

# The Trouble with Jenny's Ear Short Guide

## The Trouble with Jenny's Ear by Oliver Butterworth

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## Overview

The Pearsons of Pearson's Corner, a Massachusetts hamlet, are introduced to the era of electronics by the energetic experiments of their two young sons.

Some tampering with one of these experiments has a strange and unpredictable result: Jenny, the small daughter of the family, discovers that she can hear people's thoughts. The three Pearson children and the adults— Mr. and Mrs. Pearson and Uncle Harold— suddenly find themselves confronted with an extraordinary situation, and their reactions to it are all somewhat unusual.

The Pearsons' predicaments are common problems of everyday life, though considerably exaggerated. Because of electronic bugging and because the daughter can read everyone's thoughts, privacy becomes an issue that the family must resolve. When it appears that the pristine hill next door may soon become a teeming housing development, the family must reassess the importance of their living space. As the family meets these challenges, Butterworth reminds the reader of simpler, more pastoral virtues that are too often forgotten in the rush to modernity.

Butterworth writes about the rapid and unsettling changes in American life that continue today—the conversion of countryside to suburbs, and the impact of new technologies, like the electronic devices described in the book. *The Trouble with Jenny's Ear* approaches these problems with understanding and gentle humor. Readers will find the characters familiar but described with freshness and sympathy. After trying to follow everyone else's advice, Jenny preserves her beloved hill in her own way, simply by listening.

## About the Author

Oliver Butterworth was born on May 23, 1915, in Hartford, Connecticut, a town which had once been the residence of the famous American authors Mark Twain and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

One of three children, he grew up in a nearby farmhouse surrounded by pasture and woodland. Raised by his father after his mother's death, Butterworth attended high school at a boy's boarding school in the western part of the state.

After graduation he attended Dartmouth and earned a bachelor's degree in 1937.

Butterworth began his teaching career as an instructor in English and Latin at a school for boys. In 1940 he married Miriam Brooks, a young woman who shared his enthusiasm for the outdoors, and together they raised four children.

In the meantime, he continued his schooling and spent a single summer at Harvard as a graduate student in 1941.

He obtained his master's degree from Vermont's Middlebury College in 1947.

For the next two years Butterworth taught elementary school in his hometown of Hartford, which had now grown into a sizable city. Eventually he became an instructor at the Hartford College for Women, serving as a trustee of the college and of the Mark Twain Memorial.

Butterworth's interest in writing was sparked by the desire to provide more interesting books for his elementary students' reading programs. He decided to write a book, using humorous ideas and a rich vocabulary that would stimulate the imaginations of students and teachers alike. In 1956 he published *The Enormous Egg*, a funny and gently satirical story of a New Hampshire boy and his dinosaur. Much of the setting of the story was inspired by Butterworth's experiences raising chickens at his family's summer home in rural New Hampshire. *The Trouble with Jenny's Ear*, his second book for young people, was also based on family experiences.

The Butterworths enjoy travelling, particularly into wilderness areas, and they lived in Europe for a year. The author incorporated these experiences into his third book, *The Narrow Passage*, a sequel to *The Enormous Egg*.

Oliver Butterworth still resides in West Hartford and has recently produced two new books: *The First Blueberry Pig* and *The Visit to the Big House*. *The Enormous Egg*, which made the New York Times list of the one hundred best children's books of 1956, remains a great favorite among young readers. *The Trouble with Jenny's Ear* was chosen as an Honor Book for the New York Herald Tribune Children's Spring Book Festival in 1960.



## Setting

Set in 1960 in a little New England town, this novel explores the era of electronic bugging, quiz shows, and flight to the suburbs. The Pearsons are the fifth generation of their family to live on the land settled by their ancestors, a land which has remained very much in a natural state as they found it.

One day, the Pearson boys discover a cache of television cameras, microphones, intercoms, and tape recorders—all surplus equipment from Uncle Harold's shop. With perhaps more tolerance than forethought, the boys' father allows them to rig the family home with these devices, resulting in an inconvenience that is out of proportion to the benefits. Private remarks are overheard by the wrong people, and loud noises are generated at unexpected times. One such loud noise gives the boys' little sister a bad earache, followed by unusual sensitivity to sound. But this is only the beginning, for Jenny soon finds that she can hear what people are thinking.

Soon the family members hear the unsettling news that their neighbor, Mr. Watson, wants to sell his property to developers. This beautiful hill with its running brook has been enjoyed as a playground by generations of townspeople, particularly the Watson and Pearson children, but it may quickly be covered with tract housing. The loss can only be averted by purchasing the land for an astronomical sum. Jenny's miraculous ear becomes a source of both hope and trouble, as she enters quiz contests to win enough money to buy the hill but, at the same time, attracts the unwanted attention of the Defense Department.

## Social Sensitivity

Butterworth's novel is socially complex and raises many issues that are currently being debated. The impact of urban sprawl and the problem of technological invasion of privacy are major concerns today and are possibly more important to more people now than they were when this book was first published. Butterworth makes his points about these issues without being heavy-handed.

Those responsible for problems in the book are not villains; rather, they are ordinary folks who do not realize the intangible value of what they have. Mr. Watson, Mr. Billings the school principal, and Jenny's family, all possess something priceless that is not fully appreciated. Butterworth was ahead of his time in bringing conservation and privacy issues to the attention of young people.

The Pearson family is a traditional one, with Mrs. Pearson occupied full time at home, even though all of her children are of school age. When the novel was written the great majority of American families resembled the Pearsons in this way. The reverse is true today; most mothers work outside the home. Uncle Harold's friend, Miss Romaine, is athletic, daring, and assertive, more like young career women of today. Harold, Joe, and Stanley are adept with machinery, physically vigorous but socially awkward, while Jenny and her mother—gentle, perceptive, and nonathletic—are ill at ease around anything more complicated than the kitchen stove. These supposed differences in gender roles are deliberately exaggerated to heighten the domestic comedy. In the story the young get the upper hand over the old, the unmarried cause problems for the settled couples with children, and the boys—who seem so much smarter at first—are shown a thing or two by the girls. In any case, Jenny emerges as the star player by drawing upon her strength of character.

# Literary Qualities

Butterworth uses various literary devices to make *The Trouble with Jenny's Ear* work as a novel. He writes on two levels to make the story richer in meaning; he makes the most unlikely character the heroine; and he develops a comical plot that is part real and part fantasy. His well-rounded characters mature over the course of the story, and through their activities he is able to widen the focus of the story to include the adult world outside Pearson's Corner.

*The Trouble with Jenny's Ear* is written on two levels—as a whimsical fantasy for youngsters, and as social commentary for adults. This dual construction makes for a richer book, as the two levels of the story play off each other. The fantasy is deepened by its tie-in to larger social issues, and the adult level is made more poignant by its nostalgia for childhood and America's past.

The children of the Pearson family are the prime movers of the plot, while the adults get swept along in the torrent.

Jenny's parents often seem bewildered, because the world has become a more complicated place than it was when they were youngsters. One can sense their confusion, even their wistfulness, at how the world seems beyond their control. They are surprisingly accepting of Jenny's strange power, as if they believe that the children of the Space Age are some kind of new breed, like the whiz kids they see on television.

All of the characters mature as the plot develops. When Jenny's strange ability disappears, she saves the hill by the power of ordinary thought. Jenny becomes a normal child again, but with extraordinary common sense. Joe and Stanley eventually learn that their experiments have been more of a nuisance than an innovation. The two boys continue their education in electronics, but under the now-watchful eye of their soon-to-be-married Uncle Harold. The parents gain a new understanding of and appreciation for their children.

Much of the charm that draws the reader into the Pearson family circle and its story lies in Butterworth's wry descriptions of his characters and their actions. The opening paragraph, for example, imparts the hearty flavor of an American home: "The Pearson family bowed their heads over the supper table and looked down at the tablecloth. It was white with red checks, and there were several spots around Stanley's place, because he was ten years old and a vigorous eater." The dialogue between the characters has a similar style, humorous but apt.

Butterworth mercilessly parodies television quiz shows. One is called "Beat Your Brains" and is hosted by quizmaster Random Groper. Few other institutions are spared Butterworth's wit, from small-town intrigues to bustling big-city life. Many of the adult characters make themselves look silly by mindlessly following the current national obsessions.



## Themes and Characters

The Pearson family is benignly headed by the father, Mr. Pearson, who is the third generation to run the family business, a hardware store. His wife, Mrs. Pearson, is a housewife and mother of three children. Twelve-year-old Joe, the eldest child, is the leader in the electronic mischief, enthusiastically assisted by his ten-year-old brother Stanley. Six-year-old Jenny is the youngest Pearson, and utterly unlike her rambunctious brothers. Hers is a much gentler spirit. Uncle Harold is Mrs. Pearson's younger brother. Twentyeight years old and unmarried, Harold operates an appliance shop in another town. In his enthusiasm for gadgets, Harold is much like his nephews—a bit heedless. He introduces the Pearson boys to the potent hardware without mentioning the need to use it with moderation.

Another important character in the story is Mr. Watson, who never appears in the flesh. Mr. Watson, the head of another old Pearson's Corner family, decides to move his young family to Florida, financed by selling the town's natural landmark. His son Tommy, the Pearson children's scatterbrained playmate, has a habit of falling into brooks and other inconvenient places.

Tommy also innocently causes the loud noise that sensitizes Jenny's ear.

Miss Romaine, Jenny's teacher, is another significant character. A pretty and athletic young woman, she attracts the attention of Harold, who is usually oblivious to the existence of the opposite sex. This novel has an ensemble of minor characters who play supporting roles in the plot, including the schoolchildren of Pearson's Corner, their teachers, quiz show hosts and contestants, members of a federal court, a professor of parapsychology, and a man from the FBI.

Homely virtues are emphasized in *The Trouble with Jenny's Ear*. Butterworth stresses that listening is important, that size is no measure of quality, and that gadgetry, even telepathy, is no substitute for a mind with a heart attached.

Jenny, the least likely of Butterworth's characters to be singled out, becomes the heroine of the book. At first her wondrous ear sets her apart, but fortunately for her family and her town it is Jenny's less obvious qualities that save the day. Like Uncle Harold's gadgets, Jenny's ear seems more a source of trouble than of help. Her brothers enlist her in schemes to circumvent their schoolwork and to win prize money to save the hill. Because she does not really know all the answers, these actions conflict with her developing sense of right and wrong.

When Tommy Watson becomes lost, everyone expects Jenny to find him with her telepathic ear, but, although she has told no one, her power has given out weeks before. Nevertheless, Jenny's desire to help her playmate motivates her to deduce where he has become trapped. When Tommy is rescued, Mr. Watson realizes how important close neighbors are to him and his family. As a result, he decides to stay and spare the hill. The Pearsons, after all their experiences, realize the value of quiet and



privacy. And Jenny, smallest of the clan, discovers her own worth. In the end she saves the hill with nothing more than a kind heart and the brains with which she was born.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Jenny accidentally develops the ability to hear other people's thoughts.

How does she feel about this at first?

How does she feel later? Is she glad when her ears go back to normal? Why does she not tell people that her power has disappeared?

2. Of the various characters in the novel, who do you find the most interesting? Who changes the most? Are these two qualities in a character related?

3. Joe and Stanley create havoc and comedy with their enthusiasm for gadgets. Are their parents too lenient with them? If you were Mr. or Mrs. Pearson, how might you channel their energy and curiosity?

4. Why is Uncle Harold reluctant to admit at first that he is thinking about Miss Romaine when Jenny asks him?

How is Miss Romaine different from the other women that Harold knows in Pearson's Corner? What does he like about her?

5. Mr. Watson seems to feel that if a man has an opportunity to make a great deal of money for his family, he should take it, even if it means bringing drastic changes to a town landmark. Is this kind of change inevitable in small towns across America today?

6. Various money-making schemes to buy the hill from Mr. Watson do not work. Do the Pearson family gain any lasting benefit from their adventures in New York, Boston, and other places?

7. Why does Private MacLeod want to stay on an extra week guarding Jenny?

Is it because he likes Miss Romaine as a jealous Harold suggests? Or are there other things that he seems to like about Pearson's Corner?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Traditional small-town virtues include neighborliness, a regard for nature, and a sense of tradition rooted in local history. How do the townspeople of Pearson's Corner demonstrate these virtues? Use specific examples from the book to illustrate your answer.

2. One critic has claimed that *The Trouble with Jenny's Ear* perpetuates unflattering female stereotypes. Do you think this is a fair criticism? Compare Mrs. Pearson to her daughter Jenny, to Miss Romaine, to Harold, and to Joe Pearson. How does Mrs. Pearson react to new situations? Is she an interesting character in her own right?

3. A major theme of *The Trouble with Jenny's Ear* is the need for privacy in everyday life. Research how the U.S.

Constitution protects the individual's privacy from outside intruders, even those using electronic devices.

4. Across the United States many citizens' groups are calling for "slow growth" in towns where rapid increases in size and population have been the rule for decades. What do you think has brought about this reaction among people? Are the townspeople of Pearson's Corner selfish for wanting to preserve the hill as it is?

5. Compare *The Trouble with Jenny's Ear* with Butterworth's first book, *The Enormous Egg*. Which book do you think is the more interesting of the two? Why?

Consider what each story is about, how it is written, what the characters are like, and how humorous or original the story seems.

## For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. *The Writer's Dictionary, 1988-1990*. Chicago: St. James Press, 1988. A brief entry on Butterworth includes a career history, current list of publications, and the author's address.

De Montreville, Doris, and Elizabeth D. Crawford, eds. *Fourth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1978. Contains a lengthy sketch by Butterworth that details his boyhood and youth, his travels with his young family, and his thoughts on how he became a writer.

Ethridge, James M., and Barbara Kopala, eds. *Contemporary Authors*.

Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale Research, 1967.

Includes a short entry on the personal and career history of the author, a list of publications, and a list of hobbies.

Kirkpatrick, D. L., ed. *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*. London: Macmillan, 1983. Contains a lengthy entry in which Butterworth summarizes his philosophy of writing, as well as reviews of each of the novels through *The Narrow Passage*.

Stavn, Diane Gersoni. "The Skirts in Fiction about Boys: A Maxi Mess."

*Library Journal* 96 (January 1, 1971): 66-70. Butterworth is one of a dozen writers mentioned in this provocative article about female characters in books for young adults, particularly boys. Stavn contends that characters who are girlfriends, wives, or mothers usually fill uninspiring or negative gender roles.

## Related Titles

The Enormous Egg is set in a small New England town and chronicles the adventures of twelve-year-old Nate Twitchell after a baby dinosaur hatches from an egg laid by a hen in the backyard chicken coop. Well-told, and beautifully illustrated by Louis Darling, the book is a minor classic. Nate Twitchell returns in *The Narrow Passage*, where he accompanies Dr. Ziemer, a scientist, on an expedition to rural France. There Nate and a young companion discover a boysized cleft in a rocky cliff which leads to a valley lost in time. Both Nate Twitchell books have characters and themes similar to *The Trouble with Jenny's Ear*.



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