Living on Air

by Anna Shapiro



About the Book

When Maude Pugh, an artistic and intellectual fourteen-year-old from Levittown, Long Island, obtains a scholarship to a prestigious prep school, her parents do not approve. They are not a private school type of family. But the Pughs have never really been a Levittown type of family either. Having abandoned their bohemian Greenwich Village past, they now live in a house where the walls are painted black to better showcase the paintings of Maude's father.

Maude is eager to escape this confining world for that of the Bay Farm School and its socially privileged students. She befriends Weesie Herrick, a girl who lives on a nearby estate. Maude is entranced by Weesie's elegant lifestyle and envious of her mother's easy affection, while Weesie is embarrassed by hear wealth and intrigued by the Pughs' bohemian lifestyle.

As her high school years unfold, Maude's carefully constructed Bay Farm life is threatened by her family's tensions and secrets, and she is forced to seek happiness elsewhere. Witty and observant, **Living on Air** is a coming-of-age story that is also an exploration of culture, class, art and adolescence in the 1960s.

Discussion Guide

1. When Maude does her self-portrait, it is a gift to Danny. In what ways might it also be a gift to herself? What would it give her?

2. Looking and reflection are central in **Living on Air**. Maude looks into several "mirrors." Weesie could be seen as one, and likewise Weesie's family. Pictures and paintings can be reflections too. The book opens with Maude's disappointment in the picture Milt makes for which she poses. Does she need to be an artist of her own life --- create her life in what might be called her own image? When Maude looks into the "mirror" of her fellow GED test-takers, she sees a reflection of what seem to her pathetic aspirations and her own failure. Yet it is on that day that she accepts that she is

hungry for life, just by eating a cruller. Does this represent a renewal of her ability to take her life into her own hands?

3. Which do you think Maude sees as more important, art or money? How do the other characters feel about the relative value of these things? If Maude had to choose between being loved and having great artistic ability, which do you think she would choose? Which would Milt choose?

4. Bay Farm is the "microcosm in the macrocosm," as Weesie says. Even though Bay Farm is special and has esoteric aspects, is it reflective of mobile American society? In what ways is Maude's overall odyssey like doing anthropology and in what ways not? Does everyone have to do this kind of anthropology to find where they fit in? Are the characters and places and events in the book both literal and metaphorical, like the elements of Stand's house?

5. It often comes up that "Pughs" do things a certain way, as if "Pugh" were a distinct class of beings. What are the qualities of that class? How do the various Pughs feel about those qualities or their membership in this category? How is the book about the categories into which people fall and to which ones they want to be seen as belonging? How does Maude feel about her family --- how much disappointment and pride, how much identification with them and rejection of them? In what ways do the values of Maude's family reflect those of the art world (for instance, in regard to male and female roles)? Do they reflect the values of the sixties? Could this story have been set in a different time?

6. Weesie says her family lives on "air," a statement Maude cannot believe. When Maude starves herself, she could be said to be living on air. Are there other ways she is subsisting on less than people would normally expect to have? Who else is living on air in the book, and in what ways?

7. Do you think Weesie is a good friend to Maude? What are the obligations of friendship? Is Maude right to hold onto this friendship even when it is diminished?

We take it for granted that having a common perspective is both a good and a necessary part of friendship. How much does perspective depend on circumstance? In Weesie and Maude's case, they are financially unequal, but being in the same school seems to equalize their circumstances. When Maude can no longer go to Bay Farm, though, the differences in their circumstances become more pronounced. Should friendship transcend circumstance?

8. Weesie has qualities of which Maude would like to have more, and Maude has aspects Weesie admires and for which she might wish. As the flip side of jealousy, is idealizing always a problem in the end, or can admiration trump potential covetousness or envy indefinitely?

9. Often we look for mothering or emotional caretaking in our friends, but if our own parents were deficient in these ways, we may be geniuses at finding friends who will disappoint us similarly. Is this because we find people who really are like our less good parent, or is it because we expect to be disappointed and uncared for and will find that no matter who we deal with? Likewise, a well-cared-for child will be more likely to feel that her friends are very good to her, and they may even be better friends to her, because she automatically elicits affection and care. How do Maude and Weesie fit these categories?

10. What do you think will happen as the characters go on? Will Maude and Danny be a couple? Will Maude and Weesie be best friends or grow apart? What will they each become? Will Milt find a new wife, have other kinds of success? Will Nina find her own profession and, if so, will that change her other relationships? Will Seth ever see Maude

and, if he wants to, will she want to see him? How long will Milt support him? Will Milt become more supportive of Maude, emotionally or financially?

Author Bio

Anna Shapiro is the author of two previous novels, **The Right Bitch** and **Life and Love**, **Such as They Are**, and a collection of essays, **A Feast of Words**. She was the regular fiction reviewer for the *New Yorker*'s "Briefly Noted" column and has written for the magazine at greater length, as well as for numerous other journals. She has illustrated three books, and been an activist and lobbyist on behalf of public open space for New York City.

Critical Praise

"Shapiro ... is a shrewd anthropologist well versed in the cultures of adolescence, the '60s and class strife."

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