

# Second Star to the Right Short Guide

## Second Star to the Right by Deborah Hautzig

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## Overview

*Second Star to the Right* is about the complex love between a parent and a child. In an age when most books for the young adult are focusing on aspects of an abused or neglected child, this book shows what happens when the love of a mother becomes too encompassing. Leslie Hiller loves her mother, but she never seems to be able to enjoy that love; instead, she always feels guilty for something she has thought about or for something she has not thought to do. Leslie and her mother love each other "to the moon and back," but this love leaves Leslie empty and guilty.

Leslie is always trying to figure out what will make her happy, while at the same time keeping her image as the perfect child intact for her mother's friends. She is a fourteen-year-old girl who says that she loves to break rules.

"It was a lot easier not doing what I was supposed to do than trying to figure out what I really wanted." However, Leslie never breaks a rule that might disappoint her mother. She will wear the wrong color socks with her school uniform and feel satisfied, but panics if she gets a "C" on an exam, and will work very hard to bring the grade up before the time of report cards. Leslie's love for living free of rules is hampered by her fear of disappointing her mother. She could not stand the thought of seeing disappointment etched in her mother's face. The spontaneous nature of Leslie's personality—the wanting to do what makes her feel good—is smothered by the need to be the perfect little girl.

The ultimate love that Leslie appears to be striving for is the love demonstrated by her mother's cousin, Margolee, who died in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. Leslie is raised with many horror stories about the destruction and the torture of her mother's family in the concentration camps, but the strength and the courage of her namesake, Margolee, appears to take on a life of its own. Margolee was in the same line as her own mother as they moved toward the Nazi German soldiers. The individuals in their line were sent either to the left or to the right. Those sent to the left were too old or too sick to work and were put to death immediately; those sent to the right got the chance to stay alive.

Margolee was sent to the right and her mother to the left; Margolee chose to go to the gas chamber with her mother so that she would not die alone. Leslie often thinks about what choice she would make if asked.

On the surface, Leslie and Mrs. Hiller appear to have a good relationship.

Mrs. Hiller is very interested in everything that Leslie is doing or thinking of doing. When Leslie returns from the dance when she meets Avram Werner, her mother is talking on the telephone with her best friend Judy. As Leslie is telling her about the evening, Mrs. Hiller is getting more and more excited as she repeats and relives the story for Judy. It was as if Mrs. Hiller had gone to the dance and met Avram. Leslie goes to her room with an empty feeling as if the evening was no longer hers to think about. She starts to feel



robbed because she never seems to have anything that is only hers. Her friends become her mother's friends; her plans become her mother's plans; her dreams become her mother's dreams. Leslie struggles to find what will make her happy.

Over Christmas vacation Leslie gets sick and loses a few pounds; for the first time in her life she feels like she is in control of her life. She decides that being thin would make her happy. At first the more weight she loses the happier she believes she is; but then a voice takes over, the dictator, and she is forbidden to eat. At first Leslie is pleased to have someone who is helping her diet; she thinks of this voice as a "savior." She sets a goal of 105 pounds as her ideal weight to be happy. But she passes this goal with no realization of having reached it. She has not only stopped eating, but she has developed what she believes is a miracle technique of erasing any mistake she might make. She forces herself to vomit any food she believes she should not have eaten. When Leslie drops down to 86 pounds she is put in the hospital and eventually gets into a program for individuals who have eating disorders. The book ends with the impression that Leslie will survive. She has decided to go to the right and straight on till morning. But, unlike Peter Pan she will grow up, change, and become her own person.

## About the Author

Deborah Hautzig was born October 1, 1956, in New York City. She attended Carnegie-Mellon University from 1974 to 1975, then transferred to Sarah Lawrence College where she received her bachelor of arts degree in politics in 1978. Hautzig says she was born to write. "I love to write more than anything else in the world. I feel unified when I write—sort of like being married to myself. Technical ability means nothing without emotional validity, and emotional outpouring without craftsmanship and discipline is ultimately powerless—and usually pretty boring."

The daughter of Walter ( a musician) and Esther (a writer) Hautzig, she grew up in an artistic household. She majored in the fine arts at Carnegie-Mellon University before she transferred to Sarah Lawrence College. Deborah was only twelve years old when her mother's autobiographical novel, *The Endless Steppe*, was first published. Hautzig has said that she herself would someday like to write a novel about the Hitler years from the point of view of the second-generation American immigrant; although she has not as yet written this novel, her works for the young adult appear to draw heavily on her family's heritage. In *Second Star to the Right* the effects of the Holocaust on the family members left behind are woven throughout the story. In *Hey, Dollface*, the mother in the story is actually Esther Hautzig from *The Endless Steppe*. Both mothers spent time in some form of concentration camp as did Deborah's own mother. Her first novel, *Hey, Dollface* (1978) was named the best book for young adults by the American Library Association. Since 1984 Hautzig has been writing books for the "Sesame Street Start-to-Read Series," the "Sesame Street Mini Storybook Series," and the "Step into Reading Book Series."

## Setting

Because Leslie is in constant conflict within and about herself, she believes she does not fit in anywhere. In order for her to feel as though she belonged at her school, she believed she had to stop being herself. It seemed as if all the girls at Barrow were "graceful and slender" while she was fat at 5'5" and 125 pounds. Leslie also believed that the girls at Barrow were frightened of her because she was from the West Side of New York and her father was a musician. She believed she was the exact opposite of all of the girls at Barrow.

At home, Leslie's turmoil and frustration not only continued, but grew.

Leslie says about her mother, "I miss her sometimes when I'm in the same room with her! Like I'm not really with her. And another thing—I get homesick sometimes, which wouldn't be strange except I'm usually at home when it happens."

The setting of *Second Star to the Right* demonstrates that much of the conflict and turmoil that Leslie faces daily is a result of her unresolved feelings for her mother. Her unhappiness and her feeling different from everyone else is because she does not believe she is worthy of love. It is only at the Columbia Presbyterian Hospital that Leslie starts to look at some of what is really bothering her. It is only after she has been removed from the environment that caused her problem that she is able to look at the problem. She is also somewhat relieved to be with a group who are all suffering from an eating disorder. Carrie, Nicole, and Jessica all appear to be normal teenagers, albeit very skinny. With Leslie they form a group that understands there is much more to life than what shows on the surface. Leslie knows that each of them is suffering a silent war inside, but more importantly, she realizes that each of them knows she also is suffering. It is in the later environment that Leslie starts to take chances; it is also where she starts to look at some of the things that bother her so much. Leslie is not well when the book ends, but the reader is assured that she has a "promise of happiness."



## Social Sensitivity

There are many aspects of *Second Star to the Right* which may be of concern to some readers or parents. First, there is attempted suicide in the form of anorexia nervosa; second, there is deception as Leslie lies to all those around her in order to conceal her condition; and third, there is the terrible memory of the Holocaust which looms throughout the actions of Mrs. Hiller and Leslie.

But perhaps the biggest concern should be why Leslie's eating disorder went unnoticed for so long; it is true that this book was published in 1981, which is before the death of singer Karen Carpenter from anorexia nervosa and before the disease was so well known. However, American society places so much emphasis on being thin that Leslie kept receiving compliments for losing weight. It is not until she can hardly stand up and walk that she is brought to a doctor. When her mother is concerned because she is losing so much weight, she is told to stop being a "Jewish mother." There is not one person who seems to care (other than Mrs. Hiller) that Leslie is losing weight too rapidly, that her fingernails are turning blue, and that she is cold all of the time. Some of her teachers notice that she may be losing too much weight after she drops to under one hundred pounds. She is constantly being told that she should stop dieting because she is "not fat" or that she is "thin enough," but never does anyone ask her whether or not everything is okay.

The American public has placed so much emphasis on being thin and unfortunately, anorexia nervosa and bulimia have become very common diseases. Teen-agers must be made aware that healthy eating is beneficial to their whole being, but that being thin at any cost is too big a price to pay.

## Literary Qualities

There are many subplots running through *Second Star to the Right*, but none so important or integral to the story line as Mrs. Hiller's cousin Margolee choosing to die with her mother and what this means to Leslie.

Many of Mrs. Hiller's family suffered horrible conditions in concentration camps, and many died. Mrs. Hiller, who herself was in a concentration camp, is scarred from this period, and is not capable of reaching out to Leslie in an unselfish manner. She will not let Leslie own anything that is made in Germany, which is why Leslie hides the rapidograph pen Cavett gives to her. Leslie also hides from her mother the fact that she feels flattered when the girls at school tell her "you really don't look Jewish." Leslie, who tells her mother everything, is now in conflict with herself. She feels guilty because she believes she is doing something wrong. The only subject that Leslie appears unable to share with her mother is about being Jewish.

When Leslie stops eating and it becomes apparent that her diet is out of control, she screams at her mother for the first time, "It's not my fault you were hungry when you were a kid! My eating won't change that!" It is as if it were Mrs. Hiller's past that is suffocating both her and Leslie. Because Mrs. Hiller's past and Leslie's present are linked to the Holocaust, it is impossible for Leslie to talk about how she feels to her mother. She can only talk about things that will not disappoint her mother, and it is extremely important to Leslie that her mother never think her not eating is in any way a reflection on her past. Leslie would rather die the perfect child than have her mother think anything is wrong.

Perhaps the most vivid symbol Hautzig uses is the dictator as a force to keep Leslie from eating. A powerful force that is in complete control of another's body and mind with the intention of doing evil represents the Nazi Germans and their control over the Jewish people. Mrs. Hiller's past has become so much a part of Leslie's life that she must suffer as her mother did.

Because the Holocaust is long since over, Leslie creates her own Hitler within her own mind.





# Themes and Characters

The title of *Second Star to the Right* is taken from *Peter Pan*, and describes how to find Never Never Land. Unlike Peter, who refuses to grow up, Leslie wants to grow and take control of her own life, but she does not know how.

Leslie thinks about Peter Pan the night she feels her mother robbed her of her happiness from the dance. "If I open the window all the way and wait long enough, Peter Pan will fly in and take me away." Peter Pan represents freedom. Leslie's life is headed for destruction and sure death unless she is able to make the choice to fly away and turn her life around.

The other time that Leslie refers to Peter Pan is when she is talking with Dr. Wilcox and there are indications that she might be getting strong enough to stand up to her mother, or at the very least to look and see that there are problems with their relationship.

She indicates that if she could fly she would go away to a place where she could be free. "Never-be-hungry land, never-be-judged land, never-be-Mom land always-be-me land." The theme of freedom and never letting go (growing up) as symbolized by Peter Pan comes full circle. When Leslie is weak she want Peter to come and take her away to a place that is happy; as she gets stronger she wants to fly like Peter Pan, but she is going to a place all her own. She is willing to grow up but she wants things to be different.

The major characters are Leslie and her mother; all of the other characters build and support these two.

Cavett French is Leslie's best friend.

Our first introduction to her is "she's normal, like us," Leslie announces. It turns out Cavett is normal in comparison to all the other characters in the book. All she wants is for Leslie to be happy, get well, and be her friend.

Cavett is not a well-rounded character, but her behavior around Leslie tells something about her. She is afraid for Leslie, but only asks once: "I don't mean to sound like everyone else, but —can't you eat just a little so you can get out of there? I mean, I don't care what you look like or anything, but can't you just get healthy enough to come home?" She misses her friend.

Margolee is Leslie's namesake and Mrs. Hiller's cousin who chose to go to the gas chamber with her mother rather than let her face death alone. Although Margolee is long since dead, it is the love she demonstrated for her own mother which has remained a constant barrier between Leslie and Mrs. Hiller.

Ruth and Max Hiller are Leslie's parents. Max Hiller teaches piano at the Juilliard School of Music and travels on concert tours. The first time we see how important the feeling of



being free is to Leslie is when Mr. Hiller is playing her favorite song, a mazurka, on his piano. He is the parent who does not demand the attention and the love; and he is the parent that Leslie admits she may not love as much as her mother. Mrs. Hiller spent part of her youth in a concentration camp where she lost many of her relatives, and she wants Leslie to be happy more than anything in the world; she is reliving her own youth through Leslie and it is important that it be right this time around.

Mrs. Hiller's biggest problem is that she loves Leslie too much and is too insecure to let her go; therefore, she smothers her.

Leslie sees five doctors during the course of her eating disorder. The two medical doctors are men and the three psychiatrists are women. The first medical doctor whom she sees is Dr. Lese.

Leslie is five feet five and one-half inches tall and she weighs eighty-six pounds, after having lost nearly thirty pounds in a relatively short period of time. He sends her home and tells her to "try and gain a few pounds, and I'll see you again in two weeks." The first psychiatrist Leslie sees is Dr. Jenkins.

When Leslie confides in her that she is not eating because she is not sure she deserves to live, the doctor stares at her and does not say another word until the session is over. After she loses another ten pounds in the two weeks, Dr. Lese puts her in the hospital and Leslie chooses a new psychiatrist, Dr.

Sussman. The first meeting is superficial and troubling to Leslie, as well as to the reader. The doctor puts Leslie on Stelazine, a neuroleptic drug to reduce her anxiety level so that she will eat.

Leslie enters into a floating state of consciousness. Stelazine is what they use in many mental hospitals to keep the patients "under control." At the end of the session Dr. Sussman tells Leslie to start eating a little and then vanishes. The next set of doctors manage to raise her spirits a little. Dr. Gold is a pediatrician who specializes in treating anorexia. Leslie is put into the hospital for a three to four month program. She can receive visitors, parents only, once a week and make one telephone call per day. The hospital provides everything she will need, which is meant to set up a new dependency.

The rules are simple, yet strict. The choice is Leslie's. Patients do not have to eat, but must drink at least five glasses of a calorie liquid per day or be put on an IV. In order to be released from the hospital, a patient has to eat everything on his or her tray. The choice of when to get out also lies with Leslie. The rationale behind the rules is to remove Leslie from the environment where she was when she stopped eating, and to put more of the responsibility of getting well into the patient's hand. The team member psychiatrist, Dr. Wilcox, appears quite as competent as Dr. Gold. During the first session she tells Leslie, "Eating is not your problem, Leslie. It never was; it never will be. Starving will not get rid of the problems." Leslie talks and Dr. Wilcox listens.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Reread "God gave a loaf to every bird" by Emily Dickinson. Cavett believes Dickinson is saying something about being happy with what you have. Leslie believes the author is saying something about the feelings of starvation. What do you believe that Dickinson is saying? Why?

2. Why is it important for Leslie not to let her mother take any of the blame for what is happening to her?

3. Food in children's books often represents a good thing to the protagonist; Leslie believes food is a bad thing.

What does food symbolize in this book?

4. Why does Mrs. Hiller only buy things for herself that are on sale, and yet, spend any amount of money on something for Leslie?

5. Leslie says that she went to the dance like an empty box and Avram put a present in it. Her mother untied the ribbons, tore off the paper, and took out the gift. Why does Leslie feel robbed if she enjoys giving gifts more than receiving them? (Chapter 3) 6. Why does Leslie's relationship with her father appear to be so superficial?

7. Leslie says that she could never make Cavett understand how she felt about her mother buying her a present every night of Hanukkah. How does she feel? Why? Why can she not explain this to Cavett?

8. Leslie drops her lunch bag with raspberry yogurt in the trash can and then apologizes to her mother. Why is Leslie sorry?

9. After Leslie sees the first two doctors she thinks to herself, "they poke and call and worry and ask me questions, but nobody can see or hear me; maybe I don't exist then." Why does she feel this way?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Family heritage is often used in literature as a symbol to represent strength in a character. What is the nature of Leslie's heritage and how does it effect her?
2. The reader's only knowledge of the events in *Second Star to the Right* is through Leslie's eyes. Does Leslie appear to be an accurate reporter? Discuss the ways in which she is reliable or unreliable.
3. Leslie feels "free and unself-conscious and beautiful" when she sits and listens to her father play the piano (Chapter 2). It is one of the few times we see Leslie relaxed; what is different?
4. Mrs. Hiller writes Leslie a letter in Chapter 6 which appears to be a beautiful sentiment of her love for Leslie.

Leslie says it was like hearing a chord with one wrong note. What does she mean? Why?

5. Leslie tells us about the person inside of her who refuses to let her eat.

She calls this voice the dictator. Write a report about some of the things that the dictator might symbolize.

6. *The Endless Steppe* is about a young Jewish girl in exile during World War II. This novel is autobiographical and written by Deborah Hautzig's mother.

Imagine young Esther in *The Endless Steppe* as a grown-up Mrs. Hiller in *Second Star to the Right*. Compare the two. What are the similarities? The differences?

7. Leslie says being stingy is fun (Chapter 6). She compares it to a game.

What does she mean?

8. In Leslie's dream in Chapter 7, the Orthodox Jew turns into a woman, but the screaming German is also a woman.

This is different from the dictator. How do you interpret her dream?

9. Mrs. Hiller had always praised Leslie because she seldom asked for anything. Do you view this as a strength? How does it affect Leslie now that she needs help?



## For Further Reference

Rees, David. "From Russia With Love?"

—Esther and Deborah Hautzig." In *What do Draculas Do?* Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1990: 79-87. A comparison of *The Endless Steppe* and *Hey, Dollface*. Rees not only talks about the difference in language, with Esther's being more British than Deborah's American voice, he talks about the similarities. Both novels have strong women characters who have a curiosity about life.

Rosenthal, Lynne. "To Be or Not to Be: Suicide in Literature for Young People." *The Lion and the Unicorn*: 12 (June 1988): 19-27. This article looks at ways in which literature can help to stop the alarming rate of suicides among teen-agers. One of the books looked at is *Second Star to the Right*; after a brief review of the book, the article find that the novel "may be helpful to adolescent readers with similar problems" as Leslie's.



## Related Titles

The Endless Steppe by Esther Hautzig is an autobiographical account of her life in exile. In 1941, Russian soldiers came to Esther's house in Vilna, Poland and took her grandmother, her father, her mother, and herself and crammed them into a cattle car for six weeks while heading toward an unknown destination. They survived on only bread, soup, and water. The house Esther and her family were taken from was a large house with six separate apartments all filled with family members: her paternal grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. All other family members were left behind and eventually died in or were brutally murdered in concentration camps.

Esther and her family were deported to Siberia where they spend the next five years fighting to stay alive. They never had enough food so they were always hungry; they did not have the proper shelter or warm clothes so they were always cold; and they had no other resources so they were always dependent on others. This was the most difficult part for Esther's mother.

Esther was a strong child who did much more than just survive. She had the opportunity to learn from some truly great teachers who had been forced to flee the universities in European Russia. These teachers were more than generous with their knowledge and Esther was more than willing to open her mind. Even though her years in Siberia were terrible, Esther learned and grew. Nothing broke her spirit or her will. After her family was released from Siberia they spend one year in Poland and then moved to Sweden.

Shortly after that Esther sailed by herself to the United States. On the trip over she met her husband, a concert pianist who was returning from his first European tour.

Deborah Hautzig draws heavily on her mother's strength as she creates her own young protagonists. Leslie is too strong to be suffocated. She must, at whatever cost, emerge as her own person. Fifteen-year-old Val Hoffman in *Hey, Dollface* is out of place with most people her own age. Val believes she is a different breed than all the other girls at Garfield School. She also meets a friend at school who means a great deal to her. In fact, it is the closeness of their relationship that cause Val to become confused. In the end we are sure that Val, like Leslie, is on the right road. The two teenage characters created by Deborah Hautzig are intelligent, strong, and willing to fight for a happier life, much the same as Esther in *The Endless Steppe*.



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