

Snapshots Short Guide

Snapshots by Norma Klein

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Overview

Snapshots is a sensitive novel about two thirteen-year-old boys, Marc Campbell and Sean Abrahms, who find themselves in what appears to be very serious trouble when some pictures they take of Marc's eight-year-old sister, Tiffany, are turned over to the district attorney's office as child pornography. Marc feels that his sister would make an excellent model. To convince his parents, Sean and Marc photograph Tiffany wearing a bikini. Both boys are in the photography club at school, and both are excellent photographers. To take the pictures, they use Marc's father's extremely good camera without telling him, so Mark's father does not know that the pictures are on the roll of film in the camera. He is very surprised and puzzled when he gets a call from the New York District Attorney's office saying that there are some pictures that may involve child pornography on the roll of film. Because the pictures look so professional and because of some of the kinds of poses of Tiffany on them, including one in which she kisses a balloon tied with a string to her toe, the district attorney's office feels that they may have been intended for sale as child pornography.

The boys quickly tell their parents what has happened. The fathers hire a lawyer, and the boys have to appear separately in front of a panel of lawyers from the district attorney's office.

The panel decides that the boys intended no harm with the pictures and certainly did not intend to use them for pornographic purposes. Nonetheless, the boys and their parents are really worried until the case is resolved.

Sean, the narrator and central character of the novel, is preparing for his bar mitzvah. Sean's family members are not religious: They join a synagogue solely for the sake of having Sean bar mitzvahed and then only after he has done most of the preparation, and they schedule the banquet after the ceremony at a Chinese restaurant. Still, 4014 Snapshots Sean sees his bar mitzvah as a chance to symbolize his part of a long and important tradition.

As Sean's preparations for his bar mitzvah indicate, the novel is also about growing up. Sean matures significantly during the course of the novel, becoming aware that his actions do have consequences and that he must be willing to take responsibility for what he does. He also learns that his father really does love and respect him. He learns too that he is an excellent photographer—he considers the pictures of Tiffany the best he has ever taken, and his father also recognizes their excellence. Finally, he learns that he is attractive to girls, particularly Joanie, a girl in Sean's homeroom.

Although the problem involving the photographs is very serious, the book is not without humor. The idea that he is being investigated for possibly planning to distribute child pornography causes Sean to wonder about his motives in all he does; some of his fantasies about things he has done that he may get into trouble for in front of the district attorney's lawyers are hilarious. The idea of having a bar mitzvah banquet at a Chinese restaurant fits into a series of ethnic jokes in literature and folklore involving Jewish

Americans' love for Chinese food; however, most of these jokes involve more religious Jews than Sean's family and involve understanding that Chinese food, depending heavily on pork and shellfish, is usually not kosher. In addition, Sean's father's reactions while Sean is being questioned by the lawyers are also hilarious. Thus, the book is fun to read at the same time that it explores a serious set of problems.

About the Author

Norma Klein was born on May 13, 1938, in New York City. She grew up on Manhattan Island and died after a brief illness on April 25, 1989, also in New York City. She was the daughter of Emanuel Klein, a Freudian psychoanalyst, and Sadie Klein. Although as an adult she became disenchanted with Freudian psychoanalysis, her interest in using her fiction to help adolescents with their problems surely stems in large part from her interaction with her father.

Klein attended Dalton School from age three to thirteen and Elizabeth Irwin School during her high school years. Both were, she said, progressive schools, run on the model of Summerhill in England. She attended Cornell University from 1956 to 1957 and received her B.A. degree, cum laude, in 1960, from Barnard College, where she majored in Russian and became a member of Phi Beta Kappa. At Barnard, she took creative writing courses from Robert Pack and George P. Elliott. When she was nineteen, she sent out her first story. It was accepted by Greccourt Review. After this initial good fortune, she found it much more difficult to get published, claiming that some of her stories were rejected as many as fortyfive times.

She received an M.A. in Slavic languages from Columbia University in 1963. She said that other than when she was at Columbia, she spent most of her time from age nineteen until her first daughter was born in 1967 writing short stories. She married Erwin Fleissner, a biochemist in 1963. They had two daughters, Jennifer, born in 1967, and Katherine, born in 1970. She started writing picture books as a result of reading to her older daughter.

None of these books was accepted for publication until after the success of her first book for young adults, *Mom, the Wolf Man and Me*.

She is the author of novels and short stories for adults, adolescents, and children. She earned a number of awards for her writing: *Girls Can Be Anything*, a book for younger children, was chosen one of the Child Study Association of America's Children's Books of the Year for 1973; she received the Media & Methods Maxi Award for Paperbacks in 1975; *Sunshine: A Novel*, a novelization of a television special written by Carol Sobiesky, was chosen one of the New York Public Library's Books for the Teen Age in 1980; *Love Is One of the Choices* was chosen one of School Library Journal's Best Books of the Year in 1978; and she received the O. Henry Award in 1983 for her short story, "The Wrong Man."

Setting

The entire book is set in contemporary New York City. The Abrahmses and Campbells live in fairly expensive apartments; in fact, Marc's apartment overlooks Central Park. The boys attend the same private school. Sean's father directs television commercials; Marc's father is a dentist. The book provides the reader with a feeling for New York City life as experienced by fairly affluent but not wealthy young adults.

The book begins in early September, just before the start of the school year.

The main action ends in early January, when Sean is bar mitzvahed. The book itself ends just before winter vacation in March.

Social Sensitivity

Snapshots deals with some of the seamier sides of life in the twentieth century. Child pornography and child molestation are unpleasant but important topics. Still, Klein does not go into graphic detail about these topics. When the photographs come under investigation, Sean feels forced to explore whether he felt any sexual attraction to Tiffany when Marc and he took the photographs (he decides that he did not), and he becomes frightened about his growing sexual feelings: Might they get him into any kind of trouble, he wonders. In the last analysis, he discovers that his feelings are absolutely normal.

Some readers may find the Abrahms's feelings about religion controversial. They are secular Jews wholly uninterested in the religious aspects of Judaism. In his bar mitzvah speech Sean says that it is important for him "To always remember that I am part of an ancient tradition, which means that I have the responsibility of preserving it." Yet some readers may wonder whether he can preserve the tradition if he ignores the religious elements in it.

Literary Qualities

Although *Snapshots* is a realistic book about an important series of episodes in the lives of two thirteen-year-old boys, it is full of humor. Often, however, the humor is grim, especially some of the humor involved in the hearing. Sean's father becomes overexcited, interrupting the proceedings several times, especially when he feels the lawyers may be intimidating his son. Once, when they ask Sean about pictures taken of him and Marsha naked when they were children, the father screams, "Who doesn't take pictures of babies like that?" Sean himself gets embarrassed when the lawyers ask him whether he has ever looked at pictures in *Playboy* magazine; he wishes his father were not present when he answers that he has.

Snapshots is a tale of initiation on at least two levels. First, Sean goes through a formal initiation process as he prepares for his bar mitzvah and gets bar mitzvahed; and Sean and Marc are initiated into the seamier side of life when they discover that someone would think that their harmless photographs of Tiffany are intended for pornographic purposes. Sean also gets initiated into the world of dating.

One of the main techniques Klein uses in *Snapshots* is irony, especially irony of situation in which something happens that does not fit into the context in which it occurs and that emphasizes the relative helplessness of human beings. The main plot involves such irony: what the boys consider to be and what really are perfectly harmless photographs are accused of being dreadfully perverse pictures and become the source of great anguish for the two families. The irony is compounded when one lunch period shortly after the hearing, Sean discovers Marc fighting two boys. They are angry because they have heard that Marc has some dirty pictures of his sister, the kind that appear in *Playboy*, and he will not show them the pictures. Sean says to them, "His sister's eight years old!"

. . . What're you, crazy?" The fight immediately stops. To the boys attacking Marc, it is inconceivable that anyone could get sexual pleasure from looking at pictures of an eight-year-old child.

An additional irony involves Sean's dismay when he learns that Marc's father has destroyed the photographs. He feels that they were the best he has ever taken, and his father feels that Sean need only show them to any photographer in the city to get a job.

Themes and Characters

Snapshots takes a lighthearted look at some of the problems of growing up in twentieth-century America at the same time that it explores one social problem—child pornography—very seriously. Even though Sean and Marc have not done anything wrong except borrowing Marc's father's camera without first asking permission, they learn about the kinds of people who would exploit a child as pretty as Tiffany for sexual purposes and money. They also learn that they themselves might be the prey of child molesters.

Another serious theme involves Sean's bar mitzvah. He prepares for his bar mitzvah at the YMHA under the direction of Sol Segal, a cantor who also gives Sean guitar lessons. He is very serious about his preparations. A bar mitzvah usually occurs when a boy turns thirteen. Sean is thirteen and a half. When he misses some bar mitzvah lessons because of the investigation of the photographs, he wonders whether he will be ready for his bar mitzvah by the time he is eighty.

Another theme involves the role of women in Judaism. Sean's sixteen-yearold sister, Marsha, wants Sean to be bar mitzvahed by a female rabbi. Her boyfriend's sister, Eleanor Abrahms, is a rabbi. When she visits Sean's family, Sean's father tries to determine whether he and the rabbi are related, since they have the same last name, but he can find no relationship. The father, whom the daughter thinks of as being anti-feminist, at first seems determined not to have a female rabbi officiate at the bar mitzvah; but after he meets Eleanor, he is delighted with the idea of having her officiate.

Another theme involves father-son relationships. When the book begins, Marc's relationship with his father seems much closer and much more supportive than that of Sean and his father. When Sean hears that his father will go with him to the district attorney's office, he is very upset, since he views his father as being antagonistic toward him and suspecting his motives in relation to the photographs. When his father keeps interrupting the proceedings, even though he has promised not to say a word, Sean becomes embarrassed. After the hearing is over, however, Sean realizes how glad he was that his father came with him and actually came to his defense several times. After the hearing, Sean's father takes him to the Carnegie Deli and brags to their waiter about how well his son handled the hearing and about what a good photographer Sean is. At Sean's bar mitzvah, his father gives a speech in which he says that he has recently learned how very mature and capable Sean is.

A relatively minor but still important theme involves Sean's relationship with Joanie, a girl in his homeroom. His homeroom is an experimental one involving eighth and ninth graders. Joanie is a ninth grader, while Sean is an eighth grader. She is shorter than Sean, so Sean feels comfortable with her. Her father is blind, a fact that she accepts and that Sean learns to accept very easily. He discovers that he and Joanie have much in common, and they begin dating. Throughout his ordeal involving the photographs, Joanie remains supportive.

Topics for Discussion

1. Snapshots treats child pornography and child molestation. What can young adults like Marc and Sean do to combat these very serious problems? What do the lawyers for the district attorney's office suggest that they do?
 2. Another serious problem involves adults misunderstanding the boys' intentions. What do Marc and Sean intend when they take the photographs of Tiffany? Why does their lawyer suggest that they not tell the lawyers from the district attorney's office that they paid Tiffany one dollar to pose? Does their paying her have anything to do with their intentions?
 3. For Sean, tradition is important in connection with his bar mitzvah. Is tradition important for him in any other way? How important is it for the rest of his family? How important is it for you?
 4. Do the two lawyers from the district attorney's office treat Sean fairly?
- Are their questions and actions appropriate for the interrogation of a thirteen year old?
5. What do you think of the idea of putting some of the older eighth graders into a homeroom with some ninth graders?
 6. In Sean's homeroom, the teacher leads a discussion about the suicide of a twelfth grader. How appropriate is this topic for the eighth and ninth graders in the homeroom?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. For Sean, tradition is important.

Report on ways in which tradition is important in your life. What kinds of family traditions do you work to preserve? What kinds of school traditions are important to you?

2. Examine newspapers and magazines for several weeks for items involving child pornography and child molestation. Try to determine how serious these two problems are in America today and in your own community.

3. During the course of the novel, Sean's view of his father changes markedly. Try to trace this change. At what point does Sean learn that his father really is concerned about him? Compare and contrast some of the things Sean says about his father before and after Sean learns about his father's concern.

4. At one point in the novel, Sean's homeroom discusses the suicide of a twelfth grader who went to their school. Do some research to determine how much of a problem teen-age suicide is. How much of a problem is it in your community?

5. Even though the main action of the novel ends in January with Sean's bar mitzvah, the last chapter occurs shortly before winter vacation in March of the same year. The novel itself ends with Sean taking a photograph of Tiffany as she wears a beard made from hair she had cut off her head. Why is this or is this not an appropriate ending?

6. Examine some of the humorous episodes in *Snapshots*. Try to discover how Klein often uses humor to convey very serious ideas.

For Further Reference

Klein, Norma. "Books to Help Kids Deal with Difficult Times, I." *School Library Media Quarterly* 15 (Spring 1987): 161-164. This article reproduces an address Klein gave in 1986 to a conference sponsored by the American Association of School Librarians. In it, she discusses her own works in connection with two meanings of her topic, helping children deal with the difficult times we are all living in and helping them deal with their own individual problems.

She talks about her own reading as a teen-ager, her adult reading, and some of her main goals in her fiction for young adults.

Noah, Carolyn. Review. *School Library Journal* 31,4 (December 1984): 90-91.

Noah praises Klein's characterization and her ability to use types but avoid stereotypes in *Snapshots*. She says that the portrait of Sean has "vitality and significance."

"Norma Klein, 50, a Young-Adult Novelist." *New York Times* (April 27, 1989): B16. This is an obituary notice for Klein. It includes a short summary of her life and treats her fiction for young adults and for adults.

Phy, Allene Stuart. *Presenting Norma Klein*. Boston: Twayne, 1988. Phy's treatment of *Snapshots* is flawed by several factual errors, especially her writing that Tiffany is naked when Marc and Sean photograph her. Still, she treats Sean's growth sensitively.

Shapiro, Laura. "The Art of Enchantment." *Newsweek* (December 3, 1984): 86-88. Shapiro reviews children's books available for the 1984 holiday season. In passing, she says that the young adults in *Snapshots* face difficulties "with brains and notable wit."

W[ilms], D[enise] M[urcko]. Review.

Booklist (November 1, 1984): 369.

Wilms recognizes the way the novel recreates "upper-middle-class Manhattan" and calls the book "an acceptable story." She recommends it for grades 7 through 8.

Related Titles

Like *Snapshots*, most of Klein's works that deal with younger young adults treat their growing awareness of themselves as sexual beings. *Bizou*, for example, refers to some of the title character's sexual experimentation.

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