

# **A Taste of Daylight Short Guide**

## **A Taste of Daylight by Crystal Thrasher**

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## Overview

A Taste of Daylight is the last of four books about Seely Robinson, who has grown from a twelve-year-old girl living in the hills of Greene County, Indiana, in *The Dark Didn't Catch Me* to a teen-ager in her senior year of high school in Bedford in *A Taste of Daylight*.

Seely's mom has faced many difficult situations: the move to Greene County to wait out the Depression, the death of a son, leaving her oldest daughter behind to finish high school, and then the death of her husband. Faced with the need to support Seely and her younger brother Robert, she moves the family to Bedford, a small city in southern Indiana where she bakes pies in the hotel kitchen. Life is different in the city.

Seely and Robert can walk to school, there are neighbors, and wonder of wonders, a Salvation Army Store where the family can buy used clothing and other items to help stretch the family finances. Their often desperate need for money is compounded by the need to pay for electricity, fuel for heating and cooking, and water—conveniences they lived without in Greene County. Seely and Robert feel compelled to earn money to add to the family's finances and work for their landlady, Elvira Spragg.

The children discover that life is hard whether it is in the city or in the hills. Seely meets it on her own terms, head on, holding her head high, mustering her courage and accepting life's challenges. She makes friends with Deidre and Dustin Hollis, country people just outside Bedford. Deidre helps Seely face a new school where she experiences the slights of classmates courageously and earns their respect. Seely, never interested in boys, becomes Deidre's confidant when she falls in love, and must sort out her own feelings about Dustin.

Robert, seeking his own independence, wants to trap with Dustin so that he can contribute to the family finances. Seely, who feels responsible for Robert, is afraid of his working in the icy and swollen streams similar to where their brother Jamie drowned.

## About the Author

Crystal Faye Thrasher was born December 5, 1921, in Oolitic, Indiana.

She was the fourth of six children born to Virgil Leroy and Rozella (Bennett) Knight. Crystal Knight graduated from Salisbury High School and married Joseph Martin Thrasher at the age of seventeen in 1939. At seventeen she felt ill-prepared for the course her life was set on but rose to the challenge and task of raising three children, Carol, Joseph, Jr., and Janis.

Her life in a home where parents allowed her to be herself and encouraged her to do what she wanted to do contributed greatly to her love of books and writing. Like many people during the Great Depression, her family became poor when her father lost his job.

At the age of ten, she and her siblings moved with their parents to Greene County, Indiana, where they planned to wait out the Depression. Although she says her work is not autobiographical, her growing up years have had an influence on her writing. She writes about people in a way that exhibits her deep understanding of how to survive and maintain dignity in a hostile environment.

The reader of Julie's Summer finds the same attitudes among its characters as Crystal experienced in the hills of Greene County. Everyone knew everyone's business and girls who had more than one boyfriend at the same time were not well thought of. She says it was dark in those hills. The sun set quickly and the days were short in the winter months. This added to the feeling of despair among those living there.

When asked about her writing, Crystal says, "I can't say when I started writing, can't remember when I couldn't write and I can't remember when I didn't try to write stories or tell them.

I've been writing all my life; stories I wrote usually were assignments in school." During the years prior to writing formally, she worked at Sears, Roebuck and Co., the Ft. Wayne, Indiana, Country Club, and raised her children.

Because her husband's job kept him away from home for long periods of time, they moved numerous times to be near him. They haunted libraries, did a great deal of walking, read, wrote stories and poems and grew up together.

She says she has garbage bags filled with her writing from those days.

At age fifty, she quit her job at the country club and said, "I've worked the first fifty years of my life, now I'm going to play the next fifty years." When asked what she was going to do, she said she was going to write a book, an ambition she knew she could accomplish because she had been writing all of her life and knew she was good at it.



Her children encouraged her to take some writing courses at the Ft. Wayne Campus of Indiana University. They even bought her a typewriter and supplies so she would have no excuse not to sign up. Her first book, *The Dark Didn't Catch Me*, which she wrote for an assignment in those classes, won her a spot in a writing workshop on the Indiana University Bloomington campus. Her teachers there encouraged her to submit her fiction to an editor in New York City, and two years later *The Dark Didn't Catch Me* was published. Three more books followed about the young protagonist, Seely Robinson, and a fourth novel about Seely's older sister, Julie, who remained in Greene County to complete her high school education after her family moved away.

Thrasher makes her home in Huntington, Indiana, with her husband, Joe. She is still writing for herself, her children and her grandchildren. She writes compelling, historical novels that allow her readers time to know and care about her characters.

Thrasher has won numerous awards, including: ALA Book of the Year for *The Dark Didn't Catch Me*, 1976 and *Between Dark and Daylight*, 1979; Friends of American Writers Award for *Between Dark and Daylight*, 1979; Parents Choice Award for *End of a Dark Road*, 1980; Children's Book of the Year Award from the Children's Book Committee for *End of a Dark Road*, 1983; Children's Round Table Award for *Between Dark and Daylight*, 1982, *End of a Dark Road*, 1984 and *A Taste of Daylight*, 1985.

## Setting

A Taste of Daylight is set in Bedford, a small city in southern Indiana, during the Great Depression. For Seely, Bedford is a large city, an exciting place with neighbors, school within walking distance, new friends, new responsibilities, and opportunities. She and her family live in a rented carriage house with a large living area and a small bedroom for her mother with the kitchen beyond. Seely sleeps in an open loft above the kitchen and Robert on a daybed in the large open room downstairs.



## Social Sensitivity

A Taste of Daylight invites the reader into the lives of the one-parent Robinson family. Many one-parent families today face similar struggles to house, feed, and clothe children and at the same time hold on to the important elements of life like love, honesty, loyalty, respect, independence, and selfdetermination.

Many children today go to empty homes after school as do Seely and Robert. Although Seely is seventeen and by today's standards, old enough to be at home alone and responsible enough to care for her younger brother, it was not the norm in the 1930s and 1940s. Parents still have the same fears, regrets, and uncertainties Seely's mom has. She wants to be home when her children come home from school, but she can't.

Many teen-agers are eager to get that "first job." For most, it is pocket money to be spent as they please. This contrasts sharply with Seely's first job, which she takes out of necessity, a decision she makes without consulting and asking permission of her mother.

Almost universally, teen-agers do what is necessary to assert their independence. Seely is no exception. Teenagers who read A Taste of Daylight will likely identify with Seely's need to make independent choices, fit in at school, have a best friend, and be appreciated by her mom.

## Literary Qualities

Thrasher writes in the first person in a spare writing style. Her first paragraph sets the scene for the reader with a move from the hills near Jubilee to the city of Bedford, a reluctant move for Seely Robinson, the protagonist.

Thrasher's poetic use of language paints vivid pictures of her characters, their actions, and the setting. In particular, her use of metaphor is pure pleasure: "The snow began on Christmas Eve, blowing and slithering down the alley and across our yard like a living thing, hurrying on its way to somewhere else." Thrasher's vivid descriptions paint indelible scenes of the life of poor people in the Depression.

Thrasher's characters are flesh-and-blood people whose suffering and joy are tangible to the reader. The reader shares Seely's determination to be "a workman worthy of her hire" to add money to the family finances in spite of the pain inflicted on her hands by the strong soap she uses to clean for Elvira Spragg. As in her other stories about the Robinson family, Thrasher uses many idioms from the period and place of her story, and peppers her dialogue with colloquialisms typical of the people, place, and time.





# Themes and Characters

Sustaining love within the family and among friends is a strongly developed theme in *A Taste of Daylight*. Love and a sense of responsibility compel Seely and Robert to take care of each other and work hard to ease their mother's load.

A second strong theme is physical and personal hardship. Seely is growing up during the Depression when material goods are scarce for her and her family because of the small income from her mother's job. Many times they must make do with what they have or do without.

Seely dreams of completing high school and maybe going on to college like her big sister, Julie. She sees education as a way out of the Depression and hardship, and she rigorously pursues her studies in spite of snubs and slights of classmates. This ties into the ever present theme of personal dignity and integrity in the face of adversity that weaves its way through *A Taste of Daylight*, a theme found in all of Thrasher's books.

Seventeen-year-old Seely knows herself and what she wants to do. Her goals, which include completing high school, help her stay on course and guide her through the uncertainties of life. In earlier books Seely has dealt with tragedy and difficulties: the death of a younger brother, Jamie; leaving her big sister, Julie, behind to finish high school; the death of her father; and now a new community, new school, new people, and different responsibilities.

Seely is a sensitive young woman.

She is a giver, determined to do all she can to make life better for herself and her family. She respects her elders and those in authority over her but is willing to stand by her convictions when she makes decisions contrary to her mother's instructions. She is loyal to family and friends, a young woman worth knowing and having as a friend.

Robert, Seely's grade-school-age brother, a very likable boy, is cheerful and eager to please. Robert looks up to Seely and because he wants to please, shoulders his share of the load in household chores and eagerly takes on a cleaning job for Elvira Spragg and then trapping with Dustin Hollis to earn money. Although he is young, he lets Seely know that he has opinions and feelings, too. Like Seely, he is loyal, respects his elders but is willing to make decisions contrary to his mother's instructions and pay the consequences.

Robert is a bright, sunny spot in *A Taste of Daylight*.

Widowed with two children to support, Zel Robinson is a very focused and determined woman who intends to be self-sufficient. She is a hard worker and expects hard work from her children. Without complaint, she sacrifices her time and energy to provide for them. Zel is a no-nonsense, proud woman who refuses to accept the charity of others, even Gus Tyson, who has been a family friend for years. On the surface, she seems to



be a somewhat hard-hearted person, made that way by deprivation and losses, but her soft, loving nature weaves its way through the story as she sacrifices to provide a house, food, coats, and an occasional treat for her children. Loving words and gentleness surface to round off her hard edges and prickly temper.

Deidre Hollis, eighteen, and her younger brother, Dustin, are also fatherless. They live with their mother and grandfather in his home. Like Seely and her family, they are poor, although grandfather Hollis has land.

Deidre and Dustin are friends as well as siblings and supportive of each other. They befriend Seely and Robert, providing the opportunity for Robert to trap. Deidre is a romantic, and a romance develops between Arlo Hawkins and her when they meet at Seely's home for a Sunday dinner. Arlo works with Seely's mom at the hotel.

Gus Tyson is a family friend who stops by periodically to leave scrap wood from his sawmill. The Robinson family uses the wood for heating and cooking. It becomes clear early in the story that Gus delivers the scrap wood because he cares for the family, but also because he is interested in Zel.

Like Seely, he is a giver and wants to provide for Zel and her family.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Read just the opening five paragraphs of the story. What do you think Zel Robinson (Seely's mother) means by her statement, "I've finally made it out of the hills and hollows to where I can see daylight . . . I never thought I'd live to see the day." Fanny Tyson replies, "Zel, I hope the day never comes when you regret it." Make some predictions. What could possibly happen to make Zel regret leaving the hills and hollows of Green County and moving to the city? Record your predictions to review after you finish this book. Were they correct, different?
2. Mrs. Robinson seems fearful of life in the "city" for her children. Consequently we find in the opening chapters that she forbids them to leave the house without her permission. Compare Seely's and Robert's situation to your own in freedom or lack of freedom to come and go as you please.
3. On page 21 Seely is thinking about the thirty cents an hour her mother earns at the hotel and all it would have to cover if they were to make it through the winter. Earlier in chapter three, Elvira Spragg, their landlady, had told Seely she "could use a girl's help in the house." Now on page 21 Seely tells Robert they could both work for Elvira Spragg and charge for their labor (keeping it a secret) because she knows her mother will disapprove of the arrangement. What is your opinion of this idea? What do you think could happen? What kind of person do you think Elvira Spragg might be to work for? What makes you think that? What decision would you make in the same situation?
4. Seely and Robert work for Elvira Spragg without gaining permission from their mother. Were you surprised by Mrs. Robinson's reaction to their working for Elvira? How did you think she would react? Why? How would you react if you were Seely's mom?
5. How do Seely's and Robert's wages compare to the same kind of work today? What would you expect to be paid for similar work?
6. Seely, Robert, and their mother go to church with the Hollis family in chapter nine. What importance do you think church holds for the Robinson family? Why? What importance does church have in your life and the lives of your classmates? Did people need church more during the Depression than we do now? Explain your answer.
7. Deidre and Dustin Hollis are best friends with Seely and Robert. They live with their grandfather, and in chapter twelve Robert asks, "Seely, do you know why Grandpa and Mrs. Hollis fight all the time?" How would you answer this question?
8. Gus Tyson has been supplying scrap wood from his lumber mill to Zel for heating and cooking. In chapter thirteen she decides not to accept any more wood from him. Why, especially since it is scrap? Why does Gus want to supply the wood? Why would he deliver such a small amount especially when the trip would require extra money for gasoline and money was scarce during the Depression?



9. Dun Hollis said, "you can dress a boy up, but you can't take him to town." What do you think he means?

Do you know some other sayings with similar meanings? Where do such sayings come from?

10. Explain what Seely's mom means by this statement, "Seely, make the most of what God gave you and stop fighting the things you can't change."

11. In chapter 20, Zel Robinson has her pay envelope stolen. What do you think of how she handled her pay, pinning it to her coat? What does it tell you about her character? What would you have done in her situation after the money was gone?

12. In chapter 25, Zel Robinson seems quite short with Robert when he talks about the house in Oolitic that he is helping Gus Tyson remodel. What seems to be the problem?

13. Near the end of the story, we find the title of the book, "But I'd heard her say once that she'd had a taste of daylight now, and she didn't like it." What does Seely mean by this statement?

14. At the end of chapter 21, Dustin makes good his threat to leave home after the death of Grandpa Hollis. Robert is affected by Dustin's actions and in chapter 22, tries to run away. Compare his attempt with runaways today.

15. When the story is finished, Seely is on a bus headed for Julie and school.

What do you think will become of her?

Ellis Van Waggoner asks her if she is going to be a doctor. Would this be an option for Seely?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Can you remember your first day in a new school or perhaps your first day in high school? Write a paragraph comparing it to Seely's. Share your writing with classmates. What were their first days like?

2. Students are told to bring to class a complete list of the ingredients for the Mutton Tallow Salve Seely uses to treat her sore hands. Use the *The Foxfire Book* and find some home remedy recipes for salves used to treat sores, wounds, and the like. Where would you find the ingredients to make one?

You might go to a farm supply store and look over the salves used for animal injuries. Is there anything there that has ingredients similar to Mutton Tallow Salve or one you find in *The Foxfire Book*?

3. This story is set during the Depression in southern Indiana. Research this era and its effect on people, in rural areas in particular.

4. Research the beginnings of the welfare system in this country. When was a formal system put in place?

What would have been available for people like the Robinson family? Zel Robinson refused charity, even from friends, so why would she have refused help from a county or state agency?

5. Zel's minimum wage of \$2.40 per day is equivalent to today's minimum wage of \$40 per day. Make a shopping list of items you need to start school and see what you can buy at a thrift shop for two days' work (\$80).

6. Robert traps with his friend, Dustin Hollis. If you have trapped, bring the tools needed to class and explain the process to your classmates. When, where, how do you trap? What do you do with the animals you trap? If no one in your class has ever trapped, use *The Foxfire Book* edited by Eliot Wigginton and find information on trapping raccoons.

7. Many people today are opposed to any kind of killing of animals. Write a defense in favor of trapping or a protest against trapping. You need to support your stance. Present your defenses to the class and open it for discussion among your classmates. Would they trap? Is it okay to trap? Would it make a difference in your attitude if you were in Robert's situation?

8. Zel tells Robert how to make furniture polish. The recipe includes two tablespoons of olive oil and two tablespoons of vinegar added to one quart of warm water. Make this recipe in class and try it out on a piece of wooden furniture.

## For Further Reference

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## Related Titles

Thrasher has written three other books about Seely Robinson, plus *Julie's Summer*, which is about Seely's older sister. In *The Dark Didn't Catch Me*, the first of the series, Seely Robinson is twelve years old. The other three titles are: *Between Dark and Daylight*, *End of a Dark Road*, and *A Taste of Daylight*. Each of these novels can stand alone, but for the full effect of how Seely maintains a strong sense of love and loyalty to family, handles emotional and physical hardships, and accepts loss with a spirit of hope, the reader needs to start with *The Dark Didn't Catch Me* and progress through them to the last one in the series, *A Taste of Daylight*.

*Julie's Summer*, also set in the Depression, is independent of the other titles in the series, but a reading of this title featuring Julie, Seely's older sister, will help the reader gain a greater insight into Seely's desire to complete high school.



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## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996