

# **A Sudden Silence Short Guide**

## **A Sudden Silence by Eve Bunting**

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# Contents

<a href="#">A Sudden Silence Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>



## Overview

A Sudden Silence is a novel that deals with the problems of alcohol abuse, death of a sibling, and physical disability in a contemporary setting. The treatment of these ideas is couched in a fast-paced story that has the added appeal of suspense as Jesse seeks to track down the hit-and-run driver who kills his deaf brother Bry. The novel is well crafted and credibly portrays the people, the events, and the emotions entwined in a tale of life and death as Jesse lives and Bry dies; of guilt and grieving as Jesse wonders if he somehow could have saved Bry; and of vengeful searching and painful discoveries as the driver who hit Bry is eventually found.

There is a strong anti-alcohol message conveyed throughout the story, but Bunting does not allow it to overwhelm the plot. Rather, the message is revealed as the reader watches the agonizing consequences of a drunken driver's irresponsible actions, as two families are devastated by Bry's death, both Bry's and eventually that of the driver who kills him.

The theme of death creates a somber mood for this story, but the gloom is ameliorated somewhat by the detective angle as Jesse and Bry's girlfriend Chloe work together to find the killer.

There is also a lesser theme of romance as Jesse finds himself strongly attracted to Chloe in spite of feelings of disloyalty to Bry. When the mystery of the hit-and-run driver is finally resolved, revenge turns out to be less than sweet, and Jesse realizes that, "The pain doesn't stop or the emptiness fill that easily." As the reader is made aware of Jesse's growth in compassion and understanding, there is hope that healing and acceptance will eventually come.

## About the Author

Eve Bunting is one of the most prolific and versatile writers of children's literature today. Although she did not begin writing until she was in her forties, she has since written more than one hundred books that span the spectrum from preschool to young adult. Her young adult books address sensitive contemporary issues such as alcoholism, sexual relationships, and teen-age suicide in a way that makes the situations plausible. Frequently hidden within her story lines are covert messages of traditional morality.

Bunting was born Anne Evelyn Bolton in 1928 in Maghera, County Derry, Northern Ireland, where her parents were also born. Her father was a postmaster and merchant and was regarded as well-to-do by village standards. She was sent to boarding school in Belfast at the age of nine and there developed a lifelong love of books and reading.

She graduated from Methodist College in Belfast in 1945 and continued her studies for two years at Queens University. At Queens she met Edward Bunting, whom she married in 1951. In 1960 Bunting, her husband, and their three children, two sons and one daughter, uprooted and moved to the United States. They settled first in San Francisco but later moved to Pasadena, California, where they continue to live.

Bunting's career as a writer began when her children were in high school and college, and she enrolled in a writing course at a local college. She learned during the class that Ginn Publishing Company was looking for authors of picture books, and she sent them a manuscript about the Irish giant Finn McCool and how he outsmarted Culcullan, the terrible Scottish giant. The manuscript was accepted and she was, in her words, "off and running."

According to Bunting, ninety percent of her story ideas are generated by things she reads in newspapers and periodicals and ten percent by things she sees happening around her. It is because so many of her ideas come from news reports that her books are dominated by contemporary themes and characters. Realism and frankness are essential components of her writing, and she regards few subjects as taboo. However, in an Eve Bunting book the protagonists do not mess with drugs or sex, in spite of "hormones on the rampage," nor do they behave in cheap, tawdry ways. She has gained a reputation for keeping her characters morally straight even though they often must make difficult choices. There is nothing overt or preachy in her fiction, but the message is clear as her young heroes and heroines ultimately find the character and wisdom to make right decisions.

In spite of the more than one hundred books she has written, Bunting gives no indication of slowing down; she seemingly has a limitless supply of stories to tell—good news for her fans.

# Setting

The story takes place along a section of Coast Highway in Southern California between Los Angeles and San Diego.

Jesse, a student at UCLA who is home for the summer, his younger brother Bry, and his parents live in a trailer park that lies alongside the highway near Laguna. On the night of June 20th, at 11:30 p.m., Bry and Jesse are walking along the highway when a car suddenly bears down on them. Jesse yells at Bry, but Bry is deaf and cannot hear.

Jesse jumps to safety, but Bry is hit and killed as the car speeds away. It is this section of Coast Highway which provides the setting for the story.

# Social Sensitivity

A Sudden Silence deals with topics that were once considered taboo in children's literature: death, alcoholism, and the physical disability of a child.

Today's worldly readers no longer need to be sheltered from a realistic portrayal of life. While Bunting deals with sensitive issues, she reinforces accepted values, writes dialogue that is "clean," avoids explicit sexual encounters, takes pains to make her policewoman compassionate and caring, and handles Bry's disability with deftness and sensitivity.

## Literary Qualities

A Sudden Silence deals with important social teen-age issues. It is strongly supportive of established values and gives a thought-provoking portrayal of alcohol abuse. Although Bunting does not create memorable characters, her characters are believable, and they react in a realistic manner. The plot is tightly crafted and moves briskly toward resolution while maintaining an aura of suspense. The novel provides entertaining reading, and is excellent in its portrayal of a contemporary teenage world detailed with stonewashed Levi's, spray-painted graffiti, Colonel Sanders chicken bones, Surfer magazine, and a Razzle Dazzle Video Arcade.



# Themes and Characters

A Sudden Silence is peopled with contemporary characters that are deftly drawn and act like real persons. Jesse narrates the story and is the most fully developed character as the reader is privy to Jesse's thoughts and emotions.

Although the story opens with the death of sixteen-year-old Bry (Bryan), he continues to be significant to the action, and the reader gets to know him through the eyes of Jesse and other characters. Bry is not, however, a fully rounded character because those grieving for him remember only his good traits, and he is not given a free range of human emotions. Also, one questions whether Bunting is somewhat manipulative in the matter of Bry's disability. Deaf from birth as a result of his mother having German measles while he was in the womb, Bry is never taught to sign but relies on lip-reading.

He is portrayed as talking almost normally, a feat that seems unlikely since he has never heard speech.

Bry's "hearing girl" Chloe is pretty, resourceful, and a threat to Jesse's peace of mind as he finds himself increasingly attracted to her. Although he feels disloyal to Bry, Jesse's feelings for Chloe heighten as he and Chloe spend time together making and distributing posters to solicit information about Bry's death. Chloe is a winsome character who is given the very human quality of an extremely messy room.

One feels empathy for her as the story moves to its painful resolution.

The two sets of parents are stereotypical presentations of the values of the working class as opposed to the well-to-do. Jesse's parents, the Harmons, are working class, live in a trailer park, and have only one rather shabby car. In spite of a lack of material wealth, they have a great deal of caring within their family that provides emotional support and helps to allay their grief. The loving relationship that existed between Bry and his grandfather is endearing, as is the compassion Jesse displays toward his mom. The Harmons are succored by the sympathy and kindness of their neighbors and friends.

In contrast to the Harmons, Chloe's parents, the Eichlers, live in a lovely home and maintain a wealthy profile, but their lives are marked by materialism and undercurrents of tension. Mr. Eichler's involvement with his business leaves little time for the responsibilities of family, and Mrs. Eichler is inadequate to the task of filling the gap. The Eichlers' son Wilson finds deliberate ways to be absent from home, and when he is home, he is improperly supervised. Bry is hit and killed after leaving a wild party at the Eichler house which Wilson had given. One sees little warmth and support to undergird the family structure at the Eichler's.

Bunting has inserted a variety of other characters that are representational of those encounters in real life.





There is a beach bum known as "Sowbug," two inane sisters who talk only through their dog Fluffy, a compassionate cop, and a mysterious stranger who appears at Bry's funeral.

While most of the conflict centers on Jesse and his painful laboring to come to terms with Bry's death, the other characters bolster the action and aid the development of the plot to uncloak Bry's killer.

There are many contemporary issues at work in this novel, such as Bry's disability, the irresponsible action of a drunk driver, and Jesse's moving past guilt to an acceptance of Bry's death.

Superimposed over these issues and providing an umbrella that holds them loosely together is the theme of responsibility—that one must ultimately bear the consequences of one's actions. Jesse and his parents have individual feelings of guilt about Bry with which to deal. Jesse is ashamed of being attracted to Chloe whom he regards as Bry's girl and is haunted by thoughts that he should have saved Bry. His parents are unsure if they were right to prevent Bry's learning to sign and wonder if they kept him in limbo, a part of neither the deaf nor the hearing world.

Each of them, however, finds a measure of "amazing grace" that helps them deal with the pain. For Mrs. Eichler, however, the driver who allows alcohol to impair her judgment and bring about Bry's death, there can be no such lessening of guilt. The pain and suffering of two families is the awful burden she must accept.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Jesse feels guilty that he did not somehow save Bry. Do you think he must assume responsibility for his brother's death?
2. When Jesse spots a stain on the highway that he thinks is Bry's blood, he goes onto the highway to wipe it up. Luckily, it is only oil, and Jesse does not have to risk his life to remove it. What do Jesse's actions tell you about him?
3. All the guys call the homeless drunk "Sowbug" even to his face. Sowbug seems to respond to this name.

Why would anyone, even a bum, accept such a derogatory name?

4. Why is Jesse ashamed of his attraction to Chloe? Why is Chloe equally ashamed of encouraging his feelings for her?

5. When Jesse and his dad discuss their feelings concerning Bry's death, Jesse makes a point of not revealing that he was thinking about Chloe just before the car hit Bry. Would it have helped Jesse to feel less guilty if he had shared this secret with his dad?

6. Chloe explains to Jesse that she never told Bry she liked him only as a friend because Bry was deaf and she felt sorry for him. Was Chloe right to let Bry think she was his girl? What do her actions tell you about Chloe?

7. Jesse muses, "I couldn't help thinking how innocent parents are.

Lemonade and cookies. Mrs. Eichler would have freaked if she'd seen what was being consumed here last Saturday night." Do you agree that most parents are innocent of their children's activities?

8. Bunting hints at what it was like for Chloe growing up in her home with an alcoholic mother. Elaborate on how you think it would be to have such a mother. Does Chloe's relationship with her mother seem realistic in the light of Mrs. Eichler's addiction?

9. Chloe says about her mother, "It's our fault, too, of course. Mine and Wilson's and Dad's. Mom hides her drinking the way she hides everything else about herself. We help her hide it." Do you agree her family must share Mrs. Eichler's responsibility for her drinking?

10. Bunting uses real places to set her stories and makes repeated topical allusions, such as to Lionel Richie's "Dancing on the Ceiling," Reebok shoes, Spenser for Hire on television, and BABY-ON-BOARD rear window signs. Do these enhance your enjoyment of the story or would the story be just as effective without them? Will such topical allusions cause the story to become outdated?



11. What clues can one find in hindsight that would indicate the plausibility of Mrs. Eichler's guilt as the drunken driver who kills Bry?

12. At the end of the book Jesse thinks, "It seems impossible that there'll ever be anything between Chloe and me. How could it be? Her mother, my brother." Is there a possibility that the two can establish a new relationship? What are some obstacles they will have to overcome in order to do this?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. There is much suspense involved as Jesse searches for the killer of Bry.

What possibilities other than Mrs. Eichler might the author have used?

2. In speaking of Chloe's mother, Jesse states, "I guess her mom will get help now whether she wants it or not."

Research what can be done to assist someone who has an addiction and does not want help.

3. After Jesse determines the identity of the driver of the hit-and-run car, he thinks, "It's strange. I'd been so sure that finding that driver would make me feel better. If anything I feel worse." Research the reasons why people feel guilty even when they are not directly responsible for a tragedy.

4. Drunk driving is a leading cause of accidental death in our country. Research what measures your community or state is implementing to curtail drunk driving.

5. How might the story have been changed if Jesse had jumped in an attempt to save Bry before the car hit him? What are some possibilities the author might have used?

6. Many reviewers say Bunting's books have messages for young adults hidden in the actions of her characters.

What do you think might be the message of this book?

7. Mr. and Mrs. Harmon wonder if Bry should have been taught to sign instead of talk since signing would have allowed him to assume a larger role in the deaf world. Research signing and explain why it is important to deaf people.



## For Further Reference

"Bunting, Eve. *A Sudden Silence*." *Booklist* (April 15, 1988): 1419. The reviewer summarizes briefly the action of the book and concludes that this novel is "a particularly good choice for reluctant readers."

Dillon, Doris, and Valerie Lewis. "Meet the Author: Eve Bunting." *Instructor* (September 1992): 61-63. Gives elementary school students insight into Bunting as a real person.

Raymond, Allen. "Eve Bunting: From Ireland with Love." *Early Years* (October 1986): 38-40. This article provides a look at the person of Bunting as an Early Years interviewer visits her in her home. Bunting talks of her private life, her writing techniques, and the social values of her books.

Review. *Horn Book* (July/August 1988): 499-500. This review concludes by saying, "a moving story, which reveals both human caring and the painful consequences of irresponsible actions."

Review. *Publishers Weekly* (April 8, 1988): 96. Describes the book as "a strong anti-alcoholism message through an intriguing detective-story."

## Related Titles

The books Bunting has written for her young adult audience have a commonality that characterizes them. Each is a fast-paced, easily-read novel that presents a contemporary problem (suicide, alienation from parents, peer pressure, a searching for self) that quickly engages the reader. Often there is the added element of mystery or intrigue and there is usually an involvement with romance. Bunting's resolutions reveal sensitivity and perception and demonstrate an understanding of the pressures exerted on many teen-agers today.

Two additional novels develop the theme of teen-age death found in *A Sudden Silence*. *Face at the Edge of the World* details how Charlie Curtis, a promising young writer anticipating college on a scholarship, shocks the community of Oceanside, California, by committing suicide. His best friend Jed is bewildered and hurt by Charlie's action, and he attempts to make sense of it by uncovering Charlie's motivation. As he gradually learns the truth about Charlie's death, Jed is forced to face difficult truths about himself.

*Jumping the Nail* deals with the problem of peer pressure as a group of teen-agers become involved in challenging each other to leap ninety feet from sheer cliffs into the ocean below.

The jumping gets out of hand and ends with Eliza driving her car over the cliffs to her death. The surviving teens are left to ponder how each of them was responsible for Eliza's actions.



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