



THE BOOKS OF JOAN BAUER

The Books of Joan Bauer: A Reader's Companion

by Teri Lesesne

Department of Library Science

Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX

Introduction

Have you ever felt as though you were disconnected from the rest of the world, left dangling with more questions than answers in a particular situation? If so, you will immediately connect to the characters in the novels of Joan Bauer. All of Joan Bauer's novels center on the characters trying to forge connections. Those connections may be to family, to friends, or to the past. Each courageous young female, setting off on a perilous journey in search of some missing piece that will help her better form a complete picture of herself, attempts to reach beyond herself to find answers in a world full of questions. Whether the young woman is a waitress, or an amateur historian, or a shoe salesperson, all are attempting to come one step closer to realizing a goal. Along the route each takes are important life lessons, lessons that extend beyond the pages of the book and seem to transcend boundaries of age, gender, and region. What readers discover is that the journey will continue past the end of the story. As in real life, the journey is never fully over, the goals never completely realized. Perhaps this, then, is the great power of Bauer's stories: They present realistic characters who show gradual change and incremental growth. We know that Hope, Ivy, and Jenna will survive; we just don't know their story in its entirety. Like all great fiction writers, Bauer leaves readers with more questions than answers. So, if you are up for a journey where the destination will change along the way, if you are unafraid of strong-willed, intelligent young women, if you are looking for connections yourselves, read **Hope Was Here**, **Backwater**, and **Rules of the Road**. The journey will be one you will long remember.

About the Books

Hope Was Here

Another move. Another town. Another school. Hope is an old hand at starting over. Ever since her mother abandoned her as a baby, the only constant Hope can depend upon is her Aunt Addie. Hope longs for some permanence. One aspect of that sense of belonging would be finding out the identity of her father, another person missing from Hope's life. With the transient nature of her life, with absent parents, with all the difficulties associated with never staying in one place too long, it would be simple for Hope to surrender. Instead, she forges ahead, buoyed by her love of waitressing—which forces her out of herself—and her fervent "hope" that one day she will find her father. Mulhoney, Wisconsin does not hold much promise as the town which will see Hope's dreams realized. But as she discovers, maybe "the land of lactose" can offer exactly what Hope needs. Political intrigue, mouthwatering menu selections, and perhaps a budding romance combine to make a warm and warmly humorous coming of age novel.

Backwater

Ivy Breedlove likes nothing better than delving among musty tomes of history, researching the accomplishments of Breedlove family members from long ago. She longs to make history her career. Unfortunately, Ivy is descended from a succession of lawyers and judges. Her father has other plans for Ivy beginning with college and then law school: After that, Ivy should join the ranks of the other distinguished barristers of her clan. A chance remark about a relative sends Ivy off hiking the Adirondack Mountains in search of Josephine Breedlove. Perhaps Aunt Josephine, who lives in the backwater, will help Ivy make the connections to her family's history and to her future.

Rules of the Road

Life is about to get even more complicated for Jenna Boller. She is already dealing with an alcoholic father who shows up at inopportune moments, a grandmother losing touch with reality due to the ravages of Alzheimer's Disease, and hair which arrives at "warp frizz" on humid days. What is the new complication? The shoe store that has been her employer and her refuge from life's challenges is about to be sold out to a big company that plans radical changes. The one bright note in Jenna's life is her new driver's license and the used car, which allows her some measure of escape and, perhaps, independence. Mrs. Gladstone, the president of Gladstone Shoes, Jenna's employer, wants to fight the corporate takeover. When Mrs. Gladstone asks Jenna to be her chauffeur and come along on her trip cross-country to visit the stores and drum up support for her fight, Jenna does not have a clue about how her life will change. The journey is one of self-discovery, a trip that will give Jenna the courage to face the "complications" in her life without fear.

About Joan Bauer

Joan Bauer was born in River Forest, Illinois, the eldest of three sisters. Her mother was a schoolteacher with a great comic sense; her father, a salesman that no one could say no to. Her maternal grandmother had been a famous storyteller and had a striking effect on Bauer's early years. "She would tell me stories with five different voices and as many dialects. I would sit on her enormous lap transfixed at how she could teach me about life and make me laugh through her stories. She taught me the significance of humor and how it intersects our daily lives."

Bauer managed an eclectic list of jobs from assistant typing teacher at age twelve to high school waitress. In her early twenties, she was a successful advertising and marketing salesperson. Professional writing for magazines and newspapers followed, then screenwriting, which was cut short by a serious car accident. She regrouped and wrote **Squashed**, which won the Delacorte Prize for a First Young Adult Novel. Five novels for young adult readers have followed: **Thwonk**, **Sticks**, **Rules of the Road**, **Backwater** and **Hope was Here** (Newbery Honor Medal).

Joan lives in Darien, CT with her husband and daughter.

Praise

"Ivy Breedlove is another strong and quirky heroine who addresses serious issues head on."—**The New York Times Book Review**

"A fast and funny tale of one big-boned (and big-hearted) gal's summer of discovery on the road."—**The Los Angeles Times Book Review**

Recommended Reading

If you enjoyed the works of Joan Bauer, we have some other titles to suggest. In some cases, the recommended books contain good humor, sometimes the related books feature young men facing obstacles in their lives. Finally, some of these books feature heroic females as main characters.

Books to Make You Laugh:

Keeping the Moon by Sarah Dessen
Viking Children's Books
HC: 0-670-88549-5, \$15.99 (\$22.99 CAN)
PB: 0-14-131007-3, \$5.99 (\$8.99 CAN)

Gypsy Rizka by Lloyd Alexander
Dutton Children's Books
HC: 0-525-46121-3, \$16.99 (\$26.99 CAN)
PB: 0-14-130980-6, \$4.99 (\$6.00 CAN)

Where the Boys Are:

Over the Wall by John H. Ritter
Philomel Books
HC: 0-399-23489-6, \$17.99 (\$25.99 CAN)

Boltzman! by William Sleator
Dutton Children's Books
HC: 0-525-46131-0, \$15.99 (\$24.99 CAN)

Strong Women:

The Other Ones by Jean Thesman

Viking Children's Books

HC: 0-670-88594-0, \$15.99 (\$22.99 CAN)

Christmas In Heaven by Carol Lynch Williams

G. P. 's Sons

HC: 0-399-23449-7, \$16.99 (\$23.99 CAN)

Destiny by Vicki Grove

G. P. 's Sons

HC: 0-399-23449-7, \$16.99 (\$23.99 CAN)

The Girls by Amy Goldman Koss

Dial Books for Young Readers

HC: 0-8037-2494-2, \$16.99 (\$25.99 CAN)

Internet Sites of Interest:

Joan Bauer website

www.joanbauer.com

The official website of the author.

Virginia Tech Digital Library

<http://borg.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/winter96/bauer.htm>

Here is an article written by Joan Bauer on writing books with humor entitled "Humor, Seriously."

New York State Library

www.nysl.nysed.gov

This will link you to the New York State Library, where you can discover lots of interesting information about the Adirondack Mountains, site of much of the novel, **Backwater**.

Wisconsin Directory of Attractions

www.wistravel.com

Lots of details about Wisconsin, the setting of **Hope Was Here**.

Finally, type in the word "shoes" into a search engine and see where the road leads you! **Rules of the Road** is about finding your own way, after all.

An Interview With Joan Bauer

Why is humor so vital to your writing?

Because humor is so vital in my life. When I utilize humor in my writing, I'm connecting to a deep place in myself that says, "no matter how bad things get, there is hope." I believe that with all of my heart. That's what I love about humor—at least the kind that makes us look at life's difficulties differently—laughing in the midst of pain says to me that we are already on the road moving away from it. We're going to make it. I'd like to think that readers connect to that sentiment, too. We need to laugh for so many reasons. It brings perspective; it brings healing; it builds relationships; it brings release. People have asked me if I would ever write a "totally serious book." I have to say that I do write totally serious books that use laughter against the storm of life.

Your novels do deal with serious subjects. How hard is it to walk the fine line between laughter and tragedy?

It's brutal sometimes. I agonize over words, motives. I do not want anyone to think I am making fun of alcoholism, Alzheimer's disease, death, divorce, being overweight. But here's the thing: my first drafts are rarely funny and I am grimly sober while writing them. But I am getting down to the serious underpinnings of the story. Then I do look and see where the funny voice can break through. I see where comic relief can cushion a hard scene. I ask myself constantly, where can the humor break forth here and make a point?

How are you like Hope?

I'm hopeful like she is, and I've had to fight to stay that way. It isn't my natural state. I work at hopefulness. I don't expect life to be easy. Like her, I am an over-comer. I had a deep need as a teen to have a healthy father—mine was an alcoholic. I was a waitress as a teen and a good one. I love food; it is a passion for me. I have also had to work on my anger over the years. Hope and I are very alike.

But here is where we are different. I never moved from place to place. I lived with my mom, grandmother, and two sisters in the same house. Hope has a good sense of herself, what she is good at and what she's not. I didn't

have that much when I was a teenager.

She is more patient than I and better able to absorb the quirkiness of people around her. One of the things I like bear about her is the fact she has great faith that her father is going to find her and she keeps these scrapbooks for him so that when he finally shows up she'll be ready to tell him about her life. I would have never done that.

What is a typical day at the "office" like for you?

I try to clear my mind for the work ahead. I try to remember what Ernest Hemingway said about writing: Stop for the day when you've written something you feel good about. That makes it easier to get back to it the next morning. I don't wait for inspiration; I just go to work. More and more I read things out loud to check for authenticity of voice. I did that a great deal for **Hope was Here**. One of the big words in my life is "revision." It's kind of like labor and delivery. The baby is coming out and you don't have a lot to say about it.

Discussion Questions

1. Titles always hold special significance to the story. For example, how does the title **Hope Was Here** focus your attention as a reader? Other than the literal reference, what else does the title suggest about the book? Does it tell you the truth? What about the titles of **Backwater** and **Rules of the Road**? How does each indicate the literal and symbolic natures of the stories?
2. Hope's name is pivotal to the development of her character and to the development of the story. How do the various definitions of the word "hope" add to the story? See, for example, the reference made on page 22.
3. There are other important symbols in this story. What roles do each of the following play in terms of developing character, advancing the plot, or serving as foreshadowing? Are there other symbols essential to the story? If so, what are they?
 - Day lily (page 85)
 - Welcome stairways (page 14)
4. In each of Bauer's works, it is important to the main character that she provide some sense of comfort to the people she encounters. For Jenna in **Rules of the Road**, comfort comes in the form of the perfect show for each customer. How does Hope provide that measure of comfort? What does this tell you about her character? How about Ivy Breedlove in **Backwater**?
5. Fathers are a central concern to the characters in **Hope Was Here**, **Backwater**, and **Rules of the Road**. Discuss the similarities and differences among the fathers of Hope, Ivy, and Jenna.
6. Ultimately, all characters leave their mark on us as readers. How does Hope leave her mark literally and figuratively? How do Ivy and Jenna leave their marks?
7. Why is humor such an essential ingredient in each of Joan Bauer's books? How would the stories change if they were somehow more

"serious" in tone? How would your response to the story be affected?

8. Occasionally, we are swayed to purchase a book because the title is intriguing, Bauer used the title **Welcome Stairways** as she wrote **Hope Was Here**. The title changed after the story was completed. What reaction do you have to the working title? Might the working title affect your reaction to the book? What alternative titles might you suggest for **Rules of the Road** and **Backwater**?

Find more teaching guides and tips at: <http://us.penguinroup.com/youngreaders>.