Dear Zoe

by Philip Beard



About the Book

From **Little Women** to **Huckleberry Finn**, from **A Member of the Wedding** to **The Catcher in the Rye**, American authors have developed a remarkable body of literature about the challenges and exhilarations of growing up. This tradition is now further enriched by the publication of **Dear Zoe**, a sensitive and insightful coming-of-age novel by Pittsburgh attorney Philip Beard. Related as a series of letters from the main character to her deceased little sister Zoe, the novel reveals the mind, heart, and emotional struggles of fifteen-year-old Tess DeNunzio. At first, Tess writes simply to re-create a bond with her sister. As time goes by, however, her letters become a comprehensive and thoughtful chronicle of her efforts to understand herself, her family, and the world around her. Without a trace of literary pretension, Tess writes with both humor and eloquence. With pensive candor, she speaks not only for herself but also for anyone who has known the loneliness, fears, and frustrations of coming of age in contemporary America.

Although Tess's angst and insecurities will quickly resonate with the typical reader, her personal plight is anything but typical, and if she elicits sympathy, she neither claims it nor feels that she deserves it. To the contrary, her inner sufferings are rooted in almost unbearable self-condemnation.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Tess was entrusted with looking after three-year-old Zoe. Distracted by the horrible news blaring from her mother's television, Tess turned away from her task just long enough for Zoe's fatal accident to occur. Not able to feel at home with her grief-stricken mother, her emotionally enigmatic stepfather, and her surviving half sister, Tess abruptly moves across town to live with her hapless biological father. There, in a neighborhood rife with crime and drug use, she meets Jimmy Freeze, an amiable boy with a delinquent past. Jimmy has all the looks of someone who might make Tess's troubles even worse, but he may also be able to give her the support and perspective she needs to start living again.

Striking in its characterizations and brilliantly precise in its dissections of both adolescence and human nature, **Dear Zoe** deftly juxtaposes a national catastrophe with personal tragedy. While acknowledging mass suffering, it also reaffirms the

need of individuals to give and receive love. In his precociously wise but profoundly vulnerable narrator, Philip Beard creates a character of superb nuance and unusual depth. **Dear Zoe** is both a realistic portrait of troubled youth and a work of artistic and philosophical significance.

Discussion Guide

1. Tess, Em, and their mother select the name Zoe "not so much because we loved the name but because we didn't know anyone else who had it." This reasoning runs counter to the thinking of people who choose a name to create connections, perhaps to a beloved relative or a famous person. In the naming of Zoe, any existing context is assumed to be negative. Is it significant that Zoe's name denies context instead of affirming it?

2. Tess has two dads who differ on practically all points. Her stepdad, David, is a successful lawyer who tries "real hard" and is "all about efficiency." Her biological father, Nick, "is basically a zero in the professional life department," never tries hard, and yet is the person to whom Tess instinctively turns. Within the confines of the story, which character do you find more appealing? Would your answer be different if you were talking about real people instead of fictional characters? If so, what accounts for the difference?

3. In the first chapter of Dear Zoe, Tess declares that nothing changes everything. In the last chapter, she suggests that she was mistaken and that, to the contrary, "everything changes everything." Why does Tess now feel differently about the relation among events, and which of her two statements do you believe is closer to the truth?

4. Why is Tess so obsessed with her daily makeup ritual?

5. Is Zoe a presence in this novel, an absence, or both?

6. In the chapter titled "Church," Tess makes mordantly funny observations about religious attitudes and practices. How do you react to her critique of the Catholic and Episcopal churches?

7. Even before Zoe's accident, Tess occupies an ambiguous place within her family because she is not David's daughter. How does her status as a stepchild influence her responses to everyday life, as well as the cataclysmic disruption of that life?

8. Consider Em's role in the novel. How is she an essential part of Beard's story? What dimensions does her presence add to the novel?

9. Jimmy Freeze, who seems at a loss to put his own life in order, becomes essential in helping Tess to reconstruct hers. Just what is it about him that makes him such an unexpectedly good influence on her?

10. How does Tess's first sexual experience transform her? Is it represented as a necessary rite of passage or as something still more significant? Does her newly acquired sexual awareness translate into a clearer awareness of herself?

11. How do the massive public tragedies of September 11, 2001, affect the significance of Zoe's death and its impact on Tess's family?

12. Tess speculates at the end of the novel that perhaps "Z" is the shape of everyone's life. Has she succeeded in extracting some kind of coherence from all that has happened to her? What do you imagine the shape of Tess's life will be after the novel is over?

Author Bio

Philip Beard is a writer, teacher, and attorney in Pittsburgh, where he lives with his wife and their three daughters. DEAR ZOE is his first novel.

Critical Praise

"[A] sweet, sure-voiced debut."

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