

# Taking Terri Mueller Short Guide

## Taking Terri Mueller by Norma Fox Mazer

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## Overview

Anyone who enjoys suspense and piecing together a mystery will enjoy this book. Its central plot deals with kidnapping by the non-custodial parent. Bit by bit Terri discovers the answers to her questions. Why does she move so frequently? What were the circumstances of her mother's accidental death? Why does her father refuse to tell her anything about her mother?

She does not even have a picture of her. Readers will want to find out how she adjusts to finding out the truth about her father and what happens when she meets her mother and grandparents.

This is a book about a very good relationship between a father and daughter with no other relatives that she knows about. Even at the end, after the deception has been discovered, Terri goes back to her father who gave up everything and everyone to keep her.

## About the Author

Norma Fox Mazer was born May 15, 1931, in New York City and grew up in Glens Falls. She had two sisters—one older and one younger. As a child, she wanted to be a nurse, but she changed her mind in junior high school when she began working on the school newspaper and the town newspaper.

From then on, her school life centered around the newspaper and writing.

Eventually, she attended Antioch College and Syracuse University.

When she was fifteen, she met the tall, curly-haired Harry Mazer who was six years older than she was. Two years after meeting Harry the first time, they met again and were married February 12, 1950. Harry worked as a longshoreman, a railroad worker, a welder, and an iron worker, but he finally told her that he wanted to be a writer, too. They made it a practice to read and write a little every day. Since they had four children—Anne, Joseph, Susan, and Gina, they began getting up at 3:30 a.m. and writing until 6:00 a.m.

They discuss their writing in progress and sometimes do books together.

She enjoys reading and racquetball.

In the summer she likes to go to their land in Canada to get away from all the distractions and conveniences of city life. The Mazers live in Pompey Hills outside Syracuse, New York.

*A Figure of Speech* was nominated for a National Book Award in 1976. *Saturday the Twelfth of October* won the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award in 1976. *Dear Bill, Remember Me?* won the Christopher Award in 1976 and was named Outstanding Book of the Year by the New York Times and Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association. Mazer won the California Young Readers' Medal, and three of her books are on the list of Honor Books in Literature for Young Adults by Kenneth Donelson. *Taking Terri Mueller* won the 1981 Edgar Allan Poe Award for the best juvenile mystery written in the previous year.

## Setting

The story begins in Ann Arbor, Michigan, as Terri and her father examine an apartment to rent; but as the story progresses, Terri remembers the long string of other places that they have lived (big cities like New York and Chicago, little towns like Hap Falls, Amberville, and Roarin) and friends who were left behind. When her father leaves a town, he just drives until another one feels right. All he needs are Terri and his toolbox. The red Pinto was the only stable thing in Terri's life, but her father's need for freedom was evident when he traded the Pinto for a camper.

Important places in Ann Arbor are the clean, but rather plain apartment, the new school where she begins to make friends, Shaundra's house with her boisterous brothers, and the telephone booth where she finally contacts her mother. Later, the scene shifts to the reunion with her mother in California.



# Social Sensitivity

This book deals with a distraught father who felt driven to steal his child from his divorced wife, a situation that happens often in today's world. Mazer shows very carefully why he felt compelled to do it and how his life was changed because of his decision. The only person in his family that he kept in contact with was his older sister who was miserable because of keeping the secret. As the story progresses, Terri begins to have nagging questions which her father will not answer. Not knowing the truth causes Terri to imagine even worse problems than the real one. Perhaps her father had murdered the man who had killed her.

mother. On the other hand, there is a sensitive description of the feelings Kathryn went through after her child was taken. She lived in a grey world, could not get her hands warm the whole first year, and awoke every morning with the dull clamp of pain at the back of her head. The disclosure of the kidnapping caused Nancy and Phil to break up.

The author said that she wrote this book because she found out that 25,000 children a year are stolen by non-custodial parents and that most of them will never see their mothers again: I was not only saddened by this bleak statistic, I was also startled and fascinated that in the name of love adults would deprive their children not only of a parent but of family and friends, community and stability. I wrote this book for both adults and children. First, because it's a story I think everyone can connect to; and second—as in all my writing for young people—to say, "Okay, life is not easy, but don't despair.

There is strength inside you."

(Taking Terri Mueller, addendum) By reading through Terri's discovery, readers can find out what it would be like for a kidnapped child to be cheated out of knowing her mother, birthday parties, grandparents, and a sense of her past. They can also see why a parent would do such a thing and understand the loss the mother felt. It is important for readers to realize that many problems do not have a simple right or wrong answer and that such difficult situations must be understood from many different points of view.



# Literary Qualities

This is a tightly written novel in which every seemingly unimportant thing that happens interlocks to tell the story. For instance, there is a disoriented woman outside the phone booth who later represents the out-of-control feeling that Terri has and also is a basis for questioning thoughts about what kind of person her mother is. The fact that she doggedly tries to get up a hill on her bicycle and finally has to give up is a sign to her later that there are some things she cannot do no matter how she tries.

There is a mouse tale made up by the father that parallels Terri's life with her father. He would tell her parts of the story if she had been good and had performed well in school. It is about Sally, a mouse, who travels in a mousemobile with her father, Mustafa. This mouse story comes into play every once in a while as the novel unfolds.

There are several dreams in the book. Terri's recurring dream is that her father is leaving her behind. When Phil's former wife becomes a threat to his relationship with Terri, his wife appears in his dream with yellow-tinted sunglasses and a vegetable knife in her hand. Her mother, Kathryn, tells her that she dreamed of hugging and holding her the night before.

Figurative language is used throughout. Her mother told her that as a child she was like a rubber ball, that nothing could keep her down. Terri thought that finding her mother would be "one simple explosion of happiness." The red licorice on her hands looked like the red ink on the divorce papers. "It was as if they were in a bombed out building and all her father saw was a broken window." Questions "were blowing through her mind like a windstorm." Words were "pouring like water like gray rain falling in straight sheets out of the sky."

To make the scenes realistic, all of the senses are used in descriptions. The following example takes place at school: She walked to her locker, carrying with her, like something tangible, that curious numbness, that detachment. She saw little details with extraordinary clarity. A sharp-nosed girl wearing a fluffy white fur hat with earflaps. A boy with slicked-back blond hair, each hair lying separate and distinct on his head. And the smells of the school—Lysol, oregano (pizza for lunch again), and cigarette smoke — came to her in parallel waves, so that she smelled them all at once, and yet individually.

Mazer effectively uses cliffhangers at the ends of her chapters to encourage readers to continue reading: Chapter 2—"She felt something strong in herself and said out loud, 'I want answers';" Chapter 5—"Something is wrong;" Chapter 8—"he must have lied to you;" Chapter 9—"Why did you lie to me?;" Chapter 12—"I have to find her;" Chapter 13—"Do it . . . Just go ahead and do it, Terri, dear;" Chapter 17—"They were truly strangers to each other." The end of Chapter 14 puts her aunt's name and address in her hands so that she can find her mother.

These dramatic statements at the ends of chapters act as hooks to make the reader go on to the next chapter.



# Themes and Characters

The underlying theme of this book is trust. Terri and her father have only each other; there is no one else—no mother, no grandparents, and no other relatives. Her father has done a good job of taking care of her and teaching her honesty, dependability, and responsibility.

This is the story of what happens when Terri finds out that their whole life together has been built on lies. Finally she realizes that he took her because he loved her very much and was afraid of losing her. Her love and concern for him is strong enough to bring her back to him in the end. Love and caring constitute another theme.

Besides the two main characters, there is Terri's girlfriend, Shaundra, who helps her unravel the mystery; her father's girlfriend, Nancy, and her young son, Leif; her aunt from California; as well as her mother, stepfather, half sister, and maternal grandparents.

Characterization is shown by what they say and do and by third-person description. One way characters are developed is through comparison. The relationship between Terri and her father can be compared to the different kind of relationship between Nancy and Leif. Shaundra and her family can be compared to Terri and her father. In addition, characters seem real because of the things they do, such as burning the potatoes, taking walks when they are angry, and walking Barkley, the dog. Their feelings are shown through actions like Terri using the toe of her shoe to kick her father's shirt into a corner instead of picking it up, getting into a car with some wild boys, and turning in a blank test paper.

Basic attributes of the characters can be seen in what they think they must do. For example, Terri tells her father that she had broken into the security box. Even when she had done something that would hurt or anger her father, she had to be honest and tell him what she had done instead of hiding the evidence or keeping it a secret.

Conversation brings reality to the characters and situations. Some slang such as being "vegged out" is used.

There is also playful talk. For example, "You're a berry, Terri. You're a pill, Phil;" "What's green and sour and bigger than a pickle jar? . . . a pickled elephant."





# Topics for Discussion

1. Before reading the book, discuss what kind of a person a kidnapper is.

What do kidnappers care about? How do they act? Terri thought, "Kidnappers were sinister men, ugly men, violent men. Kidnappers had cut off a boy's ear and sent it to his family. This was to prove they would do what they said if they didn't get their money.

Money was what kidnappers cared about ... "

2. In the book Shaundra tells Terri, "If you had to be kidnapped, you couldn't have picked a nicer looking guy to do it." Discuss how appearances can be deceiving, and how children are often lured by kidnappers.

3. A simile explains one object or idea by comparing it to another, such as "the red licorice on her hands looked like the red ink on the divorce papers." Make a list of the many similes in the story and explain what they mean.

4. What can a parent do if a child is taken by the non-custodial parent?

What community, state, and national resources are available?

5. Discuss how dreams are used in this story to show characterization and perhaps portend the future.

6. When people are aware of a problem and cannot find answers, they imagine and worry over many things that are worse than if they had been told the truth. How is this true in Taking Terri Mueller? When has it been true in your own life?

7. Did Nancy react to the revelation in a normal way? What else could she have done?

8. Given the whole story, what decision should Terri have made regarding where she would live? Did she make the right decision? What will happen next?

9. Why is "incidental" information such as the wax paper incident, the disoriented woman at the telephone booth, the wild car ride, bike riding on the hill, and guinea pigs and goldfish, important?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Look up the Missing Children Act and any other legislation that could be used by parents in Kathryn's position.

Find out what parents are doing to protect their children such as fingerprinting and videotaping. What community resources, if any, are available?

Research information about CHILD FIND, INC., P. O. Box 277, New Paltz, New York 12561.

2. Write a book report on one of the following books: Abrahms, Sally. *Children in the Crossfire: The Tragedy of Parental Kidnapping* (New York: Macmillan, 1983).

Overly, Fay. *Missing: A Family's Triumph in the Tragedy No Parent Ever Wants to Face* (New York: Accent Books, 1985).

3. Keep a running list of the similes used in *Taking Terri Mueller* and explain how they contribute to the story.

4. Shaundra's assignment is to write three hundred words about her earliest memory. This causes Terri to try to remember something that happened before she was five. All she can recapture are glimpses of orange light on orange pop, yellow tinted sun glasses, and yellow sneakers. Write your own three hundred word essay on earliest memories.

5. After reading the book, write to the author and tell her how you felt about this book. Be specific.

6. Read Mazer's essay on respect in *Literature for Today's Young Adults* 3d ed., p. 74, and discuss her belief that children are not respected in our society. Give examples to prove or disprove her belief from your own life.

## For Further Reference

Donelson, Kenneth L. *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. 2d ed. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1985: 440, 441, 544. Provides a broad coverage of books for young adults: their literary characteristics, the different kinds available, their history, and ways they can be used. There is a valuable chapter on censorship. The Honor List in the back of the book provides titles and information about the best books published from 1967 to the date of publication of the current edition. Of special interest are the inserted biographical sketches of popular authors with pictures.

———. *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. 3d ed. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1989: 74. Similar to the second edition, this book has been updated with new information and a more modern honor list. Both the second and third editions were used for this article because some information is not in both.

Holtze, Sally Holmes, ed. *Fifth Book of Junior Book of Authors*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983. This book contains autobiographical sketches done by the authors which tell about their lives and their philosophies. There are pictures of the authors and lists of their books and awards. This personal information about authors is of interest to both teachers and to students. The specific point of view and style that an author brings to the writing of a book is developed over the course of his or her whole life. In student vernacular this kind of information shows "where he's coming from."

Levine, Susan. "Taking Terri Mueller."

VOYA 5 (April 1982): 82. This periodical reviews current books for young adults and should be a good resource when choosing or preparing to teach a specific book.

"Taking Terri Mueller." *Booklist* 78 (December 1, 1981): 500. This is a resource for the teacher to use before teaching the book. It contains professional book reviews and also publishes the American Library Association "Best" lists.

## Related Titles

The Face on the Milk Carton (1990) by Caroline B. Cooney also deals with a stolen child who is well taken care of but wants to meet her natural parents and her brothers and sisters. Students who enjoyed Taking Terri Mueller and were concerned by it would enjoy this book about a girl who had no idea that she had been abducted until she saw her own picture on a milk carton.

In Irene Bennett Brown's Answer Me, Answer Me (1985), Bryn is left completely alone after the death of Gram, the woman who raised her. In going through Gram's papers she finds out that she could have relatives in Kansas.

This is the story of her search for her background.

There are several books that deal with young people who are taken by terrorists or by kidnapers for money.

Prisoners at the Kitchen Table (1979) by Barbara Holland is much easier to read than other books mentioned in this article. Lois Duncan's Ransom (1990) is the story of the kidnapping of several young people who were on a school bus going home. Robert Cormier's After the First Death (1979) is a chilling tragedy that deals with the hijacking of a busload of children.



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