

# Things Are Seldom What They Seem

## Short Guide

### Things Are Seldom What They Seem by Sandy Asher

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## Overview

The first year of high school marks the beginning of many traumatic events for young adults. In *Things Are Seldom What They Seem*, main character Debbie Palermo's natural apprehension over that first day is magnified by the changes she has seen in her older sister, Maggie, a drama club member who now insists upon being called Margaret. Debbie fears that she will undergo such a personality change as well.

As the novel progresses, Debbie finds that the problems faced by Maggie and by Debbie's best friend, Karen, stem from their relationship with the charismatic drama coach, who Debbie dislikes. When Debbie finds out the coach's dark secret, she is torn between keeping it to herself, which she has promised Karen she will do, or telling a responsible adult so that the problem can be resolved.

Asher focuses on the difficult problem of deciding when keeping a promise goes too far and becomes "a silent way of lying." Young adults can relate to the tangled loyalties that Debbie feels. The importance of friendships and the responsibilities a person has to others are explored in this novel.

## About the Author

Sandra Fenichel Asher was born October 16, 1942, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to Dr. Benjamin and Fanny Weiner Fenichel. She attended the University of Pennsylvania and Indiana University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in English in 1964. A year's graduate study at the University of Connecticut and an elementary education teaching certificate from Drury College in Springfield, Missouri, completed her formal education.

Asher combined her love for the theater and writing as early as second grade, when she wrote and starred in plays that toured from classroom to classroom. Since then, she has honed her skills and published numerous award-winning plays that have been produced across the country. She is also a poet, having published some seventy poems, and has contributed stories and articles to several national magazines for children and for adults.

Writing for young adults is a responsibility that Asher takes very seriously.

Because teen-agers use every source, even novels, to shape their beliefs, Asher carefully considers what she writes about and how she says it. The result has been sensitive young adult books dealing with serious issues that teenagers can identify with and understand.

Several of Asher's young adult novels have been honored with awards.

Just Like Jenny was nominated for the Mark Twain Award Master List in 1984; Missing Pieces was voted one of the University of Iowa Outstanding Books for Young Adults and was named to the Child Study Association Best Books list in 1985; and Things Are Seldom What They Seem was nominated for the Iowa Teen Award and Young Hoosier Award, both in 1986-1987.

Asher is currently serving as writer-in-residence at Drury College. She and her history professor husband, Harvey, have two children and live in Springfield, Missouri.

# Setting

This contemporary story is set in Waverly, a Midwestern town with three high schools. Two of the schools are one-story modern buildings; the third, Waverly Hills Senior High School, which Debbie and her sister attend, is a three-story brick structure with a packed-dirt schoolyard in an old part of town. Students from the other high schools look down on Waverly Hills and call its students losers. Debbie hopes that they are wrong.

Debbie lives in a loud household with her parents and sister. The rule among the Palermos is to yell first and ask questions later. Debbie's friend Karen's house is quite different: it is quiet and reserved, and her parents are determined to maintain a proper existence. The contrast in the two families shapes the friends' separate personalities.

## Social Sensitivity

A problem such as child molestation could overwhelm a young adult novel, making it too serious, too heavy, too complex. But Asher handles the issue with sensitivity, delicacy, and skill. She does not sensationalize Mr. Carraway's behavior, mentioning only that he has kissed the girls and touched their breasts. Although Mr. Palermo reacts typically, screaming and yelling for jail time, the author stresses that Mr. Carraway is not a monster, although he should not be a teacher in the school system, where he can abuse his power over juveniles. He is disturbed, and professional counseling may be able to help him. Asher presents several realistic solutions to a complicated problem.

The kiss between Murray and Debbie sparks many emotions in Debbie. She wonders why Murray does not mention it again or follow it up with another kiss. When she finally asks him, Murray explains that they have a good relationship and that sex is too complicated and dangerous to explore. According to Murray, once the kissing starts, a boy has to see how far a girl will let him go. Then someone gets hurt or angry, and the couple breaks up. He prefers a good friend to a girlfriend.



## Literary Qualities

Debbie tells the story in the first person, even addressing the reader as "you." This lively, chatty style makes the reader quickly identify with the main character and empathize with Debbie's embarrassment, confusion, and worries. One of Asher's trademarks, her device of adding just the right touch of humor to a serious story, is also used to great effect. In this novel, tears and laughter balance one another, so the tone of the story is upbeat and enjoyable rather than depressing.



## Themes and Characters

Debbie Palermo, a freshman at Waverly Hills, is a misfit and an outcast. She believes that this is so because she is smart, which was acceptable in elementary school but not in high school, where only popularity and looks are important. Forthright and determined, Debbie tackles her first year with apprehension.

Maggie Palermo is a year older than her sister and a superstar at school.

President of the sophomore class, drama group leader, and star performer, she was a good friend to Debbie until she metamorphosed from the friendly, understanding Maggie into the cool-as-ice Margaret.

Karen Jackson, another freshman, is Debbie's best friend. Their class schedules are identical, but after Karen becomes involved in the drama club, she and Debbie see less and less of each other. Karen is depicted as a courageous girl who stands up for what she believes is right.

Murray Gordon, a short, bright, nonconformist freshman, also befriends Debbie. He is uncomfortable with his height but is the first one to laugh at a short joke to cover his insecurities.

The enigmatic drama coach, Mr. Carraway, is a secret pedophile—he is sexually attracted to children and adolescents. Each year he privately coaches a few student actresses, and during these sessions, he kisses and fondles them.

Margaret is caught in his web; she knows that what is going on is wrong, but she feels that he needs her. She also feels loyalty to him because he has made her a star. In contrast, Karen quits the school play after his first advances toward her. As a result, Mr. Carraway resigns his teaching position.

The title of the book reveals its primary theme—things are seldom what they seem. This adage can be applied to each of the characters: Mr. Carraway has a dark side behind his charismatic personality; Murray Gordon is a thoughtful, complex person trapped in a small body; Karen is courageous, although her voice quavers and she cringes; Margaret wants to get out of the life into which she has fallen; and Debbie, who appears not to care what others think, wants to be accepted and attractive.

Misplaced loyalties are a major theme in *Things Are Seldom What They Seem*. For example, Karen tells Debbie about Mr. Carraway's actions but swears her to secrecy. Maggie also confesses to Debbie and extracts a promise that she can tell their parents herself, although she does not say when. Only when Mr. Carraway moves to another teaching position does Debbie talk Maggie into confiding in their parents to prevent him from continuing his actions with other students. Debbie understands that keeping her promises is a "silent way of lying."





Keeping promises is also a way to alienate other friends. Murray does not understand the nature of the situation between Karen and Debbie and asks Debbie to choose between him and Karen. Debbie refuses to choose and asks Murray to trust her. Again, she expresses the theme that things are seldom what they seem. Although Murray tries, he lets jealousy separate him from Debbie. Only when the courageous Karen tells him the truth does he reconcile with Debbie.

Parental relations with their children are explored through each of the main characters. Maggie confronts her father about his fits of temper over insignificant things and accuses him of caring only for his restaurant, not his family.

Mrs. Palermo explains to her daughters that their father expresses his devotion to his family through his hard work.

Karen's parents act the way that they feel proper parents should. They sit in matching armchairs, the father with his pipe and paper and the mother with her knitting. No television clutters their space, and the novel conveys the impression that their daughter would also clutter their space. These relationships illustrate the theme expressed in the title as well.

# Topics for Discussion

1. How would this story be different if Asher had told it in the third person instead of letting Debbie tell her story?
2. From what literary reference did the book get its name?
3. What is the significance of Maggie wishing to be called Margaret?
4. Why does Mr. Carraway resign? 5. Why does Margaret decide to quit school? What does Debbie do to stop her? Does Debbie do the right thing?
6. What is the catalyst that makes Margaret speak up?
7. Debbie refuses to choose between a boyfriend and a girlfriend. Discuss her reasons and the circumstances surrounding her decision.



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Debbie has felt like a misfit since elementary school. Why? Do you view her as such?
2. Murray is as much a misfit as Debbie, but he has different ways of dealing with feeling left out. What are they? Give examples from the book.
3. Murray regrets kissing Debbie.

Give his reasons for keeping the relationship on a friendship level. Do you agree? Why or why not?

4. How can keeping a promise be a "silent way of lying"?
5. What will happen to Mr. Carraway when his secret is known? Asher presents several possibilities. List them and decide which you think is best and why. Research child molestation cases in your area and present the punishments.
6. Karen listens to the normal yelling at the Palermo home and comments that Debbie's father will never have ulcers like her father. Debbie replies that she bets Karen's father always has clean socks and does not need to yell about them. What are the other differences between the two men? Compare and contrast the parental relationships of Debbie, Karen, and Murray.
7. Families express emotions in many ways. Interview several students about how their families interact, react to stress, and express their emotions. Do any of the students' families parallel those of Asher's major characters?



## For Further Reference

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Brucoli, Mary, and Jean W. Ross, eds.

*Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook: 1983*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1984. Contains an analysis of many of Asher's books by Judith S. Baughman.

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*. Vol. 36. Detroit: Gale Research, 1984. Presents autobiographical sketch by Asher.

Elkin, Judith. Review. *Times Literary Supplement* (September 30, 1983): 1048. A favorable review that makes mention of Asher's use of incidental humor as a lightening effect.

Kaye, Marilyn. "Review." *School Library Journal* (September 1983): 130. Suggests that Asher's skill as a writer lifts this novel from the mundane "problem novel" category and "presents a realistic exploration of a probably not uncommon situation."

Locher, Frances C., ed. *Contemporary Authors*. Vol. 105. Detroit: Gale Research, 1982. Lists Asher's writings and honors.

Nakamura, Joyce, ed. *Something About the Author: Autobiography Series*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1991. A revealing autobiography.

Review. *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* (May 1983): 162. States that the book is "honest and clear-sighted, and it's written with compassion and humor."

Review. *Children's Book Review Service* (April 1983): 91. Calls the book a "sensitive and often funny story of growing up under more than average pressures."

Small, Robert, and Susan Murphy. "An Interview with Sandy Asher on the Art of Writing." *Journal of Reading* (February 1990): 390-95. Asher discusses writing from concept to editor's input.

Straub, Deborah A., ed. *Contemporary Authors*. New Revision Series. Vol.

22. Detroit: Gale Research, 1988. Presents a brief biography and career highlights.

## Related Titles

In all of Asher's young adult novels, she treats serious problems facing teenagers—strains in parent-child or sibling relationships and perceptions of change and loss. Yet the overriding tone of each novel is comic with the focus on the young person confronting the problem and not on the problem to be resolved. Her books record adolescents interacting with each other and taking steps toward maturity.



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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