

Say Goodnight, Gracie Short Guide

Say Goodnight, Gracie by Julie Reece Deaver

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

Say Goodnight, Gracie Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	12
Related Titles.....	13
Copyright Information.....	14



Overview

In *Say Goodnight, Gracie, Deaver* explores the complex emotions surrounding the death of a close friend. Morgan Hackett and Jimmy Woolf, born within a week of each other to women who were themselves close friends in high school, have been best friends almost since birth. They spend almost all of their free time together, and are supportive of each other's efforts to move into professional careers in the arts.

Their intense though platonic relationship has left little room in their lives for other friends; hence, when Jimmy is killed in an accident caused by a drunk driver, seventeen-year-old Morgan struggles to go on alone. Her life has been altered in a way that is difficult for her to accept.

Morgan struggles through the stages of denial and anger, settling into deep depression and rejecting others' efforts to assist her in coping with her loss.

Finally, with the help of her very supportive parents and an aunt who is a psychiatrist, Morgan is able to put her life on hold until she comes to terms with Jimmy's death.

About the Author

Julie Reece Deaver was born on March 13, 1953, in Geneva, Illinois, to Wilds and Dee (Rider) Deaver. During her formative years, Deaver was encouraged in her writing by her parents. The family is one in which literary efforts have played a significant role: Deaver's father was an advertising writer, and her brother, Jeffery Wilds Deaver, has written several mystery novels. Originally planning to write for television, Julie Deaver has adopted the techniques of that medium in her fiction; most notably, she uses a great deal of dialogue in her writing.

Deaver has contributed illustrations to magazines and newspapers. *Say Goodnight, Gracie*, her first novel, appeared in 1988, and was warmly received by critics. It was chosen by the American Library Association as one of the best books for young adults. She followed this novel with *First Wedding, Once Removed*, in 1990.

Setting

Say Goodnight, Gracie takes place in and around Chicago. Morgan and Jimmy live in Glen Ellyn, a Chicago suburb, but Jimmy's interest in dancing and Morgan's interest in acting frequently draw them to the city. Deaver's familiarity with the Chicago theater world is apparent, because the theater scenes are highly believable. The families both live in relative affluence; there is always enough money to support Morgan and Jimmy during their frequent excursions into the city, and the parents seem intent on fostering the teen-agers' aspirations by providing them the material support as well as verbal encouragement to pursue their dreams.

Social Sensitivity

While *Say Goodnight, Gracie* contains little that could be considered sensitive to parents or educators, some adults might find the cavalier attitude of the characters about school attendance distressing. Additionally, on occasion Deaver places blunt language in the mouths of her teen-age characters. It would be foolish to think that young adults do not use foul or suggestive language, but younger readers seeing four-letter words in a book recommended by adults may get the impression that such language is acceptable.

Literary Qualities

Written in first person, past tense, *Say Goodnight, Grade* makes significant use of dialogue and reflection to move the plot. Morgan Hackett's story is told to the reader through the eyes of a young woman who is confused and angered by the tragic turn of events that alters her life forever; readers share the heroine's frustrations and despair firsthand, and see the efforts of other friends, parents, and especially her aunt only obliquely. Nevertheless, the sensitive reader will realize that Morgan is wrong to dwell morbidly on the loss of her dearest friend; the advice offered by her father and her aunt makes good sense to those not too caught up in the emotional turmoil Morgan feels.

Deaver pays little attention to creating central metaphors that would give universal dimensions to her work.

There is one clear exception, however; the title of the book, *Say Goodnight, Grade*, will recall for adult readers the long love affair between comedians George Burns and Gracie Allen (the phrase was the tag line with which the two ended their popular television show in the 1950s). Burns and Allen were a team on stage and in life for four decades. Then Allen died, and Burns went through a long period of grief before he emerged as a senior statesman of comedy, able to speak fondly of his deceased wife. The loss of Jimmy, Morgan's friend for less than twenty years, is slight by comparison.

This is not to suggest, however, that Morgan's grief is not sincere or felt intensely; it is simply a way to remind teen-age readers who have developed close relationships that it is possible to overcome the sense of loss that inevitably sets in when such a relationship ends.



Themes and Characters

Deaver's central interest in the novel is the crisis young people must face when someone close to them dies. To create the kind of circumstance where the pain of that loss can be felt intensely, she creates two central characters whose lives have been closely intertwined since birth, almost as if they were siblings.

Living an almost fairy-tale life in Glen Ellyn, Morgan and Jimmy are surrounded by caring adults who support their theatrical ambitions. Jimmy idolizes Fred Astaire and aspires to be a dancer; and Morgan, whose heroes include Shelly Long, Bill Murray, and John Belushi of Chicago's Second City theater company, wants to be an actress. Aided by their mothers, Morgan and Jimmy frequently skip school for auditions and workshops. They seem to rely only on each other, ignoring opportunities to make friends with others at school. Morgan is intensely dependent on Jimmy for emotional support, and she is jealous when he pays attention to other girls. Their relationship is intense but platonic, and some readers may question the lack of sexual attraction between them. Although she includes scenes in which sexual innuendo between Morgan and Jimmy is present, Deaver suggests that it is possible for young people of the opposite sex to have healthy friendships without the sexual dimension being included.

Predictably, Jimmy's death sends Morgan into an emotional tailspin, and Deaver concentrates in the second half of the novel on showing how it is essential for people to let others support them in their grief. Like most teen-agers, Morgan believes only she is suffering when Jimmy dies; and like most people her age, she finds it hard to turn to others, especially adults, to help her through this difficult time.

The adults—Jimmy's mother, her own aunt, her parents, and her teacher at school—provide strong models for Morgan to follow, and eventually, following their lead, she comes to terms with her grief and is able to get on with her life. She learns from her aunt the lesson Deaver wishes to teach through her story: although the grief and loss hurt deeply, it is possible to go on with life. The subtle subtext of Deaver's story is that teen-agers who accept the support of adults have the best chance of succeeding in life.

However, Deaver's portrait of adults is enigmatic. While the young adult characters are believable, the adults in *Say Goodnight, Gracie* are almost too idyllic; on the other hand, the lack of stereotypical characters is refreshing.

In fact, Deaver provides some interesting role reversals that can offer the basis for excellent discussion with students who might have already formed stereotypical ideas about male and female roles. Morgan's father is a visual artist, and is apparently successful in his work; he supports the family in a comfortable, upper-middle-class lifestyle through his painting. On the other hand, Morgan's aunt Lo Hackett is a prominent psychiatrist. Clearly recognized by both the teen-agers and the adults in the story as the wisest and most successful figure in their lives, Dr. Hackett is a strong example of a woman who has made it in what is generally considered a man's profession. She is respected in the hospital where she works, and her professional life



moves from crisis to crisis—all of which she handles with exceptional skill. She has her own personal travails, of course—she is trying to quit smoking, and she is unable to sustain a meaningful relationship with a man both she and her family like very much—but she is never too busy to care for her niece.



Topics for Discussion

1. At the beginning of Chapter 3, Morgan and Jimmy's mothers call the school to have Morgan and Jimmy excused. Is their behavior responsible?

Should parents ever lie to school authorities? Discuss the options that schools could implement to cover such events.

2. Compare the last part of Chapter 4 with the first part of Chapter 12. Why did Jimmy and Morgan lash out at each other after their poor performances?

Discuss constructive ways to deal with feelings of failure.

3. When she sees her aunt comforting Mrs. Woolf after Jimmy's accident, Morgan does not have to be told that Jimmy is dead. Why? Discuss the power of nonverbal communication.

4. Why was Morgan unable to attend Jimmy's funeral?

5. At the end of the novel, Morgan throws Jimmy's jacket in the river.

What does this act symbolize for Morgan?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Funeral customs are different throughout the world. Write a paper comparing the funeral customs of our culture with those of different culture.
2. In *Say Goodnight, Gracie*, Jimmy has chosen to be a dancer, often considered a female pursuit, and Aunt Lo is a psychiatrist, traditionally a male profession. Write a paper on the career that you plan to pursue, paying particular attention to traditional gender roles.
3. Read A. E. Housman's "To an Athlete Dying Young." Compare the sympathies expressed in Housman's poem with the feelings Deaver expresses about death through her protagonist, Morgan.
4. The accident that kills Jimmy is caused by a drunk driver. Research and report on your community's efforts to decrease the number of people who drink and drive.
5. "Knowing what you have to lose, but risking the loss anyway. That's what it's all about." What is the meaning of this quotation from the last page of the novel?

For Further Reference

Allen, Susan. Review. *New York Times Book Review* (July 31, 1988): 33. Allen finds Deaver's treatment of Morgan's mourning process convincing, but her treatment of the relationship central to the plot less convincing.

Burns, Connie Tyrell. Review. *School Library Journal* (Fall 1988): 84. This review calls *Say Goodnight, Gracie* "[a] well-drawn portrayal of the complex emotions of an adolescent's first confrontation with death."

Sutherland, Zena. Review. *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* (Fall 1988): 114. A short, positive review of *Say Goodnight, Gracie*.

Trosky, Susan M, ed. "Julie Reece Deaver." In *Contemporary Authors*. Volume 129. Detroit: Gale Research, 1990.

Contains a brief sketch of the author's life and works.

Vasilakis, Nancy. Review. *Horn Book* (September/October 1988): 630. Vasilakis praises Deaver's effective description of the camaraderie between Morgan and Jimmy while noting a lack of tension in the first half of the book.

Related Titles

The issue of loss through death is one treated by several writers of young adult fiction. One particularly good example is Robin Brancato's *Facing Up* (1984); in that novel a teen-age boy loses his best friend, and suffers the same sense of loss and anger that Deaver's heroine feels. Pairing the novels might be a good way to show readers that these feelings exist in both boys and girls.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996