

Three Sisters Short Guide

Three Sisters by Norma Fox Mazer

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Overview

Norma Fox Mazer was the middle sister in a family of three, and she had three daughters. When she wrote this book, she decided to tell it from the standpoint of Karen, the youngest of the three.

Any reader who has sisters would benefit from reading this book; however, girls would be much more interested than boys. All three are involved in solving problems with the men in their lives. What should a girl do if her boyfriend pressures her for sex? What happens if she refuses? How does a girl cope with the break up of a relationship? What happens if one sister is attracted to another sister's boyfriend?

What if there is physical abuse? What if alcohol causes problems? What about smoking cigarettes? Another big problem that is dealt with in the book is differences of age in couples. Dealing with parents is another consideration.

Adolescents face so many problems that seeing these very real characters solve and sometimes muddle through them could give them insights into their own problems. A very basic part of the book is how the youngest sibling fits into the family. Much of the first half of this book is devoted to showing where each member of the family fits in. Tobi said, "Liz is the most beautiful and creative. I am the gutsiest and most practical. Dad is the most idealistic and dreamy." Since Karen is left out, she wants to know what she is, and Tobi says that she is their monkey.

Finally she says, "Okay, you're—you."

This leaves Karen to think, "What am I, to you, a cipher? A zero? A zit?" Even her grandmother seems to like everybody else better than her.

Karen's boyfriend, Davey, pressures her for sex, but she refuses because she thinks that there is something missing in their friendship—love. This problem breaks up the relationship. The other sisters have boyfriends, too. Karen develops an all-consuming infatuation for her sister's boyfriend which very nearly wrecks her family relationships.

Mazer does not explain how to get along with men; however, she does show how these three girls cope with their relationships which all had inherent flaws.

The parents are very concerned when Tobi dates a man with a daughter only four years younger than she is. How they try to discourage and then endure the relationship is an important part of the story. Alcohol and physical abuse are also problems for this couple. Teenagers may have problems getting along with parents, making choices, and dealing with abusive behavior. Reading this book will show them at least how the difficulties are handled by this family, but there is no advising or preaching.

Three Sisters is a good story, well told, which will hold readers' interest throughout. Although the plot is fast paced, the analysis of characters continues throughout the book, providing a satisfying balance of entertainment and character study.

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.

4132 Three Sisters 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 takes place in an unnamed city large enough to have bus service.

Most of the interaction takes place in the family home and at a rented house at Piseco Lake. The most important action occurs in Scott's apartment where Karen declares her love for him even though he is her sister's boyfriend.

Social Sensitivity

Although these characters deal with many problems, the final outcome is positive. Readers can step into the family life of the Freeds for a while and see how they interact with each other as they struggle with problems of dating and growing up. Seeing others struggle, muddle, and cope may help students make some decisions of their own and avoid some disasters.

There is some mild swearing, and there are some scenes in which Karen tries cigarettes. Scott and Karen's mother both smoke. Jason drinks excessively and is abusive when he drinks.

All of these are a part of ordinary, real life situations, and they make the story more believable.



Literary Qualities

Mazer uses poetic language throughout the book to develop the characters and to show how people feel. Liz was "a golden Buddha." If the sisters were desserts, "Liz would be cool pineapple sherbet; Tobi would be dark bittersweet chocolate."

Other examples of figurative language are as follows: A wind blew the last stars out. (p. 7) He had broken them apart as easily as snapping a stick in half. (p. 79) I hate it when spring gets gobbled up this way. (p. 154) His voice was as empty as the yogurt carton, air surrounded by plastic, the kind of voice you might use for a stranger. (p. 173) The sun looked "like a big smooth yellow egg." (p. 198) Seeing Davey after the break-up was "as shocking as opening a favorite book, a story you knew by heart, to find nothing there but empty pages."

(p. 88) Liz was as beautiful as "cool dappled water." (p. 108) Jason was "a beer drinking bear" or "an aborigine sitting in front of a campfire, humming" (p. 124) Karen's stomach felt like jelly doughnuts, "soft and squishy." (p. 133) When she sat next to Liz at the table, "there was a space between them as wide as a house." (p. 208) Mazer enjoys plays on words. For instance, the names of the two young men who do carpentry are Hammar and Sawyer which is made into the logo on their truck. Liz, who wants to be a poet, does not care for dogs, but she thinks a dog named Shelley would be all right. Tobi takes a class in sculpture "to broaden herself," and Karen replies that she hasn't noticed any weight gained.

The use of small talk throughout makes family situations more real for readers. Father tells dentist jokes. The characters use words that ordinary people use such as "damn," "hell," and "pee." When Jason calls his ex-wife a "bitch," the "word dropped into the conversation like a stone in water."

Mazer uses Karen's dreams to help reader's see what is going on in her mind and life. For instance, she dreams that Scott gave her a hammer and let her work by his side on the roof. Another dream deals with her and Scott picking up money, but some of it goes down the grate. Not being able to figure out how to get the money out symbolizes how unattainable Scott is to her. When she and Liz are no longer speaking, she remembers a past dream in which the two of them are sitting under a mulberry tree enjoying the warm, private pleasure of being together.

"Make things happen" comes up several times in different ways as Karen struggles with her feelings about Scott. This repetition makes readers understand why she goes to such extremes in Scott's apartment. Repetition is used again after she has the disastrous confrontation with Scott, who is much older; she sees a TV show with a similar plot.



There are allusions to children's literature in the book. When Liz tells her to answer the door, she grumbles about being Norman, the Doorman. The girl selling flowers reminds Karen of Mary Poppins. When she is in Scott's apartment, she looks in the mirror and remembers Rapunzel who let down her hair for the prince to climb and of Snow White lying in the coffin waiting for "the prince to give her the kiss of life." After the confrontation with Scott, Karen compares him to a prince, his apartment to his castle, and herself to a "mad, watery witch."

Mazer uses sensual imagery to show what is happening. For instance, "The tension at the table was so thick it could have been beaten and used as a whipped cream substitute." Karen thinks that tension must taste and smell like rotten eggs.

After the fiasco with Liz's boyfriend, Karen and the readers wonder whether things will ever be all right again.

Mazer gives clues about the ending first by a chance conversation with a stranger, an old woman on the street who seems like a witch, and later by her horoscope. Finally, to symbolize that Karen is over the infatuation, she cuts up Scott's T-shirt and throws it away. Another symbol that everything will be normal again is the pattern on the old, familiar plates they use for lunch. The blue is as bright as the sky and "the gold of the sunflower drew you into its warm center."



Themes and Characters

The overall theme is how members of a family get along together and how they handle their involvement with the men in their lives. Besides the immediate problem of getting along, there is a strong cause and effect foundation for the interaction. Being strong and making things happen is another aspect of the theme, and trying to grow up, to get through the problems of adolescence is another.

In *Three Sisters* the characters are very often analyzing each other. Liz, who wants to be a writer, stands back and looks at her family objectively as though they were raw material for a story. Karen is so inclined to analyze herself and her problems that her friend, Marisa, tells her to give herself illustration for *Three Sisters* by Norma Fox Mazer.

Avon: New York (1986).

a break; she analyzes everything so much that it gets all chewed up.

As the youngest, she often feels left out. This is true when Liz writes poems for Tobi but never for her. When she asks for her own poem, she gets, "My sister Karen, she is so sweet. My sister Karen, she has cold feet. There's a poem, there's a poem about you. Is one enough? I can't do two." Karen thinks that this shows again that her family thinks she is a joke. Whenever she feels depressed or frustrated about her relationships with others, she goes on a food binge. When she breaks up with Davey, she makes sweet, rich, chewy fudge and scores it like a chessboard or Davey's heart.

Every time Karen thinks of her sisters, she puts herself down. Davey tells her that just because her sisters have talents, it does not make her nothing and that she might be jealous of them.

Having her sisters call her a monkey and saying that she looked fat and juicy like a turkey leg does not help her self-esteem either.

Even though Karen feels left out or inferior at times, there is a strong bond among them. Her bicycle is an old beat up hand-me-down from her sisters; however, when it is stolen, she runs after it and faces down the boy who took it. The bicycle means more to her because her sisters have ridden it. She can not imagine life without her sisters.

Mazer knows about the problems of getting started in a writing career. In this story, the mother is a librarian who writes reviews of science books on the side. She has a children's book called *Don't Stop that Music* which has not been taken by a publisher. The father is a dentist—Mr. Crisp at work and dreamy and sloppy at home.

Karen's boyfriend in the first half of the book is Davey, who is tired of going with someone for a year and not having sex. When Karen refuses, he asks, "How do you know you like steak or don't like steak if you haven't eaten it?" Another small part of the



plot is the Health and Family Life Unit at school that requires Davey to carry an egg named Eggbert and Karen a goldfish named Gladys so that they will become more responsible. The irony is that the unit does not help them with their immediate problem.



Topics for Discussion

1. In reviewing *Three Sisters* for *School Library Journal*, Barbara Hutcheson made the following statement: After a promising opening, it becomes clear that Mazer is attempting too much and that none of the plot lines is strong enough on its own. The novel deteriorates into a soap opera for teens: loosely connected scenes, occasionally intense, sometimes mildly titillating, peopled by shallow characters moving to an abrupt ending ("tune in tomorrow"). This impression is strengthened by the "Sweet Valley High" style dust jacket. Of course, soap operas have a ready audience, but Mazer has done better than this in the past and will do better again. Better to wait.

Is this a fair critique of the book? Take a position and substantiate your argument with examples from the book.

2. Are there any unbelievable parts in this book? While Karen's family was sick at home, she was at Scott's apartment for a long time. How could she be away so long without her family's concern? Is it realistic to think that a girl would do all the things Karen did after she decided to take the daffodil to Scott?

3. Karen's special interest is photography. She makes a series of hand pictures and shoe pictures and tells everyone that she can tell a person's character from his/her shoes. Is this true?

What kinds of things can be surmised from a study of hands or shoes?

4. Why does Mazer bring in things that seem unimportant such as Mother's smoking, the theft of the bicycle, the Health and Family Unit, the dentist joke, Jason's sculpture exhibit, etc.?

What is significant about smoking in the Karen/Scott relationship? Why are the T-shirt and Scott's pajamas so important?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In both *Taking Terri Mueller* and *Three Sisters* Mazer used a character's earliest memory in order to develop the mystery or to define a person, and Karen begins with her earliest memories of her sisters and her place in the family. Write a short paper on your earliest memories.
2. The acronym that the girls call themselves is Katoli, which stands for Karen, Tobi, and Liz. Research acronyms and how they are used by the government, private companies, and groups working for social change.
3. Read Dr. Kevin Leman's two books, *The Birth Order Book* and *Growing Up Firstborn*, about the attributes of children born first, middle, and last, and discuss whether the birth order in the novel parallels the ones he describes.
4. Compare other books by Mazer, especially *Up in Seth's Room*, to *Three Sisters*.

For Further Reference

Donelson, Kenneth L. *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. 3d ed. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1989: 74. Contains a list of honor books in adolescent literature with biographical information about some major writers as well as guidelines for understanding the genre.

Hutcheson, Barbara. "Norma Fox Mazer," *School Library Journal* 32 (March, 1986), p. 177. A critical review of *Three Sisters* which could be used in a discussion of how to evaluate books.

———. *Growing Up Firstborn*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1989. Although this book deals mainly with how being born first directly effects the kind of person the child becomes, it must give insights into the development of the other siblings.

Twichell, Ethel R. "Norma Fox Mazer," *Horn Book* 42 (July/August, 1986): 86.

A book review which can be used in preparing for the book study.



Related Titles

Davey made sex a condition of his friendship with Karen in *Three Sisters*.

Up in Seth's Room deals with whether or not Finn and Seth will have a sexual relationship.

Eve Bunting's *Our Sixth-Grade Sugar Babies* deals with a class project to teach responsibility by requiring two girls to carry bags of sugar everywhere they go just as Davey and Karen carried Eggbert and Gladys Goldfish in order to learn family responsibility.

These girls are younger than the girls in *Three Sisters* and are just beginning to become very interested in boys.

In the process of writing a letter to Bill in *Dear Bill, Remember Me?*, a girl keeps rewriting as she comes to terms with her feelings about him and an understanding of what their relationship was. This is a short story about a girl with a crush on a young man.

Although the three girls in *Just as Long as We're Together* by Judy Blume are not sisters, the book shows how they get along together as their families go through problems.



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