

# Reaching Dustin Short Guide

## Reaching Dustin by Vicki Grove

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## Overview

More than anything, Carly Cameron wants to become editor of her sixth-grade class newspaper. The student who writes the best profile from an interview assignment will get this prestigious job. How horrified she is when she draws classmate Dustin Groat, a dirty, unkempt outcast, as her subject.

Determined to do the best interview she can, Carly asks questions that should get simple answers, but Dustin's odd responses draw a portrait of a life of tragedy and abuse that she can hardly imagine. In third grade the obnoxious boy's social behavior turned violent. Carly is stunned to discover that in a single action in reading group that year, she "melted" Dustin by ridiculing him in front of the class. He turned quiet, nearly invisible, sitting at the back of the room, doing no schoolwork, passing time.

With resolve fueled by guilt, Carly wants to make things right with this boy and rescue him from his sordid family life. She tries several ways to reach him, and she discovers that it is much easier to destroy someone than to build him up. Both Carly and Dustin must reach out to understand each other and build a bridge that will allow Dustin to overcome his family life and make a life for himself.

## About the Author

"Vicki Grove was born on December 24, 1948 in Highland, Illinois. Her parents, James and Gretchen Baum, lived in a converted one-room schoolhouse surrounded by acres of corn, clover, and soybeans. Down the road lived her grandparents and greatgrandparents in century-old homes that gave Grove an appreciation of her family's history. When she was in junior high, her family moved away from the farm to Oklahoma, and she graduated from high school in Miami. She earned her B.A. (1972) and M.A.

(1973) degrees in English from Central Missouri State University in Warrensburg.

Grove has been an English teacher, a grants researcher, a preschool owner, and an educational assistant at a church. Since 1983 she has devoted her time to writing, first fiction and nonfiction for national magazines and then novels for young adults.

In 1987 she won the Putnam Fiction Prize and a contract for *Goodbye, My Wishing Star*.

Since then she has written six more novels for Putnam. Her literary work routinely appears on the Mark Twain List and is selected for the Junior Literary Guild. *Reaching Dustin* was named to the 1998 lists of the New York Public Library's 100 Books for Reading and Sharing and of *School Library Journal's* Best Books. Grove is a sought-after guest author at children's literature festivals, has taught writing on the college level, and speaks at writers' conferences.

She lives in a 100-year-old farmhouse a mile outside the tiny town of Ionia, Missouri (population 117), with her husband, Mike, who teaches music. Their daughter, J. D., and son, Michael, are college students.



# Setting

Grove places her characters in a small town in northwestern Missouri, not far from the Kansas line. Carly's life centers on the farm fields and the thick trees of Kosh Woods. Not far away is Dustin's starkly different environment—a dark narrow cave, Flat River, and his home with the muddy yard on the swampy river bottom near the county landfill.

Dustin Groat's ancestors rode with Quantrill's Raiders, a guerrilla band who fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War. Among the riders who joined Quantrill were outlaws Cole Younger and Frank and Jesse James. Years before Dustin's time, Cole Younger had dug an escape tunnel from a shed on the Groat compound to a cave, which exited deep in Kosh Woods.

Dustin uses the tiny tunnel as a place to hide from his violent family. Grove uses these historical facts to link the desperate men in Quantrill's Raiders with the desperate men in the Groat family.

The public school that Carly and Dustin attend is conservative and run with middle-American values. Sixth-graders are contained in one classroom most of the day with different teachers for music and gym.

They do not stray over to the high school side of the school campus, but remain in a world of their own where sixth-grade friendships and image are of paramount importance.

## Social Sensitivity

Grove's description of the Groat family's way of life is a picture of ill-educated people who manufacture and sell drugs and mistrust government and those who are outside their own extended family. Their isolationism can be traced back to their rebellious ancestors who fought alongside William Quantrill, whose cause was more for settling personal grudges than for the Confederacy.

The Groats are heavily armed and irresponsible. They have amassed an enormous arsenal, and they like frightening the townspeople by showing their guns and shooting in the public area of Kosh Woods. Grove shows how the second amendment right of legal gun ownership can sometimes be misused by criminals like the Groats and infringe on the rights of others, which culminates in Luke's tragic accident.

Grove sensitively handles the abuse issue. Never does she show a child being struck. Instead she shows abuse through Dustin's words. He assumes that Carly's dad beats her, since that is a normal way of life for him.

Grove is not didactic in her message of the importance of schooling. The Groat men's lack of respect for education is not shared by Dustin. His disinterest in school work is a reaction to his mother's death and to the way he is treated at school. With a little encouragement, he would be a willing participant in the learning process.

## Literary Qualities

In a first-person narrative, Grove lets Carly tell this coming-of-age story. In her search for her own identity separate from her friends, Carly discovers that she must live with her mistakes and that they have molded her into the person that she is.

One of Grove's many strengths as a writer is her creation of strong characters. Her two main characters could not be more dissimilar—at first glance. Carly is a girl many readers will identify with because the problems she faces of friendship and selfimage are those they also face. Dustin, on the other hand, has problems most people cannot imagine. His dirty clothes, the bug in his ear, his protective instincts toward his pet frog, his musical talent, all add dimensions to his personality. Through Grove's carefully drawn word-pictures, readers will feel at first Carly's dislike and then her sympathy for the outcast.

Carly's poem and her search for the perfect ending to "Earbug" showcase Grove's skillful talent for layered meaning. In the poem, Grove draws similarities between the characters in her plot narrative: the bug hiding in Dustin's ear, the tiny frog he keeps in his pocket, the bat he frees from tangled fishing line, and the boy himself, who escapes abuse through a pitch-black cave. All these living things struggle for existence, and all yearn for flight or freedom.

Nature plays an important part in Grove's book. The characters are of the land. Carly's family is from a farming background, planting crops and harvesting them. Dustin's family makes a living from cutting wood; they only take from the land, they do not build it back.



## Themes and Characters

Sixth-grader Carly Cameron has an easy life, although she does not believe that until she compares her life with classmate Dustin Groat's life. She lives on a farm with both her parents, her high school-age brother who is also her good friend, and a cute younger brother she adores. Carly has two equally-best friends. The threesome has been together since the girls started school, but lately there has been some distance between them as they find different interests.

Both her friends are athletic, and Carly is more academically inclined.

Carly is an excellent reader and wants to be a writer. She has suffered the angst of a poet and struggles to put her words exactly right on paper. In the barn's hay loft, she has set up an official poetry studio. It is her place to think and choose each special word.

She is aware that writing is not something that just comes. She works at it, revising and reshaping her poems. Becoming the editor of the sixth-grade paper would let others see her as the writer she is. With the interview project being the deciding factor in who is chosen as editor, she knows the importance of good interview questions and answers. But she is getting little cooperation from her subject, Dustin Groat.

She discovers he was born in the back of a truck. His mother died when he was in third grade, but the others in his class were not told that this was the reason for his obnoxious behavior. By talking to her brother and her mother, Carly learns that Dustin's mother committed suicide by drowning herself in the creek. The note she left said, "No more."

No more what? Carly wonders. No more of the filthy poor life at the swamp? That is not a question she can ask Dustin. Instead of straight answers to simple questions, she learns about him by observing him and reading between the words of his replies.

When he thinks she has a black eye because of badly applied face powder, he asks if her father hit her. Of course not. Carly cannot imagine her father striking her, but she witnesses Dustin's father chasing him with a stick.

Dustin keeps a tiny white frog in his pocket. He has built a nest out of strips of torn paper, grass and clover and feeds it dead flies that he kills with his hand—with his good hand. He favors his other hand because of an injury to his arm. Carly suspects the injury was inflicted by his father.

Carly hears beautiful haunting music coming from Kosh Woods. Dustin has a talent for the recorder, the flute-like instrument that the sixth-graders are playing in music class. His music floats sadly, plaintively in the air. She finds Dustin in the woods and watches him free a bat from an entanglement. Obviously there are depths to Dustin that the





other sixth-graders never see. But how can Carly reach him, and how can she show the others his plight?

Carly's friend Randi has discovered MTV via her family's new satellite dish. She dresses in flouncy skirts and moves with fluidity like the dancers she constantly imitates.

Randi wants Carly and the other member of the trio, Alicia, to learn a dance routine for the Maple Leaf program.

Alicia is tiny and a gymnast, and sometimes she wears leotards and shorts to school.

Carly wants to advertise her special quality, too. She dresses in black, the way she believes sophisticated writers should dress.

When her classmates comment on her odd clothing, she gives up her new look. She concentrates on her writing, not on trying to be like her two friends, who seem to be growing closer together and further from her.

Carly's brother Noah has a crush on Dustin's sister, Julie. Although Julie had been forced to drop out of school two years earlier, Noah has carried a torch for her. He wants to get her away from the Groat compound, a collection of houses, shacks, and sheds behind a fence posted with "no trespassing" signs.

Luke, Carly's first grade brother, brings a fresh eye to old history. He is enthralled with George Washington and the concept of a democracy. When the family hears gunfire in Kosh Woods, Luke says it is all right because they are all free and can do what they please. His father explains that they have laws to decide which freedoms should be given up to make way for other freedoms. Kosh Woods is off-limits to hunting, yet the Groats are playing survivalist games, shooting, and endangering any people who walk in the public woods.

The Groats living in the compound are mostly men, relatives of Dustin's. The majority of them never finished high school, and they make their legal money by cutting and selling wood. They make illegal money by manufacturing methamphetamine, an inexpensively produced drug.

In third grade, Carly judged Dustin by his family background and his violent behavior. When given an opportunity to be in power over Dustin, she took it, telling him the wrong reading sentence. Now three years older, she knows more about Dustin, knows why he acted the way he did, and she is mortified that she contributed to the way the class treats him. She wants to believe that she is a kindhearted person, but her act hurt Dustin. If possible, she must make amends.

When Dustin drops out of school, after the meth lab explodes and his father is arrested, Carly reaches for Dustin in the best way she knows. She writes an essay about the way she humiliated him in third grade and its effect, and she reads the essay to the entire class. She also writes about Dustin in the sixth-grade paper, which she now edits.



Promising Dustin that the class will treat him differently if he will come back to school, she volunteers to help him catch up on his reading skills.

Carly tells Dustin that he has to want to be freed from behind those compound walls where his family has imprisoned him. Her parents will take Dustin and his sister to the school board if they want to protest that they are not receiving home-schooling, but have just been kept out of school. She reaches out to Dustin, but that is not enough. He has to reach back to her.

Grove shows that every action a person takes has an effect on someone else, either in a positive or negative way. That does not mean that there is always someone else to blame when a person makes a wrong decision, but it shows that each person has more influence on others than he might suppose. It is up to each individual to make sure it is a positive influence.



## Topics for Discussion

Dustin Groat is angry at the boys for teasing him about the bug in his ear. He says, "I'll give you something to scream about if that's all you can do, stupido!

Just scream your heads off and see if anybody hears or cares!" What do his words reveal about his family life?

2. Why does the teacher lecture the students about trading names in the interview assignment? Is that something that would only occur in a book or is that something that could occur in a real classroom?

3. Describe the farm where Carly lives. Is she a productive member of the farm family? What are her specific chores?

4. Carly and Noah disobey their parents on several occasions. Name these occasions and discuss if their actions are justified.

5. Carly, Noah, Luke, and Dustin have very private places they regard as their own. Describe each one and tell why you think the character chose it.

6. How does Luke's accident change the community's conception of the Groats?

Do you believe his injury was intentional or accidental?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Pretend you are Dustin Groat sitting in the back of the room observing his sixth-grade classmates. Describe your impressions of the students and the teacher in the room.

2. Many states allow parents to homeschool their children. Does your state?

What regulations are placed on this type of education?

3. Research Quantrill's Raiders and the part they played in the bloody border war in Kansas and Missouri.

4. Compare and contrast the personalities of the three equal best friends, Carly, Randi, and Alicia.

5. Grove uses foreshadowing. Find examples where the author gives hints of something that is going to happen.

6. The second amendment to the Constitution gives citizens the right to bear arms. Do you feel that drug dealers like the Groats were therefore allowed by law to amass their arsenal? Explain.

## For Further Reference

Bloom, Susan P. Review. HornBook (March/ April, 1998): 220. Bloom believes Grove's characterizations and emotional tone are strong.

Cart, Michael. Review. Booklist (May 1,1998): 1518. Cart writes that Grove does a convincing job of explaining the interpersonal relations between Carly's family and the Groats and Carly and her two best friends.

Engelfried, Steven. Review. School Library Journal (May, 1998): 142. The reviewer believes the special appeal of this book is the hope that Carly gives Dustin and the hope the reader will feel, even though there are many difficulties in Dustin's family that will be hard to overcome.

Review. Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books. (March, 1998): 242-243. This reviewer writes that readers "will understand both Carly's repugnance and her awakening sympathy" for Dustin.

Review. Kirkus Reviews (March 1, 1998): 339. The reviewer commends Grove for writing with grace and compassion for a boy who is pitiable, but noble.

Review. Publishers Weekly (May 11, 1998): 68. The reviewer finds Grove's characters well developed: "Grove's heartfelt story unmaskes the vulnerabilities of two preadolescents from very different walks of life."

## Related Titles

All of Grove's books tackle problems facing teenagers—strains in parent-child relationships, sibling relationships, or friendships. Also present in Grove's novels is a strong sense of fairness even when social ills can only be recognized and not changed.

Her books feature young people taking sometimes baby steps, sometimes giant steps, toward maturity.



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