

# **There's a Bat in Bunk Five Short Guide**

## **There's a Bat in Bunk Five by Paula Danziger**

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## Overview

Those who have read *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* will want to follow the continued saga of Marcy Lewis in her new adventures as a camp counselor-in-training for a group of especially gifted young people. But even if you do not yet know Marcy or her favorite teacher, Finney, you will quickly identify with Marcy's problems with her parents, her new boyfriend, and the unruly camper who does her best to make life miserable for everyone. Most entertaining is Marcy's own development as she grows more accustomed to her new slender body and positive outlook on the world. The story is filled with puns, jokes, and one-liners. The camp action is highlighted by the tricks, some funny and some not, which the campers play upon one another. Told from Marcy's point of view, it is a story which asks and attempts to answer questions that are on many teen-agers' minds.

Marcy Lewis was first introduced to readers as a clumsy overweight teenager in *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*. But this sequel features a slimmer, more confident Marcy who, at almost fifteen years of age, becomes a Counselor-in-Training (CIT) at the arts camp founded and directed by her favorite former teacher, Ms. Finney. There's a *Bat in Bunk Five* supplies enough background for the reader to understand Marcy's unhappy history and thus grasp the importance of her evolution into a more understanding and compassionate person. Within an interesting plot, Danziger brings Marcy to a maturity that allows her, if only in brief moments, to stop hating her father long enough to see him as a real person with problems similar to some of her own.

The action of the arts camp provides movement crucial to retaining reader attentiveness as the problems of teenage love and alienation from adults are explored. All the camp's students have one thing in common—their unusual talent in some area of the arts. The emphasis upon creative release is strong as each young person, camper and counselors alike, is encouraged to express himself or herself. While helping supervise a dozen eleven- and twelve-year-olds, Marcy helps write the camp newsletter and annual publication. Her writing also adds to the story's framework as she envisions her own life's "plot" and herself and her acquaintances as "characters" in a story. She comments early on that "If my life were a novel, it would be one without much plot, just character development."

Although talented, the campers are not perfect people. There are many confrontations over the summer, especially with a younger camper, Ginger, precocious enough to be placed in *Bunk Five* with older girls, but emotionally underdeveloped. When she runs away, Marcy must face up to the same kind of responsibility most adults have for the care of their children. As the summer evolves, a romance develops for Marcy with another CIT, Ted.

Marcy's feelings for Ted, while thrilling, are also frightening because she fears that her romantic relationships might fail like that of her parents, who constantly quarrel.



Developing an understanding of one's identity is the theme of this book, beginning with a scene in which Marcy is ironing name labels on all her belongings. She thinks early on that camp is her chance to escape her constantly bickering parents and to start her life over "where no one, except Ms. Finney, knows anything about her." By the end of the story Marcy does, indeed, have a better grasp of her identity, but realizes her journey to self-realization is a continuous process which may never be complete. The book's final line expresses her new, more optimistic attitude: "I can hardly wait for the next chapter."

## About the Author

Paula Danziger attributes many of the ideas for her young adult stories to her own childhood and also to her experience as an English teacher.

She taught at the junior high and high school level and was also a college counselor before she chose writing as a full-time career. She has said that everything in her life offers a connection to her writing and she has certainly managed to "connect" with her young reading audience in her novels. She deals directly with the tough problems young people face today, such as poor self-image and surviving divorce. Her novel, *There's a Bat in Bunk Five* is a sequel to the very popular *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*, dealing with the same character who is far from the perfect "ideal" of a teen-ager. Her own turbulent childhood relationship with her father may be seen in the character of Marcy from *Gymsuit*. And, like Marcy, Danziger never succeeded in gymnastics as a child nor did she want to "play by the rules" upon which adults insisted. She resides part-time in New York City, traveling back and forth to Woodstock, the setting of some of her novels. Danziger's approach of allowing her characters to relate their own stories continues to prove extremely popular, with her books attracting many new readers each year.

## Setting

The majority of the book's action takes place at Camp Serendipity, a camp for creative children just outside the artsy community of Woodstock, New York. There is a brief beginning scene at Marcy's New Jersey home during which her parents and their unhappy relationships with one another and Marcy are introduced. Marcy's one desire for the summer is to escape from her parents. The camp provides many creative activities for the campers, who are divided, twelve to a cabin, by age and sex. There are male and female counselors, directed by Ms. Finney and her husband, along with several pet goats who occupy an important part in the action from time to time. This setting provides a backdrop for the many and varied personalities of the campers and counselors who help shape Marcy's summer.



## Social Sensitivity

There is little here to shock today's teen-ager. Ginger issues racial insults to a black camper which reveal her own insecurities, and questions about the proper age for sex are raised, while menstruation is discussed as a type of game. None of these discussions go much beyond the normal girl talk.

Marcy simply decides she is not yet ready for sex with Ted, and he honors her decision. There is much talk about unloving parents, but ultimately, Marcy shares the blame with hers, deciding she should try to see her father as an individual with problems like her own. With the various campers come various points of view: for instance one is a vegetarian and one is anti-sugar and processed food; ethnic differences are stressed. This is all done in a very normal manner and echoes situations in which today's teen-agers find themselves daily.

## Literary Qualities

Fans of Danziger's work are familiar with her first-person, present-tense narrative style. This allows her to speak from inside her main character, often using stream-of-consciousness to present ideas rapidly, one on top of another. This approach, along with her liberal use of puns and corny jokes, may irritate some, but for the majority of readers, it will provide a delightful framework. The immediacy of the action and awareness of Marcy's innermost thoughts and feelings will attract most young people. Although her presentation of Marcy's parents is very flat and one-sided, their depiction probably reflects Marcy's immature and developing consciousness of them. Marcy is the hub of a wide wheel of relationships, all very representative of the teen-age existence.





## Themes and Characters

The theme of "identity" is predominant in this story. Marcy searches for her own amid the confusion she feels over her new outer image (due to her weight loss and breast development) and her anger toward her parents. A second theme is "responsibility"—who has it and what to do with it. Marcy sets off to camp to become an adult, but discovers the accompanying duties and responsibilities are more than she anticipated. This gives her a new sympathy for the feelings of her parents, as well as a new outlook on her former teacher, Ms. Finney, whom she has always considered perfect. She learns how unfair it is to expect perfection from anyone.

There's a Bat in Bunk Five introduces a long list of characters, a potentially confusing situation with which Danziger aids the reader by supplying a list of the campers of Bunk Five from Marcy's daily log. While Marcy, her boyfriend Ted, and the older counselor, Corinne, are major characters, the camp director, Ms. Finney, and her husband, as well as campers from Marcy's cabin, especially the difficult Ginger, also play major roles.

Marcy, age "fourteen and eleven months" has always had problems relating to other young people. Previously fat and flat chested, Marcy is obsessed with thoughts of her appearance, constantly comparing herself to others and worrying about what she eats. As she puts it, "Nancy, my best friend back home, told me I've changed a lot in the past year, that I look good, but it's kind of hard to believe after you've spent your whole life resigned to being Ms. Grotesque Lump." She arrives at camp thinking of Ms. Finney, a former teacher and friend, as a nearly perfect person, and of camp as a wonderful opportunity. She wants to escape her parents, yet when they leave her at camp she acknowledges, "I feel so mixed up—glad they're finally going and afraid to be left alone."

A gifted creative writer, Marcy hopes work at the camp will help her in the future as a possible editor or journalist.

Although nervous and self-conscious at first, Marcy learns to relax at camp and gradually understands she must accept herself and others, including her father and Ms. Finney, for who they are and are not, and for what she wants to make of them. As her romance with Ted develops, she faces questions about love, sex, and girl-boy interaction which are as uncomfortable as they are exciting. Marcy worries about almost everything during the first portion of the story, but learns as time progresses to concentrate on the more positive side of things. Marcy also learns about the problems which responsibility brings as she attempts to cope with Ginger, the camp's problem child.

Ted, a guitar-playing high school senior, falls for Marcy right away. Although they are busy with counselor responsibilities, he finds time to take romantic walks with Marcy and escort her on an actual date to Woodstock. He finds Marcy sexually attractive, but respects her desire to stay out of the back seat of his car. He experiences the normal problems of teen-age love, such as jealousy and possessiveness. Most of the time he is very supportive of Marcy and he has fun at camp, although saddled with the exhausting



eight-year-old boys. He is understanding when Marcy admits she has spent too much time on her relationship with him, and not enough with her camper charges.

Corinne, senior counselor for Bunk Five, also helps Marcy understand responsibility. Experienced with campers and young love, Corinne offers Marcy advice on a variety of subjects, and Marcy listens to her as a friend rather than a representative "adult." When Corinne is afflicted with a rampant case of poison ivy, Marcy is appointed to take charge of Bunk Five. Without Corinne's presence, Ginger manages to stir up a terrific amount of trouble for Marcy.

Ginger is mean enough to sprout horns, constantly insulting her bunk mates and challenging the counselors.

She resists everyone's help, although Marcy hopes to be the one who "reaches" her before summer's end. Marcy's plan is destroyed when Ginger runs away, throwing the camp into an uproar. Suddenly, what seems an irritation becomes very serious, and Marcy miserably realizes she did not give Ginger the attention and time she promised.

Central to the camp and Marcy's involvement in it is Ms. Finney, the "perfect" teacher from Marcy's past.

Even their relationship is tested as Marcy's idealistic image of Ms. Finney becomes too difficult for even a "cool" adult to fulfill.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Like many stories, *There's a Bat in Bunk Five* contains both "good" and "bad" characters. Do you feel any of the characters in the novel are all good or all bad? Why or why not?
2. Early in the book, Marcy says she wants to go to camp in order to "try to be a grown-up, so I'll be able to take care of myself." How does she succeed or fail to reach this goal?
3. Do you think it was a mistake for Marcy to think of Ms. Finney as perfect? Why or why not?
4. Why does Danziger insert so many puns and jokes into her story of fairly serious subjects?
5. Do you think Marcy managed to "escape" at Camp Serendipity?
6. Why is the final sentence appropriate to the book?
7. What are some of Marcy's triumphs at camp? What are some of her mistakes, and what does she learn from each?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The novel emphasizes Marcy's identity. Using examples and incidents from the story, trace the different stages of her identity development.

2. Marcy likes to think of her life as a story and the people she knows as characters in her story. Discuss the effect of Marcy's acquaintances on her life and show how each contributes to its "plot."

3. Characters may be considered "flat" or "rounded" according to whether they undergo any changes from the beginning to the end of a story. Do you think Marcy, Ted, and Ginger are flat or rounded characters?

Use examples from the book to support your ideas.

4. What will happen to Marcy and Ted after the end of the novel is unclear. Discuss the different possibilities for their relationship, based on what you know of the different aspects of their characters.

## For Further Reference

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Richardson, Jean. "The Danziger Blitz."

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Includes review sources for five titles by Danziger.

## Related Titles

In Danziger's earlier novel, *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*, Marcy is introduced as an overweight, flat-chested, insecure adolescent. She rebels against the rules inflicted upon her by parent and teacher authority figures. Also a story focusing upon Marcy's quest for identity, this novel shows her struggle to find her place among peers who are more athletic and more physically attractive. While it confronts a serious situation, *Gymsuit* incorporates Danziger's trademark humor, resulting in an entertaining and enjoyable tale.



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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