compare Queenie's perceptions of her father before and after his homecoming.
3. In the book, external conflicts are apparent. Describe the internal conflicts that might exist in Queenie Peavy, Little Mother, Cravey Mason, Persimmon Gibbs, Mrs. Peavy, Mr. Peavy, Mr. Hanley, and Judge Lewis.
4. After it is discovered that Little Mother suffers from malnutrition, the Mullinses accept government assistance to help feed the family. Research and report on national programs to assist the poor with food, supplies, or jobs during the Great Depression. You may find it helpful to focus your report on one specific program.
5. Queenie has a good singing voice and enjoys singing for Dover and Avis.  
  
List the songs that she sings during the course of the novel. See if you can find sheet music for any of these songs at a library or music store, and learn to play or sing the song yourself. You may wish to perform for some of your classmates, just as Queenie does. Whether or not you are able to find sheet music, research and report on popular songs of the Depression era. Do most of these songs teach certain lessons or stress certain themes? What are they?

## For Further Reference

Evory, Ann, ed. Contemporary Authors.

First Revision Series. Vol. 5-6. Detroit: Gale Research, 1981. Includes a short biographical sketch that highlights the author's personal life and career.

Estes, Glenn E., ed. Dictionary of Literary Biography. Vol. 52, American Writers for Children Since 1960: Fiction. Detroit: Gale Research, 1986.

Gives background information on Burch's life and detailed descriptions of his better known books.

Smith, Charlotte Hale. "Bachelor Writes Children's Stories." Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine (November 29, 1964): 55, 57, 59. In this interview, the author talks candidly about his boyhood and its influence on his writing.

## Related Titles

Other "problem youth" books by Burch are *D.J.'s Worst Enemy*, the story of a twelve-year-old jealous bully; *Simon and the Game of Chance*, the story of a thirteen-year-old and his domestic troubles; and *The Whitman Kick*, the story of seventeen-year-old Alan and of Alex, a teen-aged thief.



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