

Seek Short Guide

Seek by Paul Fleischman

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Contents

Seek Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
Setting.....	4
Social Sensitivity.....	5
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	9
Topics for Discussion.....	11
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	12
For Further Reference.....	14
Related Titles/Adaptations.....	16
Copyright Information.....	17

Overview

Seek is presented as Rob Radkovitz's senior thesis, an autobiographical essay which, according to his teacher, "should probe the themes of your life, analyzing signal events and charting the influences of family, community, and your historical era on your development." Written in an unconventional format that resembles a playscript, Rob's essay focuses primarily on his non-relationship with the father who abandoned him before he was even born. Lenny Guidry was a disk jockey, and Rob grows up listening to both local and DX (distant) radio stations in hopes of encountering his father's voice. With the support of his mother, grandparents, and, later, his new friends at high school, Rob becomes involved in shortwave radio, establishes an underground newspaper, writes fiction, and starts a "pirate" radio station. In seeking his father's voice, Rob ultimately finds his own.

Although the story of Rob's emotional journey makes for an affective plot, the book is equally notable for its unusual style.

Writing in metered prose, Fleischman blends the best of several forms—novel, poetry, and drama—to create a truly unique volume that can be silently read by an individual reader, or enacted as a reader's theater performance before an audience.

Setting

"Night's my hometown, the place I'm comfortable," states Rob. Although the reader knows exactly where he lives, it seems fitting that the protagonist of this novel defines himself more by the hours in which he thrives than by his geographic location. The book's unusual structure does not allow for extremely detailed physical descriptions of Rob's home and community; instead, it explores his emotional landscape and the nightly sojourns he makes— via the radio dial and his own imagination— to remote locations around the globe as he searches for his father's voice on the airwaves.

The physical setting of the story is briefly and concretely described: Rob and his mother live with Rob's grandparents in a Victorian duplex on San Francisco's Potrero Hill. The family has installed a connecting door between the two units of the duplex, which signifies the close relationship between the older and younger generations. Rob states, "I began to think of the long stairway in our house as the Mississippi," with the bottom step representing Louisiana, his father's home state. When Rob goes down the stairs, he always steps on the bottom step twice "to show I hadn't forgotten him." A few details about San Francisco are provided, including jokes about the Golden Gate Bridge and references to the weather (Rob's girlfriend Neva is shocked that August in California "could be as cold as winter in Chicago.") Rob makes occasional trips to Ray's Electronics on Sixteenth Street to buy radio equipment; the store and its proprietor are briefly, but marvelously, described: It was dim as a cave and crammed with old equipment. Ray kept several ashtrays busy at a time, one at the phone and one on the counter enveloping the shop in its own atmosphere of two percent oxygen and ninety-eight percent cigarette smoke, the price of his otherwise free advice.

Less beguiling is Rob's description of his new high school. "Jefferson looked like a battleship: huge, gray, a scarred survivor of a thousand vandal attacks." Although he originally begs his mother to homeschool him, Rob continues to attend Jefferson, making new friends and testing the staid restrictions of his high school by tweaking authority in the classroom and starting an underground newspaper.

This theme of achieving personal growth by rising above convention runs throughout the novel. Fleischman chooses metaphors that suggest height and distance (Potrero Hill, an antenna "affixed to the pitched roof" above Rob's bedroom, radio waves bouncing off the ionosphere and relaying sounds from thousands of miles away) that take the story far outside the confines of Rob's bedroom.



Social Sensitivity

Despite its relative brevity, *Seek* addresses a number of social issues, with a particular emphasis on the impact of a broken home on a young person's life. It is interesting to note that Rob's perspective on the matter is almost entirely personal. First and foremost, he longs for the father he never knew.

He dreams of encountering Lenny's voice somewhere on the radio band, and fantasizes that his father will return. Initially he does not judge Lenny for abandoning his family, for not providing monetary support, or for never calling or writing. Rob's attitude toward his father does change over the course of the novel, but, for most of his childhood, his desire for a male parent is presented as a raw, primal need.

The circumstances of Rob's birth are described in neutral terms. The fact that he was born to unwed parents does not appear to be an issue to either Rob, his mother, or his grandparents. Relating the story of her courtship with Lenny, Rob's mother says, "I'd never had a live-in boyfriend before. I felt I was finally an adult, like my official card had come in the mail." Her attitude toward abortion is also casual. Rob's mother tells him that when she became pregnant Lenny assumed she would have an abortion. "I felt ready for a child," she states, but adds that the couple argued about whether she would continue the pregnancy "until it was too late to get an abortion." Accepting that "the decision and the responsibility were mine" may initially seem an admirable attitude, but Rob's mother seems to leave one factor out of the equation: what are the consequences for Rob to be raised without a father—and a father who does not provide any monetary support at that?

A related issue involves a young person's attitude toward a parent's new partner. Here, Rob regards his mother's new boyfriend—and later husband—with believable jealousy and resentment that later softens to acceptance and affection.

The book also touches on issues of freedom of the press, journalistic ethics, and teenage rebellion against social injustices.

Because Rob and his friends find their work on the high school newspaper, the *Jetstream*, to be so unfulfilling, they create their own underground paper, *The Jefferson Post-Nasal Drip*, subtitled "All the News That's Snot Fit to Be in the *Jetstream*." The paper's parodies give way to "campaigns" that question if high-fat fast food should be available in the cafeteria and whether the school's gym clothes are manufactured in sweat shops.

One of the most interesting aspects of Rob's career in "anarchy" is that it not only addresses the kind of injustices that a bright high school student might find troubling but also relates to the book's central theme.

Rob's grandfather defends the teenager: He's running an underground paper, not stealing cars. He's found himself some fine substitutes to attack. Who was out with the

and crowbars, tearing down the statues of Lenin all over Europe? Men who hate their fathers, that's who. Rob reacts to these overheard words in shock, but admits, "I knew he was right."



Literary Qualities

In writing a novel, every author juggles the demands of creating a story and finding the best way to tell it, hoping for a seamless merging of style and substance. Fleischman is known for the exquisite care he takes in fashioning his prose, focusing on every word—and even every syllable—to achieve a metered, musical quality. Here, the rhythms of nearly every sentence can be scanned, and the author employs such literary techniques as alliteration (the repetition of initial consonant and vowel sounds) and assonance (the repetition of similar vowel sounds in different words.) *Seek* is a symphony of the spoken word, interpolating dialogue from over four dozen characters into an uninterrupted whole that travels effortlessly from place to place, as well as from the present to the past and back again. Fleischman is able to execute such verbal acrobatics without confusion through the judicious use of explanatory notes. The text of Rob's autobiographical thesis is always enclosed by quotation marks and preceded by an italicized, parenthetical note labeled "(reading)." Flashbacks are understood within the context of the story though, for reasons of clarity, when Rob himself speaks in a flashback scene, his name is changed to "Young Rob." The pacing of Rob's story is also notable, mounting to a feverish cacophony of strident voices as he awaits—and is disappointed by—his father at his graduation ceremony, then slowing to reveal a calmer, more reflective character as he matures into his later teenage years.

Irony is evident throughout the story, as Rob desperately seeks his father and Lenny virtually ignores his son. There is also irony in Lenny's choice of career. He is a professional communicator, and snippets from his radio broadcasts show him kindly helping members of his audience recall favorite memories, yet Lenny is unable to communicate—or help in any way—the one person who needs him most.

Symbolism is also utilized to good effect.

Early in the story, Rob mentions the baklava that his elderly Greek neighbors often share with him. Later, in a scene that shows the passage of time, Rob explains that Mr. Kathos has died and Mrs. Kathos, about to move into a nursing home, brings Rob one "last piece of baklava" that represents "my sweet, pampered childhood" and which he does not want to eat. Later, Rob's practice of a yoga "falling leaf" position may be seen to signify his acceptance of a new family structure that includes a stepfather.

Ghosts serve as another symbol in the story.

Lenny's late night radio show is called "The Ghost Rising" and he reappears in Rob's life, like a ghost, on Halloween night. Later, Rob expresses hope that his father will someday contact him again because "Halloween, when the spirits return to earth for one night, comes around every year."

Despite its moving premise, Fleischman prevents *Seek* from becoming too heavyhanded by including a welcome dose of humor, evident in the sardonic comments

of Rob's grandfather, as well as in Rob's wry observations about school assignments and his method of relieving classroom boredom with a game called "habit bingo."

Similarly, Fleischman keeps the story grounded in the real world by including allusions to television serials, baseball games, opera, myths, lullabies, and literary works such as English detective stories and Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*. These references not only serve as cultural touchstones— they also help illuminate the characterizations and situations found within the novel.



Themes and Characters

In this novel composed almost entirely of dialogue, there are fifty-two characters with speaking parts. Rob functions as the book's main narrative voice, with characters such as his mother, grandmother, grandfather, and friends providing strong support. Some minor characters, such as Mr. McCarthy, the teacher who assigns the senior thesis project, are essential to the plot; others perform in what is essentially a chorus: baseball announcers, Spanish-speaking television actors, audiobook readers, and radio station callers whose voices create the background music of Rob's life.

Together, these varied voices explore an array of themes including abandonment, disillusionment, family life, memory and reminiscence, rejection, and self-expression, all under the general rubric of one boy's coming-of-age.

Because the story is told through dialogue, the reader is not (with one important exception) provided with much physical description of the characters. Nor is the reader privy to their inner thoughts. Thus the only way to really understand each character is to study his or her words to determine personal history, motivation, and emotion. The novel's protagonist, Rob Radkovitz, is an extremely well-developed character. Initially, Rob represents the theme of abandonment as he obsesses about his absent father and spends his evenings dialing up and down the radio tuner hoping to find the sound of Lenny Guidry's (Rob's father) voice. Rob's desperation becomes evident as graduation from middle school nears and the young man—for no apparent reason—begins to fantasize that Lenny will show up for the ceremony. When this event fails to occur, Rob's attitude changes. "I'm through with radios!" he announces, and the theme of disillusionment emerges.

Now feeling completely rejected by his father, Rob embarks on a high school career that has nothing to do with radios or disc jockeys. Instead of reaching out for a father who is not there, he begins to reach out to new friends such as Zad, Penelope, and Neva. He joins the school newspaper, then begins his own underground paper. With the guidance of his mother, he studies creative writing. Although Rob never comments on this, it becomes clear to the reader that although the protagonist is no longer actively seeking his father on the radio, he still has a keen interest in communication as he explores these other forms of selfexpression. So it is not surprising that he eventually gravitates back to radio and starts his own pirate station. After struggling through a period of disillusionment he can return on his own terms, as a near-adult no longer haunted by the ghost of his distant father.

Other important characters include Rob's family members, who are identified throughout as "Rob's Mother," "Rob's Grandmother," and "Rob's Grandfather." Each has a connection with words. Rob's mother is a foreign language teacher with an interest in writing; Rob's grandmother is a retired former editor; Rob's grandfather is a retired history professor who writes countless letters to the newspaper that are never published. All of these family members are well-rounded, with human interests and foibles. Offering constant love and support to Rob, they represent not only the theme of



family life but also (along with Aunts Jessica and June) support the theme of memory and reminiscence as they share stories of their past with Rob who, in turn, records his own past experiences for his senior thesis.

One of the most interesting characters is also the most enigmatic. Lenny Guidry's appearance ("Dark-haired and handsome.

Mustache. Muscular. Rough-hewn charm.")

and behavior ("Sociable on the surface but really he was solitary at heart. He burrowed into his music and was gone.") are described more thoroughly than the other characters'. Although Rob's father represents the theme of rejection, he is described so well, and comes across so colorfully in the recorded excerpts of his radio broadcasts, that the reader—like Rob—wants to know more about him. Lenny does eventually make contact with his son during a busy Halloween night broadcast on Rob's pirate radio station, but it's telling that he phones Rob rather than showing up in person. Even though he establishes a connection, he remains just a voice in the air. But by now Rob has matured and reached a level of self-awareness that also allows him to accept—if not understand—his deeply flawed father.



Topics for Discussion

1. Some critics have expressed concern that the unusual format of this novel could be offputting to readers. Did the book seem more difficult or easier to read than a standard novel? Did your feelings about the book's structure change as you read the entire volume?
2. Compare and contrast the roles of Rob's grandmother and grandfather, both as characters in the novel and as influences on Rob's life.
3. Consider the implications of the Internet on this novel. Would Rob's story be different if he sought out his father using the Internet rather than a radio? Do hobbies such as being an "AM band DXer" or shortwave radio operator seem passe now that people can listen to radio stations all over the world via the Internet?
4. A number of minor adult characters, including Aunt Jessica, Aunt June, Nick, and Ray, play roles in Rob's story. Compare and contrast their importance to his life.
5. Rob says, "I was raised among adults and treated as one." Is this a good thing, or does it have negative implications? Should Rob's mother have revealed Lenny's feelings about her pregnancy to Rob?
6. Limited by the strictures of high school, Rob finds creative release in outside activities such as writing and publishing an underground paper. Can these kinds of individual pursuits be just as educational as classroom activities?
7. Considering Rob's interests, emotions, and personality, is he more like his mother or his father? Or does he have traits of both?
8. Rob spends most of his childhood seeking his father. What do you think would have happened if Rob had tracked down Lenny and contacted him?
9. What does Rob mean when he tells his mother she was "in the Whispering Gallery" when he talked to Lenny on the phone?
10. Discuss how Rob was affected by Lenny's phone call. Do the last lines of the book suggest that Rob and Lenny will someday have a relationship?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The original dust jacket illustration of this book included a photograph of Paul Fleischman as a young boy, listening to a radio with earphones. Years later he had his own classical music radio program and wrote this novel concerning radio. Look at your own family's photo albums, paying special attention to pictures of your grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles as children. Do any of those photos provide clues to their later lives and careers? Do any of your own photographs depict your own continuing interests? Write an essay based on one of these photos.

2. Rob and his friends are concerned that the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) will discover their pirate radio station. Write a paper tracing the history of the FCC and explain what this organization is empowered to do.

3. Rob's teacher, Mr. McCarthy, tells his class to "Think of your autobiography as a letter addressed to your future self." Write a letter to your future self and set it aside to open at some later date—perhaps the day you graduate college.

4. Lenny tells one of the callers to his radio program to make a tape of songs that reveal how she is feeling. Create your own tape of music that reflects your emotions at this point in your life.

5. Research shortwave radios. How do they work? How are they built? Are there special laws or rules governing their use? If there is a shortwave radio club in your area, interview members and report on your findings.

6. When Rob begins to use a shortwave radio, he sends reception cards to the radio stations he hears. In return he receives QSL cards, which are "verifications sent by stations" and are sometimes accompanied by "a decal, a station schedule, a flag, a magazine, a banner, a map, or all of the above."

Contact local or distant radio stations and see if they will provide a QSL card or station souvenir for a school project.

7. Though a likable and increasingly wellgrounded individual, Rob has a difficult time warming up to Andy, his mother's new husband. Using the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, research and report on current articles dealing with blended families.

8. Rob is repeatedly described as a night person; his mother says he should be a member of the "Future Bartenders of America, Infant Auxiliary." What other professions are known as primarily night-time jobs?

9. Just as Lenny and Rob both have an interest in broadcasting, Sid and Paul Fleischman are both leading figures in children's and young adult literature.

Can you list other examples of famous parents/children in literature, music, and performance art?



10. Snippets of poetry and song are included throughout the novel, though often their titles are not identified. Using Internet search engines and poetry indexes, identify the various works that are cited in the pages of *Seek*.

11. What roles have underground student newspapers played historically?

12. Plan a reader's theater production of *Seek* and keep notes of how the story evolves in its journey from page to stage. Is it stronger as a written work or a performance piece?



For Further Reference

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Del Negro, Janice. Review of *Seek*. *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* (November 2001): 101. Del Negro praises the novel's structure, comparing it to Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Our Town*.

Fleischman, Paul. "The Accidental Artist." *School Library Journal* (March 1999): 104-107. Adapted from the 1998 Anne Carroll Moore Lecture, this autobiographical article describes Fleischman's journey to becoming a writer.

———. "Fleischman, Paul." In *Fifth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983, pp. 114-116. This is an autobiographical essay written early in the author's career.

———. "Paul Fleischman." In *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, vol. 20. Detroit: Gale, 1995, pp. 219-231. This essay is comprised of previously published autobiographical articles written by the author and includes an insert written by his father, Sid Fleischman.

"Fleischman, Paul." In *Something about the Author*, vol. 110. Detroit: Gale, 2000. Biographical information about the author's *Seek* 345 life is supplemented by critical commentary about his work.

Fleischman, Sid. *The Abracadabra Kid: A Writer's Life*. New York: Greenwillow, 1996. In his autobiography, Sid Fleischman describes the pride and respect he feels for his son's literary work.

———. "Paul Fleischman." *HornBook Magazine* (July/August 1989): 452-455. The author—himself a Newbery winner for his novel *The Whipping Boy*—profiles his son's life and work on the occasion of the younger Fleischman winning the Newbery Medal.

Krulwich, Robert. "Dialing for Dad." *New York Times Book Review* (November 18, 2001): 51. In this review of *Seek*, television and radio correspondent Krulwich praises the novel. His suggestion that the characters may seem too good to be true is tempered by his own fond response to Rob and his family.

"Paul Fleischman." In *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*, vol. 11. Detroit: Gale, 1993. This entry provides a critical overview of Fleischman's works, with quotes from various review sources.

Review of *Seek*. *Kirkus Reviews* (August 15, 2001): 1211. This starred review refers to the novel as "a splendid, smart, and savvy addition to YA literature."



Rutan, Lynn. Review of *Seek*. VOYA (December 2001): 357. Praising the book's plot and style, Rutan encourages teachers to perform the story with their students.

Sherman, Chris. Review of *Seek*. Booklist (December 15, 2001): 722. Sherman's positive critique states that the book will please both individual, silent readers and those who choose to perform it as readers' theater.

Sieruta, Peter D. Review of *Seek*. Horn Book Magazine (November/December 2001): 746-747. Sieruta's starred review praises both the novel's unique format and its depiction of Rob's maturation.



Related Titles/Adaptations

Paul Fleischman's interest in multi-voice narratives is evident in many of his other books. In *Whirligig* (1998), high school junior Brent Bishop kills a teenager in a drunk driving accident. As a form of penance, he makes plywood whirligigs and places them in the four corners of the United States— Maine, Florida, California, and Washington; the novel describes Brent's experiences, as well as the stories of those who discover the whirligigs. *Seedfolks* (1997) is the story of a child who begins an urban garden and is joined in this pursuit by community members of various ages and backgrounds, who tell their individual stories in concise firstperson narratives. Fleischman has also used this technique in his historical novel *Bull Run* (1993), which tells of that Civil War battle in the voices of a dozen people who were present. Like *Seek*, his brief novel *Mind's Eye* (1999) utilizes a play-script format in telling the story of a teenaged paraplegic who shares a room in a nursing home with an elderly woman.

Readers will also be interested in Fleischman's books of verse. Most poetry—whether read silently or aloud—can be enjoyed by a solitary individual. Fleischman has produced several volumes that require a second (or third and fourth) reader to be fully enjoyed. *I Am Phoenix: Poems for Two Voices* (1985) contains poems about birds, while *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* (1988) focuses on insects. In both books, the poems are divided into columns, with one person reading aloud the left side and another reader the right, resulting in a dual recitation that often mimics the sounds made by the finches, sparrows, crickets and bees that are featured in the verse. *Big Talk: Poems for Four Voices* (2000) presents three choral poems and uses color coding to differentiate between the quartet of speakers necessary to bring each poem to life.

Other books that combine poetry and multiple narrators include Karen Hesse's *Witness* (2001), which explores racism in a small Vermont town in 1924, and Nikki Grimes's *Bronx Masquerade* (2002), the story of a urban classroom studying poetry.

Conflict between sons and their fathers is a common theme in young adult literature. Robert Cormier has dealt with this issue in several books, including *Frenchtown Summer* (1999), a novel related in verse. Homer must deal with an absent father in *Following Fake Man* (2001) by Barbara Ware Holmes, while Joey has to contend with both attention deficit disorder and the sudden reappearance of his problematic dad in *Joey Pigza Loses Control* (2000.) A Boston Globe-Horn Book Award winner for fiction, *Lord of the Deep* (2001) is Graham Salisbury's stunning tale of a teenage boy who is disappointed in his all-too-human stepfather.

At first glance, Linda Crew's *Long Time Passing* (1997) seems an unlikely match for *Seek*. Crew's novel features a female protagonist, is set in the turbulent 1960s, and concerns an intact family. But the way in which Kathy evolves as a person, moving from journalism to drama to art, is reminiscent of Rob's artistic and personal growth in *Seek*. Although published for adults, Fannie Flagg's *Standing in the Rainbow* (2002), also presents a multifaceted portrait of a young man who, like Fleischman's protagonist, has a broadcaster as a parent.



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