

# Weetzie Bat Short Guide

## Weetzie Bat by Francesca Lia Block

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# Contents

<a href="#">Weetzie Bat Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>



## Overview

Weetzie Bat reads like a Grimm's fairy tale in a Disneyesque setting, combining the magical wonder of Disney with Grimm's sometimes harsh reality. It introduces Weetzie, a young woman who leads an unconventional life. She lives in a magical Los Angeles—where Marilyn Monroe once walked and anyone can be launched into stardom from behind the counter of a diner—and seeks her own "duck" (true love) in the bars and dance clubs. Her friend Dirk, who is gay, searches with her, but they have no luck until Weetzie receives a magic lamp and her wishes for "A Duck for Dirk . . . My Secret Agent Lover Man for me, and a beautiful little house for us to live in happily ever after" come true. In *Weetzie Bat*, Block writes about being true to one's self and the search for love in the modern-day world, issues that her readers will recognize and with which many will identify. While these ideas are not new, the manner in which Block presents them will entice the reader into her creative vision of Los Angeles.

Many critics view Block's books as controversial because of their subject matter and writing style. Block writes about present-day issues of single parenthood, homosexuality, drug use, and the many different types of love present in human relationships in a lyrical and conversational voice, filled with invented slang, but lacking the preaching that usually accompanies such topics. Block does not judge her characters or the world in which they live. She presents the unconventional as ordinary and leaves it to her readers to decide what is right.

## About the Author

As Francesca Lia Block is a relative newcomer to the field of children's literature, not much has been written about her, but through reviews of her books and articles she has written, some information can be gathered.

Block has lived in Los Angeles all her life and uses the area as the setting of most of her books. She studied English literature at the University of California at Berkeley where she first started writing stories about Weetzie, as well as working on poetry. According to Block, the idea for Weetzie actually came while she was in high school when she saw a "punk princess with spiky bleached hair, a very pink '50s prom dress and cowboy boots" hitchhiking in Laurel Canyon. She views Weetzie as an innocent and feels that she and her friends "survive pain by using their imaginations and becoming a family." Currently Block is working on a screenplay of Weetzie Bat.

# Setting

With its culturally mixed neighborhoods and diverse society, Los Angeles serves perfectly as the setting for this story. Weetzie and her extended family live in and explore the area around Hollywood with its palm trees, sushi bars, and movie sets. They encounter people and go to places that reflect the diversity found in Los Angeles, like a restaurant called Oki Dogs where Weetzie and Dirk buy "the wildest, cheapest cheese and bean and hot dog and pastrami burritos." The magic of Los Angeles also extends to the way time passes, slowly and seamlessly.

Initially, Weetzie and Dirk are in high school, but the book follows them into adulthood and traces the choices each makes.



# Social Sensitivity

Block explores four issues especially pertinent to today's world: homosexuality, interracial romance, blended families, and drug addiction. She treats all with great sensitivity, but in Weetzie's world these issues are part of normal, everyday life, so Block writes about them as such, which may offend some readers. The people in her novel interact as individuals, not as walking labels for specific causes.

Dirk can be seen both as a stereotype and a ground-breaking character in young adult literature. On one hand, he is a stereotypical gay character, sympathetic, kind, giving, and the protagonist's best friend, who attracts the attention of all the girls in school with his chiseled good looks and sophisticated demeanor. On the other hand, unlike gay characters in some other young adult works, it is clear that Dirk has sexual relationships with men.

Block shows the evolution of Dirk's love life from his telling Weetzie of his homosexuality, to going to all-boy par4236 Weetzie Bat ties, and having one-night stands, to meeting Duck and establishing a committed relationship. Block shows the two as a loving couple with the same wishes as any other couple—to have a good life and a family—not as people involved in an abnormal relationship.

She treats Dirk and Duck with respect, as individual people lucky enough to find love in a world that does not always understand differences.

One aspect of homosexual life, AIDS, is not discussed in detail. The tests Weetzie, Dirk, and Duck take before Cherokee's birth show them to be responsible people, aware of the dangers in society, but it is left to the reader to decide the tests' purpose. At the end of the story, though, the fear of AIDS looms large. Duck returns from a hospital visit terrified because one of his friends "is really sick," and he wonders how "anyone can love anyone when you could kill them just by loving them?" The disease becomes part of the story but not its main focus. Grief and illness invade Weetzie's world, but the main focus of the story remains life.

The relationship between Ping Chong and Valentine Jah Love also touches on a sensitive issue in today's society. While interracial romances become more common with each passing year, some areas of the country and the world still attach a stigma to them, isolating the individuals involved. Ping and Valentine seem to take the differences in their cultures and celebrate them, giving the best of each to their relationship and to their son Raphael, "a baby with skin the dusty brown of powdered Hershey's hot-chocolate mix." As with Duck and Dirk, Block chooses to concentrate on the couple's strengths rather than the problems they might face.

With so many modern-day people Weetzie Bat living away from their hometowns and immediate families, blended, or extended, families have become a topic of great interest and one that Block tackles in her work. Blended families can be single parents sharing living quarters to save on expenses, friends who live together for companionship, or



single parents who have married and acquired a family in the process. Weetzie's family combines elements of all three. The adults live together and support one another through troubled times. When My Secret Agent Lover Man leaves Weetzie after they have a fight over her pregnancy, the bond between Weetzie, Dirk, and Duck becomes even stronger. The two men take care of her when she feels sad, make sure she eats the right foods, and help prepare for the baby. On My Secret Agent Lover Man's return, they tell him he has been missed, and that they "hope you will stay around and help raise our kid." While not all blended families experience the same harmony that Weetzie's does, their presence in a young adult work suggests that blended families are becoming common.

Next to Block's depiction of homosexuality, the issue provoking the most controversy in *Weetzie Bat* is the view of drug addiction. As teen-agers, Weetzie and Dirk experiment with drinking and club-hopping. They outgrow this behavior, but Weetzie's mother Brandy-Lynn does not. In the episodes where Brandy-Lynn appears, she almost always holds a drink—vodka or some type of cocktail. Even at the end of her marriage, she has a drink nearby: "They had screamed and thrown glasses at each other in the heat . . .

Brandy-Lynn threw a drink in Charlie's face." She also indulges in another legal form of drug use, Valium, a drug that doctors commonly prescribed for unhappy women in the 1960s. Block portrays Brandy-Lynn as an attractive woman with an unattractive addiction who uses her addiction as a means of hiding from disappointment and sorrow.

Charlie Bat also uses drugs to escape from reality and unfulfilled dreams, but Block portrays his drug use differently from Brandy-Lynn's. Her use is a way of life, a way of coping with everyday problems, but Charlie seems to use drugs to find what he feels is missing from his life. His visions take place in a "city where everyone [is] always young . . . and lovers . . . [drive] down the streets paved with stars that had fallen from the sky." The peace and beauty of his visions disturb and fascinate at the same time, because they represent the world Charlie left behind.

In contrast to Brandy-Lynn, who seems to remain young and beautiful, Charlie grows ill as he delves deeper into his dream world. The drugs take their toll on his body, and one day he overdoses and dies.

In all the social issues presented in *Weetzie Bat*, Block neither condemns nor condones the actions taken by her characters, she simply reports them. In some cases, as with the relationships between Duck and Dirk, and Valentine and Ping, her writing and language give an almost tacit approval to them.

This exists partially because of her narrative style. A third-person limited narrator lets the reader see into the thoughts of characters, to perceive as the characters do. Thus, the love between Dirk and Duck seems pure, because the reader sees either through Weetzie's unprejudiced eyes or into Dirk's thoughts as he searches for his mate. Ping and Valentine's world holds no hatred because Weetzie cannot see any. Brandy-Lynn's drinking seems distasteful because Weetzie finds it so, and Charlie's drug-induced

dreams appear beautiful and peaceful because the reader only knows what he experiences and feels.



# Literary Qualities

Weetzie Bat is a slow-paced story that enthralls the reader. Block achieves this by incorporating different literary qualities into the work. The most noticeable of these is her narrative style, or voice. Block uses a third-person limited narration in her work, a style that allows the reader to experience the thoughts and feelings of the main character. The advantage of this narrative style is that the reader gets to know the main character intimately, but a disadvantage exists as well: The reader only sees the events of the story and the other characters from the point of view of the main character. To expand beyond this limitation, Block switches the point of view a few times in the story from Weetzie to another character, giving the reader access to parts of the story that affect Weetzie only peripherally. Charlie Bat's death, for example, causes Weetzie great pain but the actual event does not involve her directly. By allowing the reader into Charlie's mind, the scene takes on an added poignancy. The same holds true for Dirk's search for Duck at the end of the story. Weetzie knows Dirk loves Duck, but by spotlighting Dirk's thoughts, Block makes the search more urgent, more immediate.

Block also uses descriptive language to create more precise images of her characters and their world. Her invented slang adds a lively color to the story, but it is her use of imagery that brings the tale to life. Using metaphors and similes, Block takes feelings, places, or events and enlarges their descriptions to elicit a particular reaction from the reader. When Weetzie discovers she is pregnant, Block describes her happiness with holiday images: [Weetzie] felt like a Christmas package . . . Like an Easter basket of pastel chocolate-malt eggs and solid-milk chocolate bunnies, and yellow daffodils and doll-housesized jelly-bean eggs.

These images evoke feelings of wonder and anticipation, sweetness and surprise. This language also colors the perceptions of places in the story: Dirk's grandmother's home is "a Hollywood cottage with one of those fairytale roofs that look like someone spilled silly sand," while Charlie Bat lives in a "dark apartment" in New York, a city "where the subways made [Weetzie's] nerves feel like a charm bracelet of plastic skeletons jangling on a chain." Both descriptions evoke clear pictures and show Weetzie's feelings about the places at the same time.

Other literary qualities present in *Weetzie Bat* include symbolism and the use of familiar societal icons. Weetzie's idealism and search for love symbolizes light, contrasting sharply with the darkness found in Vixanne Wigg's hiding from life. Even their appearances and behaviors identify them with traditional visions of evil and goodness.

Weetzie, with her bleach-blonde hair, wants to help people overcome problems and find happiness. Vixanne, a dark-haired woman, prefers to stay in a darkened room, dressed as Jayne Mansfield, a long-dead movie star, and practice voodoo on those who anger her. The use of Jayne Mansfield, Marilyn Monroe, and even the HOLLYWOOD letters that loom over Los Angeles provide cultural reference points for the reader. Block's deft use of literary techniques such as these makes *Weetzie Bat* a provocative story that readers will surely turn to over and over.



# Themes and Characters

Weetzie Bat contains many characters, some of whom, like Marilyn Monroe and other stars, are implied rather than actually present in the story; characters who do appear include a genie, a convertible named Jerry, a rubber chicken, a slinkster dog, and a variety of "wrong Ducks." The main characters are Weetzie and her extended family.

The reader will know Weetzie Bat, the title character, the best by the end of the story. Her "bleach-blonde flattop . . . pink Harlequin sunglasses, strawberry lipstick, earring dangling charms, and sugar-frosted eye shadow" almost conceal a sensitive, caring young woman who more than anything wants a place to belong. Weetzie's honest, outgoing, and idealistic nature leaves her open to new relationships and ideas, but also exposes her to some sorrow, making her utterly human and extremely lovable.

Her best friend Dirk, the coolest boy in school "with a shoe-polish-black mohawk . . . [and his] red '55 Pontiac" is gay. He and his lover Duck remain a constant in Weetzie's life. These two seem stock California characters—Dirk is tall, dark, and intense, and Duck is a compact, sunny surfer—but they possess a depth not found in most stock characters. Warm and caring, they understand and love Weetzie, giving her the support she does not always get from her biological family.

Possibly the character with the most unusual name is Weetzie's lover, My Secret Agent Lover Man. An unhappy cynic, he also is a seeker, but unlike Weetzie he seeks not a place to belong, but rather a safe haven from the evils he perceives in the world. My Secret Agent Lover Man uses the films he creates as refuges from crime, pollution, and hunger, but also as a medium to inform others that evil and injustice exist.

Weetzie's parents play small but important parts in the story. Brandy-Lynn and Charlie Bat represent the world Weetzie is trying to escape, the world of disappointment and lost dreams.

Her mother, Brandy-Lynn, once a starlet in B-movies, never appears without a drink in her hand and still seems to mourn her divorce from her husband, Charlie Bat. Charlie, a transplanted New Yorker, came to L.A. to make movies, but ended up designing monster masks and marrying Brandy-Lynn.

His dislike of Hollywood's false facade inhibited his creativity, so he moved back east, but the absence from his family puts him into a deep depression and eventually causes his death.

Ping Chong, a Chinese clothing designer, and Valentine Jah Love, a Jamaican silk screen artist, show Weetzie another side of dreaming and love.

With their son Raphael, they "wore red and ate plantain and black beans or won ton soup and fortune cookies, and made silkscreen clothing they sold . . .

at [the] beach." Where her parents' lives are unhappy and unfulfilled, Weetzie finds in Ping Chong and Valentine people who have found happiness and contentment in a world that does not always understand their differences.

The themes about which Block writes are simple and universal: the search for self and acceptance from those around you. Both of these intertwine around each other. In finding one's self, acceptance of others is possible, and accepting the differences of others helps to define the self. Her characters, Weetzie in particular, spend a great deal of time searching for a place to belong and people to love, and in this story Weetzie Bat there does not appear to be a right or wrong way to search. The key, however, is remaining true to the ideals and beliefs held by the individual.

Even in the great diversity of Los Angeles, Weetzie, with her flamboyant style and pure emotions, does not fit in any one group and must create her own place, a place where Dirk and Duck can be accepted for who they are, not what they might represent, and where Weetzie can live happily with those she loves.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Prejudice takes many forms, but seems to be absent in this novel. Which of the characters or their behaviors would evoke the strongest reaction from a prejudiced person? Could that person's mind be changed? How?
2. Interpersonal relationships are important in *Weetzie Bat*. How do these relationships affect the way the reader sees the characters as individual people?
3. In some ways, Weetzie and Dirk are like many teen-agers: "They drank beers or bright-colored canned Club drinks in Jerry and told each other how cool they were. Then they went into clubs dressed to kill." Does Block promote underage drinking and premarital sex by making it appear glamorous?
4. Does Weetzie change the direction of the story with her wish on the genie's lamp?
5. How effective are the adults in the novel as role models? What sort of examples and guidance do they provide the younger characters?
6. AIDS has become a very important issue in the last decade, yet Block mentions the disease by allusion only, never by name. Is this realistic? Would an extended or even short discussion of AIDS mar the work?
7. Does it really matter who Cherokee's father is?
8. At one point in the novel BrandyLynn says to Weetzie: "I haven't been a very good mother, have I?" What defines a good mother? Can Weetzie be considered one? Why? Why not?
9. *Weetzie Bat* is a relatively new novel by a recently published author.  
Will it continue to be read in the years that pass? Should it? Will it become outdated?
10. In this book Block presents an idealized vision of relationships, interracial and otherwise. Does this seem realistic in light of racial tensions recently reappearing in many urban areas?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Weetzie Bat gives different views of the modern family: that of a traditional family, a married couple with a child, a divorced couple and their child, and an extended family. Historically, which has been the norm? When did the pattern start to shift? Why?

2. Some classify the novel as a fantasy and others as realistic fiction.

Which does it seem to be? Why?

3. How important is setting to the success of Weetzie Bat? Could it take place elsewhere or in another time?

Would it be as effective?

4. Is evil represented in Weetzie's world? If not, explain why not. If so, what form does it take?

5. In the novel, My Secret Agent Lover Man films a remake of Lost Horizon by James Hilton. Compare the plot of Hilton's novel to the discussion of the film made in Weetzie Bat. Do you agree with Block's changed ending?

6. You are responsible for selecting books for the young adult section of a library where quality literature is sought after, but a vocal Moral Majority exists. Should Weetzie Bat be put on the shelves? Discuss the pros and cons of such a move.



## For Further Reference

Block, Francesca Lia. "Punk Pixies in the Canyon." *Los Angeles Times Book Review* (July 26, 1992): 1,11. Block discusses the images and ideas that led to her writing *Weetzie Bat* and the concerns of her publishers about her nonjudgmental depiction of alternative lifestyles.

Campbell, Patricia J. "People Are Talking about Francesca Lia Block." *Horn Book* 69,1 (January/February 1992): 57-63. This article rebuts Patrick Jones's assertion that *Weetzie's* Los Angeles does not exist. Campbell states that not only is the fictional Los Angeles a real place, but that Block effectively captures both its tone and paradoxes.

Jones, Patrick. "People Are Talking about Francesca Lia Block." *Horn Book* 63,6 (November/December 1991): 697-701. Jones discusses Block's work in relation to other books deemed controversial when they first appeared, most notably S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*. He compares *Weetzie Bat* and *The Outsiders* in regard to materialism, a travelogue motif, and the names and places each author invents.

Knoth, Maeve Visser. "Witch Baby."

*Horn Book* 63,1 (January/February 1992): 78-79. This review provides a bare plot outline and looks for insight into the life of a modern teenager.

———. "Cherokee Bat and the Goat Guys."

*Horn Book* 63,1 (January / February 1992): 587. In this review of Block's third book, Visser outlines the story and briefly discusses the controversial aspects of the book: teen-age sex and drug use.

Roback, Diane. "Francesca Lia Block."

*Publishers Weekly* (December 22, 1989): 27. This short piece combines an overview of *Weetzie Bat* with some information about Block and her ideas about *Weetzie*, the L.A. in which she lives, and the realities of her world.

Singer, Michael. "Cream of Weetzie: Francesca Lia Block's Books Aren't Just for Kids Anymore." *Express* (Holiday Edition) 1992: 1, 12-14.

Singer's article starts as an outline of an interview with Block and examines in depth her first three works, the issues they discuss, and the writing style she employs.



## Related Titles

Weetzie Bat is the first of four books about Weetzie and her extended family. While Weetzie, Dirk, Duck, and My Secret Agent Lover Man appear in the subsequent novels, they play lesser roles, with the books concentrating primarily on the next generation. Witch Baby tells the story of Weetzie's "almost-daughter" Lily, called Witch Baby for her dark, unruly hair, purplish eyes, and complexly introverted personality. Witch Baby skates through life cutting out photographs, playing her drums, and searching for her place in the family unit. Cherokee Bat and the Goat Guys concentrates on Cherokee's coming of age. While the adults are away filming a movie, Cherokee, her boyfriend Raphael, Witch Baby, and a boy named Angel Juan start a band and experience life away from adult constraints and guidance. Missing Angel Juan shifts the focus back to Witch Baby who travels to New York City in search of the boy she loves. An interesting note on this work is that Block uses first-person narration rather than the third-person limited narrative style found in the other books. As a series, these books provide an offbeat look at adolescent life, magic, and different kinds of love.



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