

Pepperland

By Mark Delaney

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Young Adult / 12 and older

About the Book

Pamela Jean, a.k.a. Star, is sixteen when her mother dies of breast cancer. Star is angry that her mother has died and left her, and nothing seems to make her feel better: Not talking to her shrink. Not playing rock music with her best friend Dooley. Not even listening to her mother's old familiar Beatles albums.

It is not until Star finds an unsent letter addressed to John Lennon and a broken-down vintage Gibson guitar that she begins to find a way out of her grief...and maybe even a way to take care of some unfinished business left by her mother.

Written with compassion, Mark Delaney's new novel offers a realistic and poignant look at a difficult period in a teenager's life.

Themes

Coping with the loss of a parent

The Beatles






Music as a source of healing

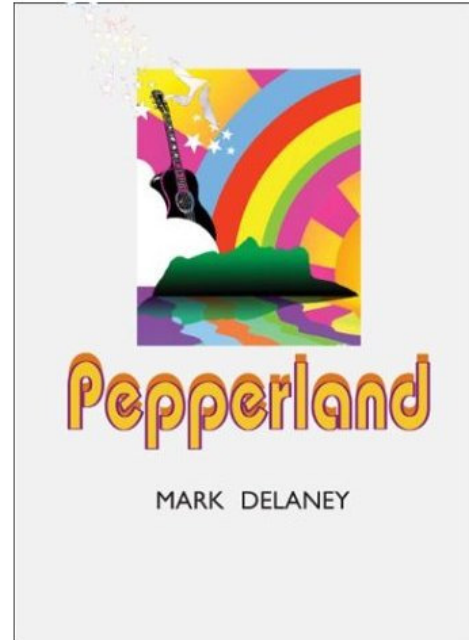
Art as an expression of inner thoughts and feelings

Hate crimes

Friendship/romance

Awards

-  2004 Young Adult Top Forty (PA)
-  2005 Kansas State Reading Circle Recommended Reading List
-  Nominee, 2005 YALSA Teen's Top Ten
-  Nominee, 2005 YALSA Best Books for Young Adults
-  Nominee, 2005 KSRA Young Adult Book Award



Reviews

“Delaney is able to make Star and Dooley, her best friend, true-to-life people whom readers will recognize and care about.”

— VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)

“Delaney's sensitive style and his development of realistic, multidimensional lead characters combine to create an absorbing story set in the early '80s... The author shows how a love of art can help one cope with difficulties as he deftly balances the dual themes of dealing with tragic loss and with being different.”

— School Library Journal

“Delaney's novel tells a quiet, moving story about a smart, capable teen learning to cope with a parent's death... What works best is Star's believable, gradual healing, described in vivid details and memorable scenes, as she finds ways to stay connected to her mother through their shared passion for music.”

— Booklist

“Pepperland is the tender story of one young woman's journey through the grief of losing her mother to ultimately finding herself. The cast of characters is small but runs deep, and readers root for Star to deliver the letter at an upcoming concert, to recognize how her feelings for Dooley have changed, and to find the Gibson's chords and her own words immortalizing her mother in a song.”

— Kliatt

Before You Read

Ask readers to think about and discuss the following questions and issues:

1. How important is music in your life? What does music do for you?
2. Do you listen to different types of music, or different specific songs, depending upon your mood? Why? What kinds of music go best with certain moods?
3. Do you know any young people who have lost a parent? Do you notice any changes in those persons? How are they coping? What fears might come to a teen who has lost a parent? How would your life change if you lost one of yours? How would you cope?
4. Do girls have a different kind of relationship with their mothers than boys have with their fathers? In what way?
5. People who belong to certain minority groups are often targets of hatred. Why might someone hate a person he or she does not even know? Can you think of any specific examples of this kind of hatred?
6. What do you know about the Beatles? Have you heard many of their songs? How would you describe their music? How is it different from, and similar to, today's music?
7. Do you like to draw? Paint? Play music? Write poetry? Why? Why is art important?

As You Read

Ask readers to consider the following questions:

1. What impression do you have of Star as you read the opening scene? What seems to be her attitude toward Dr. Artaud? Toward being in therapy? Why do you suppose she has this attitude?
2. Describe the relationship Star has with her stepfather, Syke (avoid using vague words like "good" or "strong"). In what ways do they "watch each other's back"? What scenes, in your opinion, best illustrate this relationship?
3. Star assigns herself three important tasks. What are they? What is she trying to accomplish by pursuing these tasks?
4. What are your impressions of Dooley? In your opinion, should Star have forgiven him for his

bad behavior? Why or why not? In what way has Dooley changed by the story's end?

5. Star's sessions with Dr. Artaud change as the novel progresses. How? What does the change suggest?
6. At first Teri Seegar is opposed to the idea of letting Star work with her. Then she quickly changes her mind. Why?
7. Throughout the novel Star refers to the old Gibson as her "mother's guitar." Later it becomes *her* guitar. What precise moment signals this change?
8. Star attempts to meet John Lennon by sneaking backstage after a concert. How does she imagine this meeting will turn out? Before reading the end of the chapter, make your own prediction: Will she meet him? If so, what will they say to each other? If not, what will happen instead?

After You Read

After discussing the following issues in class, consider asking students to write a paper or prepare a presentation on their thoughts:

1. A metaphor is an implied comparison. Star rebuilds a guitar, yet all her work might also be a metaphor for a larger kind of "rebuilding." Explain.
2. Track Star's relationship with Dooley. How do they relate at the story's beginning? When does the relationship begin to change? How does it change? What events cause each of the changes? What is their relationship at the story's end?
3. Each chapter title is the title of a Beatles song. Why might the author have made this choice? Examine the events of each chapter in light of its title: Is the title an apt one? Why or why not?
4. Star, during a session with Dr. Artaud, lets her hair dangle in front of her face because "it's the only way I can be alone between 4:00 and 4:50 on a Thursday afternoon." What other techniques has Star developed to avoid dealing directly with her problems? Cite specific moments in the novel when she uses them. What escape techniques does Dooley have?
5. What is a *flashback*? The novel contains a number of flashbacks that feature Star's mother. What might be the purpose of these scenes?

What impression do you have of Star's mom after reading them?

- Neither Star nor Dooley succeed in the goals they have set. In what sense do they fail? In what ways do the two grow through these failures?

Interdisciplinary Connections

Music

- While discussing her guitar playing, Star frequently mentions chords. What is a chord? How is a chord constructed in a standard scale? What are some other scales?
- Examine chord structures in various musical styles: What is a blues chord? A jazz chord? A minor chord? What is unique about a power chord? What does it mean to take a chord and add a seventh, a major seventh, an eleventh, or a thirteenth?
- Music comes in many different styles. Star mentions blues and jazz in particular. What makes a composition a "blues" piece or a "jazz" piece?
- The phrase "rock music," short for "rock and roll music," has become a bland term that covers many different types of modern bands and performers. What is the original, pure definition of "rock"? What are some classic examples of songs that are true "rock and roll"?
- The music of the Beatles influenced much of the music that has followed. Examine some Beatles songs and suggest more recent or contemporary pieces that borrow ideas from the Beatles sound.

History

- The Beatles toured and recorded during some of the most turbulent times in U.S. history. They arrived in this country shortly after the assassination of President Kennedy and continued performing through the era of the Vietnam War and the assassinations of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy. Trace the major events of this

period. Which Beatles songs were popular in November of 1963? Which were popular in 1964 as Vietnam escalated, or in 1968 when the assassinations occurred? Which songs seem to reflect the turbulence of the time and which seem almost too innocent?

- John Lennon was an outspoken critic of the war in Vietnam. Examine songs like "Give Peace a Chance" and "Happy Xmas (War is Over)". Examine his interviews, his art, his "bag-ins." In light of his words and music, what do you think of his efforts?
- The events of *Pepperland* take place during a narrow window of time between the first and third weeks of November, 1980. Who were the popular recording artists of the time? What were the popular songs? What movies were playing in theaters? What, if any, were the important news events?
- The author of *Pepperland* does not mention that a new president was elected right about the time the novel begins. Who was this president? Was his election a close one or a landslide? Whom did he defeat? What does history think of his term in office?

Psychology

- Star has recently lost her mother. What effects does such a loss have on a teen? Are the problems associated with the loss of a parent different for a girl who has lost her mother than for a girl who has lost her father? Are they different if a boy loses his mother? His father?
- Star has a number of "escape techniques." What are they? Can escape techniques be healthy? When do they become unhealthy?
- Star, and eventually Syke, attend therapy sessions. What might be the goal of therapy in such a case? What are the benefits of the two attending sessions together?
- What might a psychologist say about Dooley? What is his level of self-esteem? How does it affect his behavior, especially his behavior with Star?

Art

- What are the differences between representative art and abstract art? Examine the descriptions of Dooley's works as they appear in the book. Which are representative and which are abstract?
- Dooley's art teacher apparently encouraged students to explore various styles and traditions of art. What schools of art or individual artists might Dooley have admired? Why?

More Classroom Activities

- Have students listen to Beatles music on CDs. Compare early Beatles tunes to the later solo work of John Lennon. Language arts teachers may wish to focus on mood, tone, and theme. Music teachers might have students consider song structure, musicianship, or instrumentation. History teachers may use the music as a way to place historical events in a cultural context (one clear example is "Revolution," which was John Lennon's response to those who criticized the Beatles for not being more outspoken about the war in Vietnam).
- Art students may wish to examine the descriptions of Dooley's more abstract pieces. What is the literal look of the piece? What idea might Dooley be suggesting by painting the image as he does? Have students—in paint, pen and ink, or pencil—create their own abstract pieces.
- Have classroom groups decide the legal fate of Farris Tidwell. In particular, students should determine whether those guilty of a "hate crime" should receive a greater punishment than those who commit a similar act for another reason.

Research Topics

- As a semester project, advanced students in vocational arts classes may examine the difficulty of building a wooden musical instrument. Have students look online at plans for building a working mandolin, violin, or dulcimer (tackling a guitar requires highly specialized tools and equipment and may be

unrealistic). Some students might prefer to report on the history of one of these instruments, on pioneers in guitar making, or on musicians who have contributed to the development of various types of guitar music.

- Research the history of the "British Invasion." What groups followed the Beatles to the U.S.? Which found success and which did not? Construct a timeline of these groups, including both the music and historical events from the same period. In what ways did the music reflect the time?
- Research the psychological effects of the loss of a parent. What are the stages of grief? What are its long-term effects? Consider whether males and females respond differently to grief. If so, why?

About the Author



Mark Delaney is the author of *Pepperland* and the award-winning mystery series *Misfits, Inc.*, the sixth volume of which was nominated for an Edgar Award by the Mystery Writers of America. For two decades

Delaney has been a teacher of English, yet now he finds himself suddenly thrust into the high-energy job of high school theater teacher. His presentations are titled *From Mind to Page: How Writers and Publishers Make Books Happen* and *Finding Pepperland*, which is Delaney's story of how tragedy in lives of his students, and his own sense of the healing power of music, led to the writing of his Beatle-themed novel. Delaney is also an accomplished guitarist and often uses music during his presentations. He originally hails from California but currently makes his home in a rural community west of Nashville, Tennessee.

(Intended audience: Grades 6-10)

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