

Sybil at Sixteen Short Guide

Sybil at Sixteen by Susan Beth Pfeffer

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Overview

The special experiences, good and bad, that bond a family together are explored in *Sybil at Sixteen*. While Sybil is the focus of the story, the relationships among the four sisters and the father and mother are preeminent. It is clear that even though members of a family love each other, they can still be capable of secrecy, deceit, and betrayal.

Love shared by members of the Sebastian family is unevenly dispersed with one sister or another often receiving preferential treatment. At times the sisters vie with each other for the love of their father, Nick Sebastian. Motives of the sisters and of their parents, particularly the father, are not always admirable. In crises, however, family loyalties usually prevail.

Events comprising the story of *Sybil at Sixteen* are initiated during a gathering of the entire family in honor of Sybil's sixteenth birthday. Traditionally, the Sebastians have specially celebrated each girl's sixteenth birthday.

Now it is Sybil's time. Sybil, youngest of the four sisters, still bears the results of having been a victim of an automobile accident four years earlier. Since the accident, Sybil has lived in a series of rehabilitation centers and the family has moved numerous times. Sybil is elated with this gathering of the family not only because it is in honor of her birthday but also because she feels a sense of a permanent home in the brownstone in which they now live.

The house has been inherited, in trust, from a great aunt who was not especially loved or admired by members of the family.

Nick Sebastian, father and head of the household, is in serious financial straits. Previously all of the sisters, except Sybil, have been used in some way by Nick to help in his financial struggles. When an opportunity arises to help Nick raise some much-needed cash, Sybil becomes engaged in a scheme bound to hurt one of her sisters and her sister's fiancé. Sybil's loyalty to Nick is stronger than her concerns for her sister. Results of the deed are more serious than Sybil could imagine. In the process of dealing with the unforeseen and critical events, the family comes to know and understand each other better.

About the Author

Born on February 17, 1948, in New York City, Susan Beth Pfeffer is the daughter of Leo Pfeffer, a lawyer and professor, and Freda Plotkin Pfeffer, a secretary. She received a B.A. from New York University in 1969 where she majored in television, motion pictures, and radio studies. She makes her home in Middletown, New York.

Pfeffer's output of books published for young adults is extensive. While many of her books deal with controversial subjects, these are handled nonthreateningly and nonsensationally.

Topics of lighter concern are also treated in Pfeffer's books. For example, *What Do You Do When Your Mouth Won't Open* explores the terrors of public speaking experienced by a twelve-year-old girl. This book is another story of a situation with which many youths will identify.

While her writing for young adults is prolific, Pfeffer still finds time to pursue her long-held interest in United States movie history.

Setting

The immediate events in *Sybil at Sixteen* occur over a period of less than one week, with references to the previous history of the Sebastian family.

Boston and its nearby areas constitute the major geographical setting although there are relationships with other locations. Most of the action takes place in the stately, lovely but sparsely furnished brownstone house inhabited by Sybil and her parents.

Other places serving as a backdrop for the story include the eldest sister's apartment, a hospital, a library, and other places generally found in large cities. The time of the year is early spring and there are vivid descriptions of the transition from winter to spring in and around Boston.

Social Sensitivity

Many of the personality traits and exploits of the characters in *Sybil at Sixteen* are more interesting than they are worthy of emulation. These, however, are not sensationalized and are balanced with more acceptable traits and habits. The Sebastian sisters are products of their time and place in the modern world. They use mild profanity, and whenever it is essential for achieving their ends, they are not bound by strict moral behavior. One sister lives with her fiancé and there seems to be no concern about this by the parents. Even at age sixteen and somewhat crippled, Sybil is not above invading her sisters' privacy when she feels she can get away with it. There are no admonitions from the parents regarding the behaviors of the sisters.

While the father and mother have shared a true and faithful love relationship, there are questionable aspects of the father's honesty, integrity, and achievement. While the mother loves her daughters and is an excellent role model, she leaves moral and ethical questions in their own hands.

All controversial activities arising during the story are handled discreetly and in good taste. Younger readers may not recognize some of the more questionable traits and characteristics of the sisters, while older readers may discuss the social and ethical reasons behind the sisters' behavior.



Literary Qualities

The plot of *Sybil at Sixteen* is straightforward, although several subplots are interwoven on the way to its resolution. The major plot involves Sybil's efforts to help her father gain a financial stake that will help to get him started again on his business ventures.

Mysteries involving Evvie and Sam and even Nick, himself, are solved during the course of events. Certain longstanding misunderstandings among the sisters are corrected. The case of Sam's mother, Sybil's stealthy activities, and Nick's final disposition generates suspense, which is built through descriptions of situations and of characters' inner conflicts as well as through the technique of foreshadowing. Although a narrative, *Sybil at Sixteen* is developed mainly through dialogue. Flashbacks are used to establish background necessary for understanding current events and to illuminate traits of the characters. A sense of reality is heightened in the story by use of names of real objects and places.

Language and education help convey the social status of the Sebastian family and their friends and associates. Yiddish words and phrases highlight the cultural background of Sam and his family. That higher education is a value in the Sebastian family can be seen in the frequent references to universities attended by the parents and the older sisters. With respect to their social status, relationships among the sisters are realistically depicted.

Members of the Sebastian family constitute characters that tend to be well rounded. Both admirable and not so admirable characteristics are apparent among family members. While there are some changes in the characters over the course of the story, changes in Sybil are most notable. Sybil does not lose her youthful naivete but she does become wiser and more practical in her attitudes toward her father and her physical handicap.



Themes and Characters

Several themes, including family relationships, love, deceit, lying, dealing with a physically handicapped family member and dealing with death are preeminent in *Sybil at Sixteen*.

Sybil is the major character who narrates the story and whose reflections acquaint the reader with significant past events. Sybil is a well-rounded character whose strengths and weaknesses are apparent. She changes from a daughter who not only loved her father unconditionally but failed to sense his flaws to one who continues to love her father but with a clearer sense of who he actually is. Sybil's devotion to her father makes her a willing accomplice to a scheme she believes would help him financially. Sybil loves her mother and all of her sisters but she is most fond of Claire, who is nearest her age, although her affection for Claire is subordinate to that which she feels for her father. Sybil feels indebted to the family for the sacrifices they have had to make because of her accident. She is most grateful to her father, however, and is willing to participate in any activity that will help her prove her gratitude to him. Of all the sisters, Sybil is her father's favorite, a fact of which she is clearly aware.

Nick Sebastian is disturbed and unhappy about his lack of ability to provide as he would like for the family.

Most of all, he suffers from Sybil's discomfort and pain but there is little he can do about it.

Meg (called "Megs" by her daughters and "Daisy" by Nick) is the mother and mainstay of the family. It is through her checks from an inheritance and her job that the family has a livelihood upon which it can depend. Having come from a well-to-do family, Meg had the opportunity to marry someone of more favorable financial background and social standing but her love for Nick won out. Meg attends to the needs of her daughters and her husband with tenderness and understanding, but she worries about the welfare of Nick and her daughters.

Claire, next to Sybil in age, is a dark and elegant beauty who resembles her father both physically and in terms of her ability to scheme and promote deals. Claire is a model living and working in New York City. Generally somewhat distant in her feelings for her family, Claire is fond of and protective of Sybil. Claire has a past that includes an annulled marriage to someone who first was in love with Thea, another sister. Because of a clever scheme the annulment netted Claire the sum of \$50,000. The money was used to help Sybil and to launch Claire on her modeling career. Of the sisters, Claire is the only one who has a lucrative career.

Thea, second oldest of the sisters, also lives in New York City. Because of past experiences and resentments, Claire and Thea are not close and rarely see each other. Thea, who is also beautiful, is planning a medical career.



Blonde and lovely, she resembles her mother more than she does her father.

Evvie, oldest of the sisters, is generally regarded as the family anchor.

Having left home for college when Sybil was twelve years old, the two are not very close. Evvie is in love with Sam Steinmetz Greene with whom she lives and plans to marry. Evvie and Sam's bonding tends to widen the gap between Evvie and the rest of the family. Sam harbors a secret that he does not wish to share with Evvie's family.

These major characters in *Sybil at Sixteen* display a gamut of emotions as they interact with each other during the story. They show love, concern, suspicion, even hate as the critical events unfold. There is pathos and grief as they bear the losses by death of two persons important to the family.

Several other characters play relatively brief roles in the story yet they are important to its continuity and outcome. Sam, Evvie's fiance, loves Evvie and appreciates her family, but when a crisis occurs, his family becomes more important. Although Linda Steinmetz, Sam's mother, does not actually appear in the story, she affects its outcome.

Clark, wealthy and secure, is a loyal and trusted friend of the Sebastian family even though Meg decided to marry Nick instead of him.



Topics for Discussion

1. The Sebastian family is living in a home bequeathed to them by Aunt Grace, who is regarded by the family as a demon. Why is Aunt Grace unloved and unappreciated by the family?
2. Aunt Grace left the brownstone house to Meg "in trust." Was she justified in leaving the house to her heirs in this manner?
3. Nick, the father, shows an inordinate amount of care and concern toward Sybil. Is he genuinely concerned about her or is he motivated by his own needs? Take a position on this and support your views by references to incidents in the story.
4. Sybil's older sisters had become somewhat disaffected toward Nick.

Were there good reasons for their feelings? What had transpired during the past to account for their feelings?
5. Was Meg, mother of the Sebastian sisters, a well-rounded character? Why or why not? Is Meg a memorable character in the story?
6. Claire, who has achieved some success in her career, tries to befriend and protect Sybil. In what ways is Claire like Nick? In what ways is Sybil like Nick?
7. Should Sybil have gone as far as she did to try to help Nick? Was Sybil's behavior wise?
8. What about Sybil's character showed her to be a strong, resourceful person? Did Sybil have a good attitude toward Sam?
9. Claire and Thea had experienced many conflicts in which each showed a strong sense of competitiveness. Is Claire or Thea the more admirable person? With which one do you tend to identify?
10. Claire's career has been costly to the family. Is Claire grateful to the family for their sacrifices?
11. Is Sybil's attitude toward hospitals justified?
12. Does Sybil's handicap constrict her activities to any appreciable degree? Is her supposed debt to her family justified?
13. Is Nick's guilt rooted in external circumstances or does it relate to his personality and penchant for secrecy?
14. Is there any humor in the relationships among the sisters? In the story as a whole? Cite incidents in the story that support your point of view.



15. What is the nature of Nick's legacy to Sybil? Does Sybil concur with Nick's final request?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Susan Beth Pfeffer is a prolific young writer, sometimes publishing two or more novels in a single year.

Discuss what events in Pfeffer's life might help to account for her prolific writing.

2. Some critics have compared *Sybil at Sixteen* and the titles related to it with the classic, *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, first published in 1868.

Compare the exploits of the March sisters in *Little Women* with those of the Sebastian sisters in the Sebastian sisters series.

3. In several instances in *Sybil at Sixteen* a family member or an entire family is called upon to make major sacrifices for another member of the family.

Compare the implications of Sybil's sacrifice for her father and Sam's sacrifice for his mother. Which was the greater sacrifice? Why?

4. The technique of foreshadowing is used in *Sybil at Sixteen* to suggest the impending tragedy which will befall Nick. Compile a list of the ways by which the author prepared the reader for Nick's fate in the story.

For Further Reference

Bingham, Jane M., ed. *Writers for Children*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988. Presents a biography of Louisa May Alcott and a critical review of *Little Women*. The virtues and flaws of the March sisters in *Little Women* can be compared with the treatment of the Sebastian sisters in the series by Susan Beth Pfeffer.

Lesniak, James C., ed. "Pfeffer, Susan Beth." In *Contemporary Authors*. New Revision Series. Vol. 31. Detroit: Gale Research, 1992. A biography of Susan Beth Pfeffer highlighting her numerous writings and award-winning novels.

Related Titles

Sybil at Sixteen is the fourth of the quintet of books on the Sebastian family. Other closely related titles in the series are: Evvie at Sixteen, Thea at Sixteen, Claire at Sixteen, and Meg at Sixteen. According to a critic writing in Publishers' Weekly, through this series of novels "the Sebastians have established themselves as a family to watch." Each book takes off from the events surrounding the sixteenth birthday celebration of a family member. In the first four books, the sixteenth birthday celebration is in honor of one of the Sebastian sisters. The last book in the series is the sixteenth birthday celebration of Meg, the mother, at which she fell in love with and later married Nick Sebastian, father of the sisters.

While Sybil at Sixteen is enjoyable in and of itself, a deeper understanding of the family is possible through reading the related titles. If possible, these novels should be read in the order in which they appeared. Doing so enables the reader to become thoroughly acquainted with unique characteristics, habits, attitudes, and values of each character. While some information of this type is given in the flashbacks in Sybil at Sixteen, for example, it is not sufficient for a full understanding of each family member's behavior.

In Evvie at Sixteen, the first book in the quintet, each member of the family is introduced. Aunt Grace's antipathy toward Nick is clarified. The saga of the family continues in Thea at Sixteen, in which the reasons for the strained relationship between Claire and Thea are explained. In Claire at Sixteen, Claire's greed and ego are exposed.

Sybil's exploits and thoughts are detailed in Sybil at Sixteen. Because of Nick's death, it is clear that the Sebastian family will never again be the same. Meg at Sixteen is the story of Meg's shattered life with her wealthy aunt after she meets and falls in love with Nick.



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