

# Surrogate Sister Short Guide

## Surrogate Sister by Eve Bunting

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## Overview

Surrogate Sister contains many of the qualities characteristic of Bunting's young adult fiction. It is a fast-paced, easily-read novel that goes straight to the heart of a contemporary problem; it is peopled with believable characters who face realistic temptations; and it presents a final resolution consistent with traditional morality. The story deals with the issue of surrogate parenting as sixteen-year-old Cassie Dedrick's mother responds to an advertisement for a woman to give birth to a baby for a childless couple. The focus is on Cassie's reaction to her mother's pregnancy as well as the emotional growth she gains through her relationship with Sam Danielson, a college student to whom she becomes strongly attached.

Bunting is perceptive and astute as she pictures the mercurial emotions of a teen-ager caught in a complex dilemma. Cassie has always adored her mother but is angered and disgusted by her mother's having Mr. X's baby.

She is upset with Mr. X for donating his sperm and with her classmates for making humiliating remarks about her mother. She also experiences private anxiety in her romance with Sam as she frets over his possible attachment to Ashley, another girl in his life. As Cassie works through the problems generated by her relationship with Sam, she gains new insights into her mother's decision to have the baby.

Eventually she matures to the extent that she can rid herself of the anger she feels toward her mother. She stops short of giving approval, but she can offer her mother acceptance.

Surrogate Sister provides an avenue for a look at some of the details involved in becoming a surrogate mother and offers a plausible defense for a woman's action in having a baby for a fee. It additionally speaks to the issue of teen-age sex as Bunting delineates the pressures on today's teen-agers to accept sexual intimacy as the status quo. Cassie and her friend Bel-Bel joke they are "the only two virgins in California over the age of fifteen." When Cassie visits Sam at the beach house he shares with two girls, she is aware one of the girls is "doing it" with her boyfriend behind the closed bedroom door.

Cassie knows Sam and Ashley have "slept together" and feels the only way she can compete with Ashley and win Sam's love is to make herself sexually available to him. Bunting, perhaps out of honesty for her young adult readers, does not close the door on a future sexual relationship between Cassie and Sam, but she does permit Cassie to retain her chastity for the present.

Cassie concludes, "Someday Sam and I will be together and it'll be right for both of us. But that time isn't now."

Bunting's young adult novels are known for their revealing and sympathetic insights into the lifestyles of young people today. Surrogate Sister is no exception.

# About the Author

Eve Bunting is one of today's most prolific and versatile writers of children's literature. Although she did not begin writing until she was in her forties, she has since written more than one hundred books that span the spectrum from preschool to young adult.

Her young adult books address sensitive contemporary issues such as alcoholism, sexual relationships, and teenage suicide. Frequently hidden within her story lines are covert messages of traditional morality.

Bunting was born Anne Evelyn Bolton in 1928 in Maghera, County Derry, Northern Ireland, where her parents were also born. Her father was a postmaster and merchant and was regarded as well-to-do by village standards. She was sent to boarding school in Belfast at the age of nine and there developed a lifelong love of books and reading. She graduated from Methodist College in Belfast in 1945 and followed this with two years additional study at Queens University. It was while at Queens that she met Edward Bunting, and the two were married in 1951.

In 1960 Bunting, her husband, and their three children, two sons and one daughter, uprooted and moved to the United States. They settled first in San Francisco, but later moved to Pasadena where they continue to live.

Although Bunting manages to produce a steady stream of books, she eschews the modern word processor and writes the old-fashioned way, with pencil and notebook. She writes four to five hours every day in the library of her home, first mapping her ideas on paper, then typing the material on the typewriter. Finally, she reads the manuscript into a tape recorder and makes corrections in areas that do not flow well.

Bunting's career as a writer began when her children were in high school and college, and she enrolled in a writing course at a local college. She learned during the class that Ginn Publishing Company was looking for authors of picture books, and she sent them a manuscript about the Irish giant Finn McCool and how he outsmarted Culcullan, the terrible Scottish giant.

The manuscript was accepted and, in her words, she was "off and running."

According to Bunting, ninety percent of her story ideas are generated by things she reads in newspapers and periodicals and ten percent by things she sees happening around her. It is because so many of her ideas come from news reports that her books are dominated by contemporary themes and characters. Realism and frankness are essential components of her writing because she regards few subjects taboo.

However, in Eve Bunting books, the protagonists do not mess with drugs or sex, in spite of "hormones on the rampage," nor do they behave in cheap, tawdry ways. She has gained a reputation for keeping her characters morally straight even though they often must make difficult choices. There is nothing overt or preachy, but the message is clear

as her young heroes and heroines ultimately find the strength of character to make wise decisions.

In spite of the more than one hundred books she has written, Bunting gives no indication of slowing down.

She seemingly has a limitless supply of stories to tell—which is good news for her fans.

# Setting

The story is set in Pasadena, California, about 1984. Cassie Dedrick lives with her widowed mother in a small house close to the downtown area. Her father Chad was killed in an automobile accident when Cassie was three years old. Her mother was pregnant with a little boy at the time but miscarried as a result of the accident. Mrs. Dedrick informs Cassie she is pregnant again. Several months earlier she had answered an advertisement in the Los Angeles Times for a surrogate mother and was artificially inseminated. Although the initial attempt was unsuccessful, she continued her visits to the doctor until impregnation occurred.

The baby she is carrying is a boy, and Mrs. Dedrick is very happy about the situation. Cassie, however, is too absorbed in the effects her mother's pregnancy will have on her own life to share her mother's pleasure. She is particularly concerned with the reaction of her new boyfriend Sam to the news that her mother is being paid to have a baby.

Bunting has a knack for making her stories credible through her use of time and place. There are numerous topical allusions that establish the time as contemporary, beginning with artificial insemination and continuing with allusions to such things as the Pill, the Free Choice Clinic, embryo transplants, the Mall Theater, and a Richard Gere movie. Likewise, Bunting uses the names of actual places to give realistic underpinnings to her story. Cassie takes a bus to Hollywood and Vine; she goes to Victory Park with her friend Bel-Bel; she reads in the Los Angeles Times of a showing of Loren McIvers's work at the Newport Harbor Art Museum; and she and Sam visit the Los Angeles Zoo, listen together to the bells of St. Anne's, and drive on the Ventura Freeway.

# Social Sensitivity

The idea of surrogate parenting which is central to the plot of *Surrogate Sister* is a highly charged topic, and the book is subject to the controversy that surrounds the issue. While Bunting hints at the legal, moral, and ethical questions involved, she does not explore them in depth. The book's stance is that Rosemary Dedrick is doing something noble in providing a baby for a childless couple. Whether this premise would be satisfactory to all parents and teachers is questionable.

There may be concern on the part of some about the issues of teen-age sex and birth control. Although there is talk of sex throughout the book, the sex act is never graphically described, nor does the language descend to the low or vulgar. While Bunting champions the use of birth control measures for those teen-agers who choose to be sexually active, the message is not loud or blatant. Cassie is presented as acting responsibly by going to the Free Choice Clinic for help when she decides she will become intimate with Sam. In contrast, Deenie, who is willy-nilly about birth control and who has had two abortions in thirteen months, is slovenly and irresponsible. Even so, some may object to the depiction of a sixteen-year-old going to a birth control clinic without parental consent.

The issue of abortion is an emotional one, and there will inevitably be dissatisfaction with whatever stand an author takes. Bunting's voice is neither loud nor strident, but she does give a nod of approval to proponents of the right to choose when Cassie says to the attendant at the Free Choice Clinic, "Did I tell you I really, really like the name of your clinic?"

The ideas with which Bunting chooses to deal in *Surrogate Sister* lend themselves to dissent. Some librarians, teachers, and parents will object to each of the issues raised—surrogate parenting, teen-age sex, birth control, and abortion. However, its ultimate message—that one has the right to choices, including the choice not to have sex—should find favor with many parents and teachers and offer help to teen-agers seeking to establish a value system.

# Literary Qualities

In *Surrogate Sister* Bunting creates a novel that deals with controversial issues in an entertaining format that appeals to teen-agers. Although the story contains some of the traditional trappings of the teen-age romance, it is more than another addition to the romance genre. By presenting the issues of surrogate parenting, teen-age sex, abortion, and birth control, Bunting indicates her willingness to tackle problems pertinent to the teen-age milieu.

While there is a certain glibness to Cassie's decision to postpone sexual intimacy with Sam, the book refrains from giving pat answers to complex questions and approaches an openendedness that reflects life. While Mrs. Dedrick is momentarily happy about the baby, the reader knows there is inevitable pain for her when she must give her son away. Deenie has resolved to find a means other than abortion to protect against child-bearing, but she remains in an abusive relationship with Max. Cassie has achieved an increased measure of maturity but one cannot know the direction her life will take and the ultimate effect the birth of the baby—a baby she already thinks of as her baby brother—will have on her. It is a credit to Bunting's abilities that the resolution is satisfactory, even though there is much that is yet untold.

Other literary qualities which serve to enhance the book are Bunting's use of dialogue that suggests current teenage argot, details that add a sense of realism, brisk pacing, and a point of view consistent with that of a teenager.



# Themes and Characters

The array of characters in *Surrogate Sister* represents people one might encounter in life. There are the students at Cassie's high school who run the gamut from Duff, who has spiked hair and wears a safety-pin through her nose, to her close and loyal friend Bel-Bel. There is Deenie, a childhood chum, whose sexual experiences help Cassie clarify her own feelings about sexual intimacy. Most importantly, there is Sam, Cassie's love interest, who serves as the vehicle through whom Cassie works out her hostilities toward her mother.

The two characters who propel the plot and around whom the action develops are Cassie and her mother.

Cassie is the more complex and fully developed character. It is she who faces conflict and grows and changes within the story. A popular junior at Blair High School, Cassie is attractive, blessed with dates, and unusually levelheaded and assured for a sixteen-year-old. She has exceptional talent as a painter and knows she wants to make art her life. Cassie and her mother have a close and loving relationship, and Cassie's mother gives Cassie a great deal of freedom in managing her life. It is not until her mother decides to be a surrogate parent and becomes pregnant that the conflict in their relationship surfaces.

Cassie is angry and hostile toward her mother for making her the subject of gossip at her school. When someone scrawls CASSIE DEDRICK'S MOTHER DOES IT FOR MONEY on the blackboard, her vehemence is directed toward her mother instead of the wag who wrote the message. Adding to Cassie's emotional turmoil about the baby are her insecurities toward Sam.

She longs to be close to him but mistrusts his feelings toward her as the image of Ashley looms over the relationship. It is when she visits the Free Choice Clinic for birth control assistance that Cassie realizes life encompasses making choices and one "can't tell what is right and wrong for someone else." She is then willing to grant her mother the freedom to make her decision without censure and to admit her own motives for wanting sexual intimacy with Sam are wrong.

The character of Rosemary Dedrick, Cassie's mother, is essential to the plot, but she is a character too perfectly drawn. In order to make the idea of surrogate mothering palatable and to ensure mercenary charges of "selling a baby" do not besmirch her, Bunting makes Dedrick noble and unselfish.

She becomes, however, one-sided and loses much of her humanity. She is pictured as beautiful at thirty-six, intelligent, patient, sensitive, kind, and a perfect mom to Cassie. She is adamant that she is having the baby because she feels compassion for the childless couple and not for the money involved.

She tells Cassie that she would have the baby for free if necessary. She plans to use the \$12,000 she will receive to become a nurse so that she may continue with her mission of helping people. While Mrs. Dedrick's excessive goodness is not a detriment to the plot, it is an indication she is a cardboard character manipulated by the author.

Bunting's theme of allowing a person freedom to choose what is right for himself has its antithesis in the responsibility each person must assume for the decisions he or she makes. Mrs. Dedrick must live with the trauma of having a baby boy she immediately gives away; Deenie must live with the knowledge she is important to Max only for sex and to stay with him means she must abort any pregnancy; and Cassie must accept the vulnerability that goes with loving a person and allow her relationship with Sam to find its own way, however it may develop.

# Topics for Discussion

1. When Rosemary Dedrick tells Cassie she is pregnant, Cassie is angry and disgusted. Do you think this reaction is justified?
2. Cassie assumes the money for the baby will be used to send her to art school. What does this tell you about Cassie?
3. Cassie chooses to give her mother White Shoulders perfume for Mother's Day instead of the usual Arpege. Why does she do this? What did she expect her mother's reactions to be?
4. Cassie is able to track down the childless couple whose baby her mother is having. How does meeting them change Cassie?
5. Mrs. Dedrick and the Bridges, the couple for whom she is having the baby, are unknown to each other. Why do you think arrangements are usually handled by a third party and anonymity is insisted upon in the case of surrogate parenting?
6. Deenie tells Cassie her boyfriend Max is interested in her only as someone with which to have sex. What are some reasons Deenie and others stay in such abusive relationships?
7. Although Sam seems to like Cassie very much, she is obsessed with thoughts of Ashley, a roommate of Sam's. What are some reasons Cassie feels inadequate compared to Ashley?
8. Mrs. Dedrick is elated the baby is a boy and says to Cassie, "It's your brother, brother, brother." Should Cassie be encouraged to think of this baby as her brother?
9. One of Cassie's classmates is described as "our barefoot freak." He is not going to be allowed to graduate unless he puts on shoes, and he has refused. Should he be required to wear shoes to his graduation?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Surrogate parenting is a very controversial issue. What do you see as some of the problems which might develop?
2. Mrs. Dedrick chooses to have her baby by artificial insemination, in which case the baby is biologically hers. Why do you suppose she chose this method over the implanting of a fertilized egg whereby the baby would not be her biological child?
3. Mrs. Dedrick tells Cassie she is having the baby as a favor for an anonymous childless couple. Does this seem proper motivation to you? Is it realistic that someone would have a baby and give it away in order for strangers to have a child if no money were involved?
4. This book is about choices and freedom to choose what is right for oneself. Do you think a woman should be free to abort a baby if she chooses to do so? What are your reasons?
5. Cassie comes to the conclusion that freedom of choice is important. To what extent is one's freedom to make choices limited by the rights of others?

## For Further Reference

Campbell, Patty. "The Young Adult Perplex." *Wilson Library Bulletin* (1985): 406-407. The author reviews the year's young adult fiction in the light of its treatment of "Moms."

*Surrogate Sister* is one of several books discussed dealing with the protagonist's rage or insensitivity toward mothers who live their own lives. Campbell concludes Bunting has taken a difficult subject and "developed it with compassion into an absorbing story."

Dillon, Doris, and Valerie Lewis. "Meet the Author: Eve Bunting." *Instructor* (September 1992): 61-63. Written for elementary students, this article gives interesting insights into Bunting as a person.

Raymond, Allen. "Eve Bunting: From Ireland with Love." *Early Years* (October 1986): 38-40. Bunting talks of her private life, her writing techniques, and the traditional morality of her books.

Review. *Booklist* (October 15, 1984): 298.

The reviewer briefly summarizes the book stating it is "perceptive and unusual."

## Related Titles

Bunting has written two novels akin to *Surrogate Sister* in story line, *Will You Be My POSSLQ?* and *The Haunting of Safekeep*. Each deals with a female character who is struggling to come to terms with an inner conflict while developing an intense romantic relationship with a newly acquired male friend. There is a strong temptation toward sexual intimacy but in each case the protagonist, like Cassie, postpones sexual involvement.

In *Will You Be My POSSLQ?* Jamie McLaughlin, a freshman at UCLA, lives with the fear of recurrence of the cancer she had at fifteen. The fear translates into a nightmare that frequently disrupts her sleep. When Kyle Pendleton, a fellow student, asks her to be his POSSLQ (person of opposite sex sharing living quarters), Jamie agrees. The arrangement is strictly business in the beginning, but quickly becomes something more. Jamie is able to talk to Kyle about her cancer which dissipates her fears, but their growing attraction for each other makes Jamie realize a sexual liaison is inevitable if they continue to share an apartment. She asks Kyle to move but specifies she wishes to remain his girlfriend.

In *The Haunting of Safekeep*, Sarah Stratton and Devlin Nielsen, college students previously unacquainted, are hired as a couple to be caretakers of *Safekeep*, a group of Victorian houses which have been moved to an enclosure and restored as historic treasures.

Both Sarah and Devlin are seeking ways to escape from home for the summer. Together they solve a mystery connected with *Safekeep* and an abandoned child left in one of the houses.

Through the child they gain insight into their private sorrows and each begins to work through the problems at home.

# Copyright Information

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