

With You and Without You Short Guide

With You and Without You by Ann Martin

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Overview

With You and Without You is a sensitive examination of a family's adjustment to the loss of its father. The O'Hara clan represents the ideal American family. The parents love each other and their children; the children love, tease, play, and fight with each other. They live in a large old house that has been home to O'Haras for nearly two hundred years. Life has its ups and downs, but the family is secure—that is, until the increasingly fatigued father is diagnosed with incurable heart disease. Martin's portrayal of each member of the family, and particularly of the oldest daughter, Liza, helps the reader to understand the pain and the slow recovery that takes place after a tragic loss. The humanness of the characters, with flaws as well as virtues, makes them and their experiences realistic.

Liza's most difficult challenge is learning to accept her father's death, but along the way she faces other growth experiences as well—the death of her cat, overcoming stage fright, and finding her first boyfriend. Despite the theme of death, *With You and Without You* remains an uplifting book. Humor, often involving the youngest O'Hara, Hopie, is sprinkled throughout, and heart-warming episodes abound. While many of Martin's books might interest only girls, this is a book that both boys and girls will enjoy. For those who have lost a parent and need help in coping with the situation, *With You and Without You* offers comfort and wisdom in the healing process.



About the Author

Born on August 12, 1955, Ann Martin grew up in Princeton, New Jersey. Her father, Henry R. Martin, worked as an artist and cartoonist while her mother, Edith Matthews Martin, taught preschool. Both parents enjoyed fantasy and children's literature, and they provided an imaginative home in which Ann and her little sister, Jane, could grow, play, and daydream. The Martins enjoyed reading aloud together, and Ann liked to make up stories of her own—never dreaming that someday she would be an author.

Martin attended Smith College, spending summer vacations as a therapist working with autistic children.

After graduating cum laude in 1977, she acted on her childhood desire to be a teacher and taught for one year at Plumfield School in Noroton, Connecticut. She enjoyed teaching, but she soon realized that she wanted to be involved in some manner with children's books.

The following year she entered the publishing profession, serving as an editorial assistant for the Archway Paperbacks division of Pocket Books in New York City from 1978 to 1980.

Soon, Martin was writing seriously, and at the same time she quickly moved up the ladder as copywriter for Teen Age Book Club, Scholastic Book Services (1980-1981), associate editor (1981-1983), and editor (1983); senior editor of Books for Young Readers at Bantam Books (1983-1985); and finally writer and free-lance editor (since 1985).

An extremely prolific and disciplined author, Martin considers writing both an indulgence and a creative outlet.

While imagination is essential to her writing, memory is equally vital. As she says in *Something about the Author*, "One of the most important tools I use in my writing is my memory. . . . It's just as important to be able to transport oneself back to childhood as it is to have a vivid imagination, in order to write believable children's books." She clearly remembers the significant as well as the trivial events and emotions of her life from early childhood onward. She also draws on her experiences as a teacher and editor and her interest in child psychology and learning disabilities for her writings.

Martin is most famous for *The BabySitters Club* and *Baby-Sitters Little Sister* books which have earned her an international reputation as one of the most popular writers for elementary and middle-school-age girls. While the idea for *The BabySitters Club* was not her own, having been suggested to her by Scholastic's Editor-in-Chief Jean Feiwel, Martin developed the characters and situations for the entire series.

Originally intended as a series of four volumes, the list of titles has expanded to more than forty, with another ten plus in the *Little Sister* series. Although the bulk of her time

is spent on these two series, she still manages to write at least one hardcover novel each year.

The author stays in touch with youngsters through contact with her friends' children, her fan mail, and visits to schools. She participates in the Adopt-a-School Program of the National Dance Institute, sponsoring New York's P.S. 2 in Jacques D'Amboise's inspirational program for innercity schoolchildren.

Martin is an animal lover, and that passion comes across in many of her books. Her love of horses and horseback riding is evident in *Me and Katie (the Pest)*, and many of her fictional families own pets. Martin has a particular fondness for cats, which often are included in her books. She has never married, but lives in New York City with her cats, Rosie and Mouse (not coincidentally the name of one of the O'Hara family pets in *With You and Without You*).

Setting

All of the action in *With You and Without You* takes place in the town of Newport, Connecticut. The novel is divided into three books and an epilogue. The first book, "Autumn," begins on November 12, probably in the mid-1980s, and ends with Chapter Eight on Christmas Day. In Book I, twelve-year-old Liza and her family live at 25 Bayberry Street. For generations, O'Haras had lived in the large old home, "the biggest and oldest house on Bayberry Street." Liza enjoys a comfortable life, attending Newport Middle School, spending time at the mall, and visiting with her best friend, Denise, who also lives on Bayberry Street. Book II, "Spring," is a transitional section of two chapters dealing with Mr. O'Hara's death, on a Tuesday in early June, and the memorial service a week later. Book III, "Autumn Again," returns to mid-November, one year later. The family has sold their home and moved to a smaller house a few blocks from 25 Bayberry. The loss of Mr. O'Hara and the change to a new home has been hard on everyone. Book III ends with Chapter Nine on Christmas Eve, when Liza begins to allow herself to enjoy life again after her father's death. She even feels that she is ready to visit the cemetery for the first time. The Epilogue jumps ahead to early summer and relates briefly what has happened to the family in the intervening months. By that time, Liza's adjustment is nearly complete.

Social Sensitivity

Martin's books, particularly those in her series, have been criticized and occasionally dismissed by some teachers and parents as being purely for entertainment. True, the books are fun for children to read, but the author is unafraid to tackle many social issues within their pages, and she does so with sensitivity. While some adults may worry that children are reading such novels to the exclusion of the classics, Martin explains in an interview for *Contemporary Authors*, "I am hoping that avid readers who are reading series are reading other things as well, and I also hope that reluctant readers who get hooked on reading through series reading, whether it's the *Baby-Sitters Club* or another series, will then 'graduate' to other kinds of books."

When it comes to a serious novel such as *With You and Without You*, even Martin's critics should be pleased. Here is a book of substance, one in which the treatment of the touchy subject of death is deftly and sensitively handled.

Although Cynthia K. Leibold in *School Library Journal* terms the O'Hara family's adjustment to terminal illness and death a "sugar-coated struggle," she acknowledges "the author's skillful exploration of the fear, guilt and confusion that plague adolescents and young children experiencing the loss of a parent." Many experts agree that it is equally important for children to understand about death and the grieving process. This novel presents the topic in a realistic manner, but with compassion and positive insight.



Literary Qualities

Most of Martin's novels are written in the first person, including *With You and Without You*. The style works to bring the reader into the main character's thoughts and feelings as if reading her journal. Just as Martin's other novels deal with contemporary issues such as divorce, *With You and Without You* explores the theme of death as it affects a teen-age girl in modern society.

Christmas plays an important part in this story. It is Mr. O'Hara's favorite season, and when the family learns of his heart condition, they do everything possible to make this one not just their last Christmas, but their best Christmas. Because Christmas is so special in their household, it is no wonder that Liza wants to shut it out the following year when her father is gone. It is no coincidence, then, she finally comes to terms with her father's death during the Christmas season.

The play *A Christmas Carol* has special meaning in the book. Despite her stage fright, Liza has an important—albeit nonspeaking—part in her class's adaptation of Charles Dickens's classic story. She does not want her family to see her in the play but finally relents and asks only her father to come, since it will be his last opportunity to share such an event with her.

The play is also the vehicle through which she gets to know her boyfriend, Marc Radlay.

The most important aspect of the school play, however, is Liza's role in it. Symbolically, she represents the Spirit of the Future. It is not until the following Christmas, though, by putting her father's death behind her and accepting that her life must go on, that Liza truly embodies the spirit of the future.

Ashes come to symbolize Liza's fear of death. At the end of Book II, after the memorial service, Liza goes home and burns a copy of her father's obituary in the bathroom sink. In Book III, we learn that ashes have become a "problem" for her. Her father had been cremated, and she explains, "I saw ashes and I thought of death. It started, not the first time I saw the pot in the funeral home, but later, that time when I burned my father's obituary. I looked at the ashes as the tapwater washed them down the drain, and I kept thinking, 'They're like flakes of Dad, flakes of Dad, flakes of Dad.' "

She becomes nervous around smokers, cannot empty ashtrays, and is unable to remain in a room where a fire burns in a fire place. Interestingly, Liza's emergence from her fear of ashes is not a monumental episode in the novel. Instead, it is just the opposite.

One day, a friend of her mother's visits and smokes some cigarettes. After she leaves, Mrs. O'Hara asks Liza to empty the ashtray, which she does. "It wasn't until twenty minutes later that I remembered about 'flakes of Dad.' And when I did remember, I smiled. It seemed silly now. Besides, I had so many other things to think about—like Marc—that I didn't have time to remember 'flakes of Dad' every time I saw an ash."



Martin's subtle handling of Liza's passage through the grieving process is an effective technique and one that makes the book believable. In the case of Liza's fear about going to the cemetery, she writes: "The cemetery was Dad dead, just like the ashes were.

And I didn't want to deal with it."

Liza's gradual understanding and acceptance of death give the story emotional depth.



Themes and Characters

The main character, Liza O'Hara, the second child of four, is tall for her age, with a long, thin face. She has the olive skin, brown hair, and hazel eyes of her mother, as does her four-year-old sister, Hope (also known by the nicknames Sissy, Emmy—for Emily, her given name—and Tink, for Tinkerbell).

Hope, the youngest, provides much of the comic relief in the novel. Liza's sixteen-year-old brother, Brent, and ten-year-old sister, Carrie, are fair skinned with black hair and deep brown eyes like their father. The O'Haras are a close-knit and loving family, and although the children fight at times, they all share a love and respect for each other that generally guides their words and actions. Mr. O'Hara's death affects each family member in a different way, and each one, even Hope, must confront his or her grief and learn to cope. Other family members include the pets, Fifi, a golden retriever, and Liza's two cats, Mouse and Charlie. Later, the family adopts a kitten, named Dr. J., to replace Charlie, who dies.

Important to the story are Liza's best friend, Denise Peterson, a gifted pianist, and the boy whom Liza likes and who becomes her first boyfriend, Marc Radlay. Minor characters, such as school friends, neighbors, relatives, teachers, doctors, nurses, Mr. O'Hara's coworkers, and the funeral home director, help to flesh out the story.

Death is the main theme in *With You and Without You*. Besides Mr. O'Hara's death, several other deaths are important. Denise's father had died several years before, and her experiences with grief enable her to help Liza deal with loss to some degree. In addition, Liza's cat, Charlie, is hit by a car and killed five days before Thanksgiving. This unexpected tragedy offers Liza a bit of experience in dealing with death. With Denise's encouragement, Liza allows herself to cry for Charlie, and this effort at releasing her feelings helps her to overcome the loss and get on with life.

Of course, it is far more difficult to recover from the loss of a father. Mr. O'Hara tells Liza that they are lucky to learn about his impending death.

"Only in that we have time to prepare for the. death. We'll have a chance to say everything to each other during the next few months that we want or need to say." Even so, Liza becomes angry about his death and she is racked with guilt. After her father dies, she will not allow herself to have fun because he can no longer have fun. She wants to skip Christmas and refuses to do things with her friends. In addition, she cannot bring herself to visit her father's grave in the cemetery. Ann Martin leads Liza through the slow healing process with patience and tenderness.

Fear comes into play in *With You and Without You* in several different ways.

For instance, the O'Hara family is fearful of what life will be like without their father, and money becomes a constant worry. Liza has another fear that nearly paralyzes her in some situations, that of stage fright. Her father's moral support helps her overcome her



fear during the school's production of *A Christmas Carol*. Moreover, she finds that her stage fright dissolves when it is her turn to eulogize her father at his funeral service.

Another theme in the novel is that of maturation. Aging from twelve to thirteen in the story, Liza grows into a normal teen-age girl who wears makeup and likes boys. She also matures in her acceptance of her father's death. At the end of the book, she is finally able to visit her father's grave in the cemetery, and to talk to him in spirit. Ultimately, *With You and Without You* is about love, and about getting on with life after a tragedy.

Topics for Discussion

1. How do the different members of the O'Hara family deal with Mr. O'Hara's death?
2. What do ashes represent in the novel? Why do they become a problem for Liza?
3. How does Liza overcome her stage fright?
4. Liza's best friend Denise does not want to get married in the future.

Why? Is Denise's attitude reasonable?

5. *With You and Without You* is divided into three Books. How is this format effective in telling the story?
6. Explain the significance of the novel's title.
7. Why does Hope steal her teacher's tool kit? Why does Mrs. O'Hara insist that Liza, not Hope, apologize to the teacher?
8. Liza doesn't want her family to watch her performance in the school play. Why does she decide to invite her father to see the play?
9. Why does Liza not want to celebrate Christmas after her father's death?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read a book by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, then write a paper on the "stages of dying." Discuss how the survivors pass through similar stages when a loved one dies.
2. Read Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. Explain the significance of Liza's role as the Spirit of the Future, and the comparison she makes at the end of the novel between herself and Scrooge.
3. Research heart disease, particularly cardiomyopathy. Is there a cure for this disease?
4. List the different Christmas traditions that are mentioned in *With You and Without You*. Discuss how holidays are difficult for people who have lost loved ones.
5. Money is a problem for the O'Haras after the father's death. Find statistics that show income levels for households before and after the death of one of the wage earners.
6. Read several elegies, such as Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Adonais," John Milton's "Lycidas," and Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." What is an elegy? Although it is not a poem, what does *With You and Without You* have in common with an elegy?

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. "Martin, Ann M."

In *Something About the Author*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1986. In this profile, Martin discusses her background and her writing.

Leibold, Cynthia K. Review. *School Library Journal* 32 (August 1986): 104.

This book review points out flaws in *With You and Without You*, but also offers praise for the author's skill as a writer.

Review. *The University of Chicago Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* 39 (May 1986): 174. The issue includes a favorable review of *With You and Without You*.

Ross, Jean W. "Martin, Ann M." In *Contemporary Authors*. Vol. 32. Edited by James G. Lesniak. Detroit: Gale Research, 1991: 283-286. This entry includes a complete listing of Martin's books through 1991 and a long and informative interview with the author.

Related Titles

Although the narrative style of many of her novels is similar, *With You and Without You* is not closely related to any of Ann M. Martin's other books. In her other novels, Martin addresses various contemporary issues such as step families, sibling rivalry, autism, and dyslexia, but this one dealing primarily with death is unique among her titles.



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