

Those Summer Girls I Never Met Short Guide

Those Summer Girls I Never Met by Richard Peck

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Overview

Peck has said that "a young character's climb to maturity" is the constant theme of the adolescent novel and that his special theme in all of his novels has been "you will never grow up until you begin to think and act independently of your peers." In *Those Summer Girls I Never Met*, main character Drew Wingate stands in contradiction to that comment. He has no peers other than his younger sister, Stephanie, who accompanies him on a cruise at the invitation of their grandmother. For a time, both are forced to live in an adult world.

The most significant characters in this novel are older people in their sixties and seventies. Most significant is the grandmother, Connie Carlson, a singer from the Big Band era. Because of an estrangement between Connie and the children's mother, Stephanie and Drew hardly know their grandmother. At first, both children resist Connie's efforts to thrust adulthood on them: She gives Drew a white dinner jacket and Stephanie her first pair of heels. As Connie tells Drew, "On a cruise, you're any age you can get away with." On board ship with their youthful grandmother, Drew and Stephanie live out their fantasies, but not without consequences and obligations. Peck, however, does not find this situation a cause for despair: In his view, freedom from is the domain of boredom, whereas freedom to is far more interesting.

The novel is also funny, largely through Drew's comic awareness of himself and his ability to stand aside and laugh at comic situations. The novel is also sad, however. Connie's cancer and the alcoholism of Drew's grandfather, Shep, are problems that can only be suffered through and to a degree understood.

About the Author

Richard Peck was born on April 5, 1934, in Decatur, Illinois, to a mother who was a college graduate and a father who had left school by the seventh grade to work. Although he was born during the Depression, the shortages that later came with World War II, as well as his family's creative responses to them, had a far more lasting effect on Peck. Storytelling was a gift from both parents: Richard's mother, Virginia, read to him when he was a child, and his father's stories of a rural past spent hunting and fishing in and along the Sangamon River attracted Peck in the same manner that Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn did later. The time-honored stories of the truckers and newspaperboys who frequented Peck's family gas station held a similar appeal.

Peck's public school teachers were demanding; discipline almost seemed patriotic during the war. After Peck turned in a personal essay in his senior English class, his teacher told him to find a more interesting topic than himself to write on. Challenged rather than defeated, Peck began to find out about the world through direct inquiry and from the library, methods of gathering information that he has continued to use to good effect in his novel writing.

History and English were Peck's best subjects in high school, and they continued to be when he moved on to De Pauw University in Indiana. Wanting to see as much of the world as possible, Peck spent his junior year abroad at Exeter University in England.

Friends who had fled Hitler's Germany as well as colonials from around the world broadened Peck's views, and the geniality of English life and manners caused Peck to lose his fear of speaking in public.

On his return to the United States, Peck finished his degree and prepared to become a teacher, but his plans were interrupted when he was drafted into the army. From 1956 to 1958 Peck was stationed in Germany and was given further opportunity to learn from travel abroad, this time studying a former enemy. After his tour of duty was finished, Peck returned to Illinois, where he earned a master's degree from Southern Illinois University.

Following two years of teaching as an instructor at Southern Illinois University, Peck moved to Northbrook, a Chicago suburb, and taught at Glenbrook North High School. He later moved to New York City and taught at Hunter College High School. In 1971, Peck left teaching to devote himself to writing full time. He had always wanted to be a writer, and when he clashed with administrators and parents at his school over his high standards for his students, the clash provided him with the impetus to switch careers. In fact, Peck had begun writing nonfiction before he made his break. While teaching, Peck observed that his students wanted to read fiction that reassured them and that provided hope, amusement, and new experiences. With this audience in mind, Peck completed his first novel, *Don't Look and It Won't Hurt* (1972).



Since his first success, Peck has written children's books, adult novels, and his specialty—novels for young adults.

He has made serious attempts to keep in contact with his audience and subject matter and spends a good deal of time visiting young people throughout the United States, listening as well as asking and answering questions.

Setting

Occurring in the 1980s, *Those Summer Girls I Never Met* has two settings, a moderately wealthy Chicago suburb and an elegant cruise ship that stops at Scandinavian and Russian ports of call.

Stephanie and Drew are hangers-on in the suburbs, although they seem not to know it. Their father has remarried, and though his support checks arrive regularly, their mother still must work hard as a legal secretary to maintain their standard of living. Drew is shy, works hard at school, and seems to be on the verge of growing up. He, at least, is marginally aware of his mother's difficulties. Stephanie, however, is a creature formed by MTV, Cyndi Lauper, the phone, and the mall and is aware only of her own desires. Everyone has been wounded by the divorce: Drew misses his father; his mother is lonely, feels rejected, and is insecure; and Stephanie needs the awareness of another person's will, a wall to butt against.

Life aboard the cruise ship, *Regal Voyager*, is both a complete life-support system in many ways and a challenge.

Stephanie and Drew must deal with a grandmother who not only is basically a stranger to them but who is also a revered star among an older generation of Americans and among jazz lovers in England and even Denmark. Although Connie provides the necessities for Drew and Stephanie, they must respond to life's opportunities and demands. For Drew this means taking dance classes from a woman so beautiful he nearly swoons at the sight of her, but it also means helping his drunken grandfather back to the ship so that he doesn't lose his job. For Stephanie, learning of her grandmother's cancer is like the discovery of a new world. She learns to respond to the needs of others and is no longer driven by her own imperious will.



Social Sensitivity

Unlike Peck's novels, such as *Are You in the House Alone?*, *Those Summer Girls I Never Met* is nostalgic. However, several contemporary problems can be seen in it: the separation of parents and children because of divorce or careers, the difficulty of dealing with the death of a loved one, and the crippling effects of alcoholism. In many respects, the weaknesses of Drew and Stephanie's mother are caused by Connie's abandonment of Drew's mother while she pursued her singing career. Connie is subconsciously making up for this by taking her grandchildren on a cruise.

Connie's approach to her death and her grandchildren's response raises questions about responsibility and dignity. She wants them to know her while she is still strong and not to be with her as her health deteriorates.

Certainly, this wish can reflect a kind of caring—not wanting others to see and feel the suffering of a long and painful illness. But shielding young people from the reality of death is not always in their best interests, nor is dying alone necessarily noble.

Shep's alcoholism, which ruined his marriage to Connie as well as his career as a jazz pianist, is sad to witness.

As his grandson, Drew, looks at Shep's hands, he sees that they are the only parts of Shep's body that seem alive, and he pities his grandfather on that account. Connie's medicine for Shep is tough—he must either change or leave—and she cautions her grandchildren not to mourn what never was.

Connie is no more charitable to her husband than she was to her daughter, raising questions as to whether she should be regarded as a positive role model for her grandchildren.

Peck sometimes seems out of touch with the current generation of young people. On the one hand, Stephanie is very much a product of the new generation, whereas Drew often seems like a character from the early 1950s. It is doubtful whether a modern-day boy in a dinner jacket would look into a mirror and see himself as Fred Astaire.

Also, the conservatism and obedience of Drew seem characteristic of an older generation of young people. Had Peck intentionally contrasted the values of different generations this could have emerged as a thematic strength, but the roles (and role models) of those generations are more muddled than instructive.

Literary Qualities

Those Summer Girls I Never Met is told in first-person narration with mostly comic, fantastic, and melodramatic action. The comedy arises through situations and dialogue. Most are embarrassing situations that the participants only later see as humorous, such as Drew's getting caught nude in a jacuzzi intended for both sexes. The humor in the dialogue is mostly expressed through puns and verbal situations similar to malaprops—words used incorrectly. Most of the malaprops come through song titles. When Mr. Morthland, for example, tells Drew "Do nothing til you hear from me," and Drew responds with a serious "Okay," Mr. Morthland must explain that he merely said the title of one of Connie's big songs.

The pathos of melodrama is achieved by turning sympathetic innocent characters into victims. Mrs. Wingate is a victim of her husband's divorce, Connie is a victim of cancer, and the Krebs family is a victim of Soviet caprice with respect to Mrs. Krebs' mother. All of these situations cause readers to feel sympathy for the characters.

The fantasy is mostly in the form of dream fantasy, mostly Drew's dreams about Holly and her three beautiful friends—Sandi, Helga, and Jean. All of these young women are aware of what they mean to Drew and treat him with affection and wisdom.



Themes and Characters

In a novel, one of the ways to show growth or character development is to show different responses to similar situations. Peck establishes these changes in Drew and Stephanie Wingate by showing the reader how they respond to their mother and friends at home in suburban Chicago and then contrasts these responses to those at sea with Connie Carlson, their grandmother, and the friends they acquire on the *Regal Voyager*. At home, Stephanie talks constantly to her friend Gillian Bergner, plays her music and VCR, and only steps outside to go to the mall.

Anger and rage are Stephanie's allies in controlling her mother and her brother.

For this fourteen-year-old, being free means being obnoxious.

Drew, the main character and narrator of the novel, is a fifteen-year-old who celebrates his sixteenth birthday on the ship. At home he is a kind boy who misses his remarried father and feels compassion for his mother. The hole in his life created by his father's departure is partially filled by his friend, Bates Morthland, and by Bates' father. Though Drew appears to be a good student, the most he hopes for in the summer is a driver's license, a job, and girls. Like most young men, however, he worries about what to say to the opposite sex and about his own appearance.

Connie Carlson, the grandmother Drew has not seen since he was ten, alters the lives of both of her grandchildren by arranging a two-week cruise that begins in London and continues on to European ports. Unlike her daughter, who is low key, passive, and unsure of her attractiveness, Connie is a professional entertainer with a considerable following. She arranges to have her grandchildren see her at work leading a band through song arrangements that feature her. The first of Connie's two performances on the ship is on the first night that Stephanie and Drew are aboard. Consequently, they are able to see her power over her audience and the nearly fifty-year loyalty and history that audience and performer share. Both Stephanie and Drew are impressed. As Holly, the dancersinger-model says, Connie can "make an audience of people just her age be young again, and in love with each other." In a curious way, Connie becomes a substitute for the missing father that Stephanie and Drew lack as she sets up growth experiences.

Stephanie and Drew begin to understand authority, love, and responsibility through Connie's zest for life and her approaching death from cancer; through her gifts of the dinner jacket, heels, and formal that seem to provide rites of passage; and through other people on board, especially Holly, who is like a sexy older sister for Drew, and the alcoholic Shep, who is unaware that he is their grandfather.

In an early episode aboard ship, Drew has the responsibility of sobering up Shep in a sauna, and later he and Holly must help bring back the drunken Shep from a bar before the ship leaves port to save the old man's job.



When Drew suggests that Shep might wish to be left at the bar, Holly retorts, "that has nothing to do with it." Holly is willing to take the responsibility of overriding the will of another person for his own good, and Drew begins to admire her sense, courage, and grit.

She becomes his mentor as he learns about love, and she encourages his slight attraction to Melanie, a girl close to his own age.

For the past three years, Melanie's family, the Krebs, have traveled to the Soviet Union on cruises so that Melanie's grandmother can have a chance to see her. Since the grandmother cannot emigrate to the United States because of Soviet policies, the cruises are the only opportunity for the Krebs's family to be together. As Drew and Stephanie watch the Krebs' reunion in Russia, they begin to appreciate the value and cost of what it means to be a family separated by circumstance. Connie, Stephanie, and Drew transfer to each other the feelings they observe vicariously in the Krebs family.

Connie's gift of the adult garments is really a mask for the adult responsibilities lying underneath. Drew and perhaps Stephanie would like to make themselves known to Shep, their grandfather, but Connie's explanation that Shep would think the story a trick convinces them not to, so their grandfather leaves the ship without knowing that he has seen his grandson and granddaughter. This merciful strength that Connie tries to teach Stephanie and Drew is all the more necessary in establishing her separation from them, especially with her impending death, the last growth experience for Stephanie and Drew. They wish to take their grandmother back home to the suburbs, but Connie will not allow this.

She wants her grandchildren to see her in her strength and power and does not want their pity. Drew and Stephanie must gain the strength to let her walk away. Stephanie resorts to tears, and Drew becomes ill at the prospect; however, both succeed in separating on Connie's terms. Though Peck's title suggests lost opportunities and the resistance both children had to Connie and the trip, both gain tremendously from their experiences.



Topics for Discussion

1. In comparing contemporary rock and roll with the music of Connie Carlson's generation, Mr. Morthland says, "That noise is for loving yourself. This music is for loving someone else." How just is his observation? Try listening to some representative tracks to help your decision.

2. Drew, toward the end of the voyage, becomes terribly ill. He believes he is seasick, but Holly says, "Maybe you were ready to be sick. Maybe you were already upset." What is the cause of Drew's seasickness, the waves or tangled feelings? Why is he upset?

3. Drew openly misses his father and sympathizes with his mother. Stephanie's response to both parents is more mysterious; one can only interpret her behavior by Drew's and Connie's observations of it. What are some of the causes of Stephanie's responses to her parents?

4. Both Stephanie and Drew flower in the presence of their grandmother.

How does she help bring this about?

5. *Those Summer Girls I Never Met* ends before the voyage is over and Stephanie, Drew, and Connie must separate. Will Stephanie and Drew revert to old behaviors when they return to their suburban home? If not, how have they changed?

6. Drew characterizes life on the *Regal Voyager* as a complete life-support system. What does he mean by this?

What do Stephanie and Drew do on board that is meaningful to them?

7. Stephanie, whose room at home is a chaotic disaster, becomes orderly after living with Connie for a few days.

Why does this occur and will the change be permanent?

8. Mrs. Wingate and Connie have not had a good relationship. What seems to have gone wrong? Does the motherdaughter relationship have anything to do with Mrs. Wingate's failed marriage?

9. Why does Connie advise Drew and Stephanie not to make themselves "known" to Shep? Is this callous or wise advice? Are there ways to deal with an alcoholic or drug addict besides avoidance?

10. Connie's approach to her own death is not everyone's. How wise is she in her decision to separate herself from Stephanie and Drew as her death draws near?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Peck's presentation of the music of Connie Carlson's era is not fiction; songs and musicians mentioned are real. As Shep the pianist sees it, Connie's desire to be only a part of the orchestra rather than having the orchestra as background for the voice is what sets Connie apart from other singers. Listen to some of the vocals from the late 1930s and 1940s and explain the styles of Big Band singers and what Shep might mean by his observation. Some helpful jazz histories are Andre Hodeir's *Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence* (1956) and Marshall Stearns's *The Story of Jazz* (1956).
2. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* (1969) generated much discussion about our emotional responses to death. Read the book and analyze Connie's behavior to determine her responses to death.
3. Drinking has caused Shep's marriage and career to fail. Connie provides Shep with opportunities to recover, but then she has him replaced as her pianist. How should relations and friends deal with an alcoholic? Read some studies of alcoholism and talk with some people in Alcoholics Anonymous. Remember not to use any names in your study to protect your sources.
4. Mrs. Wingate is a child of divorced parents, and she herself is divorced. How has she been scarred by the experience, and how have her children been scarred? What, if anything, could Connie have done to help her daughter. Is there a way to divorce without hurting children?
5. Peck has estimated that he spends a quarter of his time on a novel talking to students, their teachers, and sometimes their parents to find out about his audience. Read one or two other novels by Peck and discuss the degree of his success in his portraits of young people.
6. Read Norman Friedman's "Point of View: The Development of a Critical Concept" in *PMLA* (1956) or *The Theory of the Novel*, edited by Philip Stevick (1967) and discuss Peck's handling of first-person narration in *Those Summer Girls I Never Met*. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this angle of perception in Peck's novel?

For Further Reference

Peck, Richard. *Love and Death at the Mall: Teaching and Writing for the Literate Young*. New York: Delacorte, 1994. Peck, as a former teacher, discusses his aims and methods as a writer of adolescent novels.

———. "People of the Word." *Arkansas Libraries* 38 (December 1981): 13-16.

Peck describes his concern about coming of age through a separation from peer expectations and describes his work learning about adolescence from adolescents.

———. "Richard Peck." In *Something About the Author*. Vol. 2. Edited by Adele Sarkissian. Detroit: Gale, 1986.

Peck's narrative essay on his origins is beautifully written; he describes in moving detail how settings and people from his past have influenced the genesis and development of each of his novels.

Stanek, Lou Willett. "Just Listening: Interviews with Six Adolescent Novelists." *Arizona English Bulletin* 18 (April 1976): 23-38. Contains some interesting observations by Peck on narrative point of view and topics for young adult novels including a neglected one, social class.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Even though Peck has written several adult novels and a number of textbooks, case studies, and other nonfiction, he is best known as a writer of "problem novels" for young adults.

Don't Look and It Won't Hurt deals with teenage pregnancy; Representing Super Doll focuses on exploitation in beauty contests; Father Figure deals with the death of a parent; Remembering the Good Times focuses on teenage suicide; and Are You in the House Alone? deals with rape. Those Summer Girls I Never Met falls into this genre, but it deals with a number of interrelated problems and is somewhat more complex than its predecessors.

Three of Peck's novels have been adapted for television: Father Figure, Are You In the House Alone?, and The Ghost Belonged to Me.



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