

Squashed Short Guide

Squashed by Joan Bauer

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Overview

Squashed pits sixteen-year-old Ellie Morgan and her giant pumpkin Max against the local pumpkin growing champ in the Rock River Pumpkin Weigh-in, where every pound counts. To stiffen the competition, Ellie is forced to deal with unpredictable weather, pumpkin thieves, and a father who completely misses the point. All of this, in addition to her own weight problem and a crush on the new boy in school, serves to teach Ellie important life lessons about winners and losers and particularly about the importance of just being true to herself.

About the Author

Joan Bauer makes her home in Darien, Connecticut, with her husband and daughter. She was born in July, 1951, in Oak Park, Illinois, and grew up in River Forest, Illinois, after her parents divorced when she was eight. As a child she was overweight, very tall, and says she felt "a bit like a water buffalo at a tea party."

But Bauer was fortunate to have a mother with a wonderful sense of humor and a grandmother (Nana) who was a professional storyteller. She credits her grandmother with having a strong influence on her writing career by showing her how stories help people understand themselves.

Nana also taught Bauer the difference between derisive laughter that hurts people and laughter that is genuine and affectionate. Her grandmother's stories were all told in first person, which gave Bauer a personal sense of identification with the characters, and she uses this technique in her own writing. As a child, Bauer wrote stories, poems, and kept a diary. She dreamed of becoming a comedienne and then a comedy writer. But much of her time was spent reading from the offerings at the public library.

Her career path led her first to sales and advertising with the Chicago Tribune. She also worked at McGraw-Hill and Parade magazine before she switched to professional writing, beginning with newspaper and magazine articles. Her first published work, a poem titled "Lima Bean Blues," won second prize in the Chicago Tribune Fruit and Vegetable Poetry contest. Bauer's next career move was to screenwriting, but a tragic car accident changed the course of her life. During her recuperation, she began to write *Squashed*, her first young adult novel. Drawing from her own youth, the novel tells the story of an overweight teenager competing in a pumpkin growing contest. It also deals with a father-daughter relationship, which reflects some of the anguish Bauer continued to feel about her absentee father. Bauer credits her recuperation from her injuries to the humor in the story. "There's clinically proven power in humor to change our bodies and minds.

Humor is a survival tool," she said in an ACHUKA on-line interview. *Squashed* was published in 1992 and won the Delacorte Prize for a First Young Adult Novel. It was also chosen as a School Library Journal Best Book, an American Bookseller's Pick of the List, an American Library Association (ALA) Book for the Reluctant Reader, and was listed on numerous State Award Lists.

The publication of *Thwonk*, a story about a young teenage girl suffering from unrequited love, followed in 1995. It, too, received numerous awards citations, including an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, an American Bookseller Pick of the List, a New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age selection, the South Carolina Junior Book Award, and inclusion on the California Young Reader Medal Program List.

Beginning in 1997, Bauer's publications increased to one a year. *Sticks* arrived in 1997, capturing the Sequoyah Children's Book Award and inclusion on the Chicago Library



Children's Masterlist. In 1998, *Rules of the Road* won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize and the Golden Kite Award from the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. It was also honored as an ALA Notable Book, an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, and a School Library Journal Best Book in addition to receiving several other awards. *Backwater* followed in 1999 and was added to the Smithsonian magazine's Notable Children's Books Masterlist. Finally, in 2001, Bauer captured the Newbery Honor Book Award for *Hope Was Here*, which was published in 2000, and received numerous other awards and honors.

When asked about writing for young adults, Bauer replied, "the experience of adolescence is much, much more universal than we might think. Being understood, parental angst, hormonal upheavals, obsessions, fears—these have been with teens forever and ever."

As part of her writing process, Bauer creates personal histories for her main characters, including such things as where they live, what gifts they have, what dreams they dream. This helps develop the character's voice. Once she hears the voices, Bauer then begins the novel. She also draws from her personal life to create her books. In *Squashed*, Ellie's dream of growing the biggest pumpkin relates to Bauer's own dream of becoming a successful writer. She never sold shoes like Jenna in *Rules of the Road*, but she did work in advertising sales and used her experiences to create A.J.'s character as a sales girl.

Research also plays a role in her preparation for beginning new books. Bauer states that she reads about every subject connected with her story. She is rarely pleased with the first draft of whole sections of a book and does quite a bit of revision before the manuscript is sent to the publisher and, ultimately, becomes the award-winning book her readers love.

Setting

Squashed is set in Rock River, Iowa, a small farming community where the Rock River Pumpkin Weigh-in and Harvest Fair takes center stage as the biggest annual happening in town. The community's focus on agriculture not only lends credibility to the plot, but also it provides a concrete way of visualizing the sense of belonging and shared history so important to the story's themes, for it is the land and the working of the land that ultimately teaches Ellie, the main character, who she is.

The novel is set during the years when small family farms were the norm for the area, probably before the 1980s, and ties to the land passed from generation to generation. Ellie's father, however, has rejected that heritage. On her small residential lot, Ellie competes with adults to grow the biggest pumpkin ever seen at the festival. She finds comfort in knowing that she, like her grandparents and her deceased mother, is a grower.

Many of the residents of the community farm and so are involved and engrossed in the story's events. They guard secret recipes and growth formulas, spy on their competitors, and choose sides to cheer for the competing pumpkin growers. Everyone from the sheriff to the school's history teacher has an interest in the competition. The contest is front-page news; the streetlights are even painted orange for the event, and when pumpkin thieves threaten the growers, the whole town rejoices over their arrests. This community involvement provides Ellie with moral support, but also, it offers her a strong sense of place in this small town, with its extended family atmosphere.

The festival itself maintains an expected order and pattern from year to year and serves to further build on Bauer's implication that a shared history with others creates a secure and reliable foundation on which to build lives. Ellie gains security and emotional strength from the knowledge that generations of her family have farmed the same land through good years and bad. Ultimately, it is that very soil and dedication to it that provide the answers to Ellie's questions about herself.



Social Sensitivity

Squashed explores several social issues especially pertinent to teens. The difficulties between Ellie and her father are typical at some stage of life for most parent-child relationships, and Bauer is fair in revealing the rights and wrongs on both sides of the issues. Further problems are explored in Ellie's one-parent family situation. In this relationship, Bauer explores the delicate balance that must be wrought between remembering and moving on after the loss of a loved one. She also calls attention to the fact that some children feel the need to fill the space created by the absence of one parent in an attempt to relieve the sorrow and maintain a semblance of normality in family life. Ellie demonstrates this need by cooking and caring for her father and her cousin Richard, who also lives in a one-parent family.

Bauer further provides a model for help in these situations—that of a surrogate parent or mentor. For Ellie, this mentor is her grandmother, but her community can also serve as extended family as is evidenced in the relationships between Ellie and other adults in the town as they seek to support, encourage, and take an interest in her life.

Weight consciousness is of serious concern to most teens, and Ellie is no exception.

However, Bauer deftly minimizes the importance of appearance by focusing on the things about her characters that are more lasting and real such as self-confidence, pride, and determination. She downplays the accomplishments of Sharrell, the pretty cheerleader and beauty pageant contestant, to those of Ellie, the slightly overweight, less than perfect teen, not by denigrating the one, but by highlighting the lasting qualities of the other.



Literary Qualities

Bauer does not use complicated techniques to tell her story; nevertheless, at its core, the story holds a multi-layered lesson in life. Skillful use of point of view, realistic characters, and symbolism impart understanding to the reader in an entertaining, down-home style. The first person narrative immediately involves the reader with Ellie's rise and fall of emotions. What Ellie sees, hears, and feels, the reader shares.

Further strengthening that bond are Ellie's less-than-perfect physical and personality traits. She is tall and pudgy, not a beauty queen. She says the wrong things, wears the wrong clothes, and embarrasses herself in public. She is not perfect and neither is her life. Ellie is not popular; she is unsure of herself around boys, her grades are average, and she has major problems with her father. Added to this is a quick wit and withering sense of humor, and Bauer has created one very normal teenage girl, easily recognizable and comforting to many teens.

When opportunity tempts her to turn the tide of events against her rival and to her own favor, she must dig deep inside to find the courage to do the right thing. She must also fight the seduction of instant fame and popularity, bear the burden of being a role model, and find the strength to stand tall in the face of apparent defeat. Ultimately, Bauer's theme is expressed when Ellie comes to understand and value who she is in spite of it all.

Bauer draws strongly from an old fairy tale, borrowing well-known symbols to tell her modern-day story. Max, like Cinderella's pumpkin, is Ellie's vehicle to a different life. Rather than at a ball, Ellie's prince charming waits for her at the Pumpkin Weigh-in, and instead of glass slippers for her feet, the changes that occur ground Ellie in something more durable. There is even the moment when the new life is almost lost, but in the end, integrity and true worth create the perfect fit allowing Ellie and her prince charming to live happily ever after (at least as far as the reader knows).

The references to cycles are also symbolic. The seasonal cycles of farming, the cycles of Max's life and death, and cycles of dependence and independence relate directly to Ellie's own life cycles. They provide a sense of security and rightness to her world. They train her to make tough choices and difficult decisions; they provide hope.

Most importantly, they teach her what endures. As Ellie recounts "it was one of those things you could count on."



Themes and Characters

Bauer develops the major theme of *Squashed* through Ellie's struggles to handle the stresses of competition and the resulting changes in relationships produced by the competition. In the process, Ellie is forced to redefine success and determine what is most important in life.

Winning in the adult category becomes Ellie's major goal. Every spare moment of her time is devoted to nurturing her giant pumpkin Max. Her goal is to win the blue ribbon and beat the evil, four-time winner, Cyril Pool.

But Ellie's father, her grandmother, and Wes, the new boy at school, complicate her path to success. Mr. Morgan disapproves of her devotion to the project. He wants Ellie to concentrate more on solving her weight problem and developing a social life partly because he himself rejected farming and also because he has not come to terms with the death of his wife. Contrary to this, Nana, Ellie's grandmother, offers firm support and steady guidance throughout the competition. She understands Ellie's need to win, but is more focused on convincing Ellie that remaining true to herself is the important thing. Wes, in many ways, is instrumental in bridging the gulf between Ellie's desire to please both her father and her grandmother. While not the most handsome boy at school, Wes holds other attractions for Ellie. He is cute, has a brain, and, as Ellie describes him, "he has a real grower's soul and wasn't afraid to show it."

Ellie struggles through setbacks, ridicule, and uncertainties to attain her goal, but in the end, it is her ability to stay true to herself, regardless of the consequences, that carries her through to the end. When the community praises her determination and honesty, her father recognizes the value of Ellie's efforts and offers his support. And as she worries over the contest outcome, Nana hands Ellie a bag of soil from the family farm.

Four generations of Morgans worked that soil to get it how it is, sweating themselves silly in the field, and I don't want you messing things up by thinking that winning today is more important than that it's going to be here long after all of us are gone, and if you think one Weigh-in makes a whale of a difference to who you are, then you'd better think again.

This advice clearly indicates Bauer's theme and ultimately enables Ellie to redefine success in a way that will forever make her a winner.



Topics for Discussion

1. Ellie becomes nearly frantic to win the growing competition. Why is winning so important to her? What does it represent to her?

2. Ellie is presented with several opportunities to "squash" her opponent Cyril.

Discuss these and what might have happened if she had made different choices. Discuss the symbolism of Ellie's nurturing of Max.

3. Why is Richard at first hesitant to accuse Dennis of stealing? Is this a good or bad thing? How does this relate to the choices Ellie could have made in the story?

4. What do you think of Mrs. Moritz's essay assignments? Do they have any relevance to Ellie's life?

5. The preparation of meals is an important element in the novel. Why is it important to Ellie? To Mr. Morgan? To Richard?

6. Discuss some of the reasons why Mr. Morgan does not at first support Ellie's efforts to win the contest. What changes his mind? How does this affect his relationship with Ellie?

7. What does Max teach Ellie about life? 8. Gordon Mott, the news reporter, talks to Ellie about role models. Is Ellie a good role model? Why? Why does she sound so incredulous when Gordon Mott compares her to a Barbie doll? Is Barbie a good role model?

9. When Ellie goes to her mother's grave, she says she thinks she has "lost the part about growing that I loved so much." What does she mean?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Investigate a local festival. Then prepare a proposal to hold a festival in your hometown with recommendations as to theme, purpose, committees, etc.
2. Research modern family farms, and prepare recommendations for or against them in terms of economy and community.
3. Research the evolutionary history of beauty pageants.
4. Prepare a report on the biggest vegetables ever grown and documented. Then choose one and write an in-depth report on how it was grown.
5. Write and perform a ballad about giant vegetables.
6. Find a young person in your community who has worked to reach a certain goal. Write an in-depth article on his or her accomplishments.
7. Research motivational therapies, then compare and contrast at least three different programs.
8. Many teens suffer from eating disorders. Prepare a report on several of these and the physical and emotional problems they produce. Describe some of the stereotypical qualities associated with cheerleaders, athletes, and intellectuals. Suggest ways to combat these assumptions.
9. Some scientists have researched the effects of music on plants. Investigate this and present your findings.

For Further Reference

Bauer, Joan. "Humor, Seriously." ALAN Review (Winter 1996). This article by the author is on the importance of humor in our lives and how and why she incorporates it in her novels.

"Bauer, Joan." In *Something about the Author*, vol. 117. Detroit: Gale, 2001. This entry is an introduction to Bauer's work with biographical information.

"Joan Bauer." In *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*, vol. 34. Detroit: Gale, 2000.

Entry contains biographical information on the author and a brief synopsis of her works.



Related Titles/Adaptations

Joan Bauer's five other novels offer continued laughs, tears, and excitement with gutsy, loveable characters. *Thwunk* features A.J. McCreary's adventures when a stuffed cupid comes to life to grant her long-desired wish. Peter Terris, school hunk, falls completely and totally in love with her, but rather than the thrill of a lifetime, A. J. discovers there is more to love and life than adoring smiles.

Rules of the Road follows with supershoe-sales girl, Jenna Boiler. Jenna struggles with school and competition from her prettier sister until the elderly Mrs. Madeline Gladstone hires her as a chauffeur. Jenna rides a road to self discovery and confidence that eventually allow her to confront her biggest challenge yet: her alcoholic father.

In *Backwater*, Bauer introduces sixteen-year-old Ivy Breedlove, family historian to an overachieving, legal minded family. Ivy digs up the family's black sheep member and ultimately changes the family forever.

Hope Was Here sets sixteen-year-old Hope to work in yet another roadside grill alongside her vagabond cook, Aunt Addie. Thrown into the mix is Hope's wandering mother, an ideal father figure, and the restaurant's handsome teenage cook. Because of them and while serving up comfort food to establish her claim as the best waitress in town, Hope discovers the depths of honesty, humanity, and heroism as well as the true meaning of love.

Switching to something for the boys, Bauer entertains her readers of *Sticks* with a championship pool tournament between ten-year-old Mickey Vernon and the neighborhood Neanderthal, Buck Pender. To the rescue comes Mickey's late father's poolace friend offering to coach him, but Mickey's mother stands in the way of the championship, and a hilarious saga of desperate measures to outwit parents and bullies takes off.

Related Web Sites

"Joan Bauer." ACHUKA <http://www.achuka.co.uk/guests/joanbint.htm>. Accessed March 20,2002. An interview with Bauer about her life and writings can be found on this site.

Joan Bauer Web site <http://www.joanbauer.com/> Author's Web site offers information on her life, books, and other writings.



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