

Remembering the Good Times Short Guide

Remembering the Good Times by Richard Peck

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Contents

Remembering the Good Times Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	6
Social Sensitivity.....	7
Literary Qualities.....	8
Themes and Characters.....	9
Topics for Discussion.....	11
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	12
For Further Reference.....	13
Related Titles/Adaptations.....	14
Copyright Information.....	15



Overview

Richard Peck is well known for his works in which young adults confront personal problems such as rape, divorce, peer pressure, suicide, and the pains of growing up. In *Remembering the Good Times*, Kate Lucas, Trav Kirby, and Buck Mendenhall are three close friends who must deal with several of these problems. Although Kate and Buck had met before, the two form a close friendship with Trav when the three of them begin eighth grade together. From then until the beginning of their sophomore year in high school, they are almost inseparable in spite of school plays, debate teams, freshman football, and Skeeter Calhoun who is the school bully. As they struggle through adolescence, their community is also struggling through change from a rural township to suburban sprawl.

Kate and Buck adjust, but Trav seems lost under the pressures to achieve and succeed.

In this critically acclaimed novel, Peck's writing reflects many of the characteristics for which he has become famous and popular among young adult readers. He is perceptive and has an ability to describe the lives of teenagers accurately, sometimes humorously, and always without preaching.

Yet there is also an emotional depth to this novel that goes beyond the mere telling of a story. Peck creates characters that are so interesting and so believable that readers truly care about them. Because of this, many readers may be as unprepared for the ending as are the characters themselves.

About the Author

Richard Wayne Peck was born in Decatur, Illinois on April 5, 1934, into a traditional family that lived in an old-fashioned neighborhood on the "right side" of town. His mother told him stories and introduced him to books and reading. His father often took him to his gas station in the working class neighborhood across town.

From his family and the colorful characters who gathered at his father's gas station, Peck heard exciting tales of real life and learned to listen very closely to what other people said.

These early experiences plus the demanding work required by teachers such as the dreaded Miss F, his high school English teacher, helped Peck develop the skills that he would need later when he became a writer.

After attending DePauw University (earning a bachelor's degree in 1956), he spent 1954-1955 abroad at the University of Exeter in England. While he was there, an assignment from a nonsensical professor forced him to overcome his fear of public speaking, his last obstacle to becoming a teacher.

From 1956 to 1958, Peck served in the U.S. Army and was stationed in Germany at Ansbach and Stuttgart. In Germany, he managed to turn his skills in writing into a clerk/typist position, which was, as Peck states in his autobiography, "a sit-down job by a warm stove." Later he managed to be "caught" while slipping a sermon that he had written under the chaplain's door and found himself promoted to the position of a chaplain's assistant. Returning home, he continued his education at Southern Illinois University, earning a master's degree in 1959. In 1961 he became a high school English teacher in Northbrook, Illinois, an affluent Chicago suburb. Later he accepted a position in New York City at Hunter College, teaching in its high school for academically gifted girls. In 1971, as school became more and more what Peck called "an optional exercise" for students, he gave up teaching to become a full-time writer.

Peck lives in New York City; however, in order to stay in touch with the people for whom he writes, he travels throughout the world visiting schools and listening to young adults, teachers, and librarians. In addition to his young adult novels, Peck also writes novels for adults, short stories, and poetry; he edits collections of poetry and essays; and he writes a column for the New York Times on architecture and local history.

Peck's young adult novels regularly appear on best books lists. Remembering the Good Times was one of School Library Journal's Best Books of the Year, 1985; one of the American Library Association's Best Books for Young Adults, 1985; and one of School Library Journal's Best Books for Young Adults, 1985.

Among his many honors and awards are The Mystery Writers of America's Edgar Allan Poe Award for best juvenile mystery novel of 1976 for *Are You in the House Alone?*, the 1990 Award for Outstanding Contribution to Adolescent Literature from the Assembly on



Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English, and the American Library Association's 1990 Author Achievement Award for Young Adult Writers.

Setting

Remembering the Good Times is set in a small rural town in middle America where suburbia with its housing developments and shopping malls is slowly swallowing up the meadows and farm land. Two of the main characters in the book, Kate and Trav, represent the two extremes in the area while Buck is not too sure exactly where he fits. Kate lives with her mother and great grandmother Polly Prior in the house beside the pear orchard that her family has owned for generations. Trav's family, however, is part of the group of successful, upwardly mobile suburbanites whose subdivisions are changing the rural countryside. In the beginning of the novel, Buck is living with his mother and spending his summers with his father who works at the Slocum construction sites. When Buck's mother decides to remarry and move to Cleveland, Buck comes to live with his father in a trailer behind Scotty and Irene's gas station.



Social Sensitivity

Along with accidents and homicides, suicide is one of the leading causes of death in young adults. Because of this, writers are beginning to discuss adolescent suicide in nonfiction books and in novels. Some reviewers have criticized Peck for not providing concrete information on suicide prevention and for not really explaining the causes of teen suicide in his novel. But suicide is difficult to understand and Peck's purpose seems to be to make the reader aware of the existence of a problem that many try to deny. The power of this novel comes not from a technical exploration or case study of teen suicide but from Peck's ability to make the characters and their friendship come alive for the reader and to make the reader care about what happens to Kate, Buck, and Trav. In doing so, he also gives the reader an opportunity to think about the signs and signals given by Trav that the others ignored. Experts have suggested not focusing on suicide itself but, rather, looking at family relationships, self-esteem, academic pressures, and peer pressures as a way to present the problem. This is precisely what Peck does in this novel.

In general, psychologists believe that discussions of suicide will not lead to more attempts. Rather, a well-informed discussion will end the myths surrounding suicide and present the harsh reality of teen suicide and its effects on those left behind, thus helping people to recognize and understand the danger signs that warn of a potential suicide.

Literary Qualities

While not all critics have admired his work, Peck has won praise from many for the honesty and authenticity in his writing and for his ability to portray accurately the problems of growing up in today's society. Problems are not overplayed or sensationalized. Realizing that modern adolescents face more difficult and complex problems than prior generations, Peck populates *Remembering the Good Times* with believable characters, and presents subtle humor and a well-crafted plot that provides insight into the world of adolescents. As usual, Peck writes with a rich, yet easy-to-read flowing narrative and the descriptive details that make both the major and minor characters stand out as individuals. By telling the story from Buck's point of view rather than from Kate's or Trav's, Peck is able to step back for a better look at both the old-timers and the newcomers in Slocum Township.

He also provides subtle clues about Trav's decline and foreshadows the impending suicide. While references to Duran Duran, Boy George, and "Where's the beef?" may set the novel in the mid-1980s, its themes are still pertinent for adolescents.



Themes and Characters

Some critics have noted that one of Peck's greatest strengths as a writer is his ability to create diverse yet believable and credible characters. In the three-year span of *Remembering the Good Times*, Peck shows this strength and is able to develop his characters and to plant the subtle clues of Trav's depression and eventual suicide. Buck, the teller of the story, is a male character with deep feelings and emotions. Although Buck and his down-to-earth Dad live a fairly spartan existence in the trailer, he seems to cope very well with all the problems that confront teen-age boys. In comparison, while Trav seems to have all the advantages that affluent, successful parents can give their child, he feels an intense pressure to succeed and seems unable to accept any faults within himself.

Through Buck's eyes, the reader sees Trav from the outside with only occasional glimpses of the doubt, depression, and other troubles that are hidden beneath the brilliant exterior.

Remembering the Good Times also has two strong female characters. In contrast to Buck and Trav, Kate appears to be the leader of the group. Mature and independent, she has had to cope with the flamboyant lifestyle of her mother, deal with economic problems, and take care of Polly Prior. She is the one who plans Mr. Slater's revenge on Skeeter and who makes everyone, including Polly, help her rehearse for the play.

Kate's great grandmother Polly claims to be the third-oldest and the meanest woman in Slocum Township and is a "demon" at Monopoly and cards. After the tragedy, while the parents blame the school and the school blames the parents, it is Polly's speech at the public meeting that finally helps Kate and Buck begin to accept Trav's death.

Remembering the Good Times has interrelated themes. While the book deals with a great tragedy, there are also scenes of joy and even comedy which point out the theme of friendship. Although Kate, Buck, and Trav come from different backgrounds, they have formed close bonds which they hope will carry them throughout the trials of growing up. Polly, a representative of a previous generation, joins in that friendship. However, it may be that precisely because of that closeness, Polly, Buck, and Kate are unable or unwilling to recognize the trouble under the calm surface of Trav. Also in this work is the disintegration of a community and family and a mourning for a vanishing way of life. Although Polly provides a link back to a time of "old-fashioned values," even she does not recognize the seriousness of Trav's problems in time. The Kirbys, focused on their own lives, see only the success in their son. To Trav, even school is a wasteland where he is not being challenged and not being prepared to deal with the problems in life that he sees arising throughout the world. Without the support of his family, failed by the school, pressured by the expectations of others, and burdened by the demands that he places upon himself, Trav believes that the only solution lies within himself. As the community declines even more and the pear orchard is bulldozed by the developers, Trav chooses suicide to relieve his despair.



Peck seems to believe that people have a need for both community and communication in their lives. A lack of communication in Trav's family leads, in part, to his isolation from his parents. However, a lack of community is also to blame for Trav's suicide. As Polly points out, there is a need for everyone—parents, teachers, students—to communicate and to become a community that cares about its members. It may be difficult to understand why Trav, who seems to have it all, would take his life. But it is just that calmness in the plot and the lack of sensationalism that makes the novel and its characters so real. All of this adds up to what Peck himself claims to have as the only theme in his young adult novels: That is the need for young adults to break away from the group and to think and act independently.



Topics for Discussion

1. Discuss the meaning of the title.

How are the "good times" different for each of the three main characters? For Polly? For the community? What is the significance of the homecoming theme?

2. When Trav is arrested for shoplifting (Chapter 12), why does he call Buck instead of his father?

3. After Trav's death, Kate tells Buck that there were "little things" that they should have seen as signs of Trav's problems. What were some of them?

4. Compare the description of Polly's room (Chapter 9) to Trav's room (Chapter 4). What insight does each give you into the personality of the person who lives there?

5. Trav tells Buck (Chapter 4) that he needs the collections and toys in his room to remember himself. What does he mean?

6. What problems does Kate have dealing with her mother and how does she solve them?

7. When Skeeter Calhoun first loses control in Sherri Slater's classroom (Chapter 2), why is Trav able to calm him? How are Trav and Skeeter different and how are they alike?

8. How well prepared were Kate and Buck to deal with the changes in Trav?

Why were the adults in the novel (Polly, Trav's parents, Mr. Mendenhall) not able to see the changes?

9. Why were Buck, Kate and Polly oblivious to Trav's suicide plans even after he gave them his personal treasures as gifts? (Chapter 14) 10. Why does Trav hang himself in the pear orchard rather than in his room or in his house?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Although Buck tells this story, Kate and Polly are very strong characters. Using Hilary Crew's article as a reference, explore Peck's use of a strong female character in this and other novels.
2. Point of view can be very important to a story. Discuss the effect that Buck's telling the story has on the development of the plot. How might the novel have been different if it had been told by Polly? by Kate? by Trav?
3. Explore the symbolism of the pear orchard. What do the orchard and the poem that Trav writes and that Kate recites for her audition mean to each of the main characters in the book?
4. There are two groups of three friends in the novel: Trav, Kate, and Buck; Scotty, Irene, and Mr. Mendenhall. How are they alike and how are they different? What effect does Scotty's death have on Irene and Buck's Dad? Compare and contrast this to the effect that Trav's death has on Kate and Buck. What role has the disintegrating community played in each death?
5. Peck is concerned with architecture and historical preservation and seems to say that problems (such as Trav's suicide, Scotty's murder, and a decline of a sense of community) accompany the growth of subdivisions and shopping malls and the decline of farms and small towns. Research the issue of suburban development in rural areas. Does suburban growth bring crime? family problems?
6. Research the topic of teen suicide and compile a list of the classic warning signs. Try to find these signs in *Remembering the Good Times* and discuss how the characters reacted to them.

Locate and read summaries and reviews of some of Peck's other novels that deal with adolescent problems.

Identify the problems and explain what Peck means when he writes the following statements in his autobiography: "A novel is never an answer, always a question" and "Characters grow by being backed into corners."



For Further Reference

Crew, Hilary. "Blossom Culp and Her ilk: The Independent Female in Richard Peck's YA Fiction." *Top of the News* 43 (Spring 1987): 297-301. Discusses the role of the strong female character such as Kate Lucas and Polly Prior and their importance in Peck's novels.

Garrett, Agnes and Helga P. McCue, eds. *Authors & Artists for Young People*. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 1989. Presents an overview of Peck's life and career as a writer with extensive comments from Peck about his work.

Holtze, S., ed. *Fifth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. New York: H.W.

Wilson, 1983. Contains bio-graphical information and Peck's comments on his life.

Metzger, Linda, ed. *Contemporary Authors*. New Revision Series. Vol. 19.

Detroit: Gale, 1987. Includes background information on Peck, a commentary on the importance of his works, and the text of a telephone interview with Peck on February 14, 1986.

Peck, Richard. *Anonymously Yours*. New York: Julian Messner, 1992. Pulls together, in an autobiography, much of what Peck has previously written in articles in sources such as *School Library Journal* and *Horn Book*, although the original sources are not cited. Describes his life and discusses many of the books that he has written and how his life and the books are tied together.

———. "Growing Up Suburban: 'We Don't Use Slang, We're Gifted.'"

School Library Journal 32 (October 1985): 118-119. Looks at the pressures that suburban adolescents face, including the "permissive home and the elective school" and the solutions that they find such as group conformity and suicide.

Senick, Gerard J., ed. *Children's Literature Review*. Vol. 15. Detroit: Gale, 1988. Contains a biographical sketch, author's commentary, and excerpts from reviews of many of Peck's novels including *Remembering the Good Times*.

Swing, Georgia Hanshew. "Choosing Life: Adolescent Suicide in Literature." *English Journal* 79 (September 1990): 78-82. Provides an overview of teen-age suicide incidents in Duluth, Minnesota, and the attempts of the school to discuss suicide through literature.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Remembering the Good Times is only one of Peck's novels to deal with the problems of adolescents. In 1976, the award winning *Are You in the House Alone?* told the story of a young girl who is raped by the boyfriend of her best friend and who must live with the effects of the rape. Written in 1987, *Princess Ashley* used the beautiful Ashley and her followers to explore the power of the peer group and how young adults exploit each other and allow themselves to be used. In *Those Summer Girls I Never Met*, Drew and Steph do not realize how much they will learn about their grandmother, each other, and life when the grandmother they barely know invites them on a two week Scandinavian cruise. An older girl looks back at the year she was fourteen in *Unfinished Portrait of Jessica*. Through more mature eyes, she looks at her parent's divorce, her inability to get along with her mother with whom she lived, and her blindness to the faults in her father who moved away.

Several of Peck's titles have been adapted as television movies including *Are You in the House Alone?*, *Father Figure*, and *The Ghost Belonged to Me*, which was released as *Child of Glass*.

Don't Look and It Won't Hurt was released as a filmstrip with cassette. *The Ghost Belonged to Me* and *Remembering the Good Times* were issued on audio cassette.



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