



May We Recommend... Paula Danziger

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Val Bierman introduces **Paula Danziger**.

Val Bierman finds that **Paula Danziger** knows how to get young teenage `non-readers' hooked.

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Question: What do you get if you cross a horse with a skunk?

Answer. Winnie the Pooh!

Just a sample from Paula Danziger's repertoire of jokes of varying degrees of awfulness and a clue to her instant rapport with the hundreds of youngsters she met on a gruelling 14 day tour of the U.K. recently. Catching up with her in Edinburgh, I was left with the impression of having met a human dynamo, a woman with an extraordinary capacity for work, a thoroughly professional performer and a person with a permanent supply of jokes and packets of sweets!

Highly popular in the States for many years, she's recently hit the market here. Heinemann have published six of her novels in hardback written between 1974 and 1985 but, with the arrival of four titles in Piccolo paperback, she looks set to reach a much wider audience.

Perhaps unfairly hailed as `the new Judy Blume', the writers are, oddly enough, contemporaries from the same American town. In fact, Paula Danziger tells the story of her father apologising to Judy Blume's father for putting his daughter's books in front of hers in their local bookstore. `Don't worry,' said Mr Blume, `I was right behind you putting Judy's back again!'

The Danziger titles are the more humorous of the two writers, with a noticeably lighter touch on the `problem' elements. Paula worked many of her own experiences into her books, particularly referring to her difficult childhood made lonely by ill health and the inability to join in sports or the usual all-American activities. Her dislike of her father is a constant thread running through several novels, in particular **The Cat Ate My Gymsuit**, perhaps the most autobiographical of all. 13-year-old Marcy is fat, with wire framed glasses and mousy hair. School's rotten, lunches are lousy and she's flat-chested! As she admits . . . `life is not easy. I know I'm not poor. Nobody beats me. I have clothes to wear, my own room, a stereo, a TV and a push button phone. Sometimes I feel guilty being so miserable, but middle-class kids have problems too.' But with the arrival of a controversial new teacher Ms. Finney, life takes on a new meaning and Marcy finds a new role as protest leader when Ms. Finney is suspended for refusing to pledge allegiance to the American flag each morning. The same characters re-appear in Paula Danziger's latest book **There's A Bat in Bunk Five** when Marcy is asked to help out at a summer camp being organised by the same Ms. Finney plus new husband. This is perhaps the least accessible title for British children unfamiliar with the American summer camp system and I suspect that some will be shocked by the bat hunting episodes although this is explained away by the publisher's note that bats are not a protected species in the States where *they* are suspected carriers of rabies.

Two other linked titles are **The Divorce Express** and **It's an Aardvark-eat-Turtle World** - both centring on 15-year-old Phoebe and Rosie who take the bus each weekend, along with other children to spend weekends with the other halves of their divorced parents. In the latter book, Phoebe's mother and Rosie's father are living together and life looks set to be happy ever after, but divided loyalties and family tensions create further problems which take some sorting out. Both books deal sympathetically with children caught in the upheaval of divorce but far from being heavy handed, manage to inject considerable humour into the situation - 'The transportation industry would be practically bankrupt if it weren't for divorce. A presidential candidate could run on the platform that divorce is good for the economy. Make it seem patriotic to have kids, then split up. He or she'd probably win - especially since kids don't vote.' Funny and sharp at the same time.

Two books in particular had a firmly anti-book teenager asking for more. **The Pistachio Prescription** is the saga of Cassie, a 13-year-old, mousy brown beanpole with asthma coping with parents who regularly start up World War 3 in their kitchen; she survives on pistachio nuts to prevent her `becoming the only teenage bomb in captivity'. Danziger's readers will quickly realise her books often focus on two of the seemingly most important aspects of a teenager's life - looks and fitting in with their contemporaries. Most of her characters spend a considerable time giving vent to their feelings on these subjects, like Cassie, for instance - 'I just don't fit in with the rest of my family. I'm sure I'm adopted, that I'm a Martian they found in the backyard and took in for the tax deduction. No one else in the family looks like me. Two have curly red hair and blue eyes, my mother and Andrew. My father and Stephe have blond hair and green eyes, I've got brown hair and brown eyes. The only one I resemble is Mutant, my brother's pet gerbil.'

The other hit (and my own favourite) was **Can You Sue Your Parents for Malpractice?**, a very funny chronicle of college life and love sick Lauren who takes a law course to discover whether she can sue her parents. After all, she has to share her bedroom with a messy younger sister, has a glamorous older sister who gets everything she wants and a father who grudgingly hands out her meagre Saturday allowance as if it were a million dollars.

Try the books on your over-twelves - they're told in a racy, first-person narrative and if the story line doesn't appear, there are always the jokes. By the way, what's green and hangs from trees? You really want to know? ... Giraffe snot!

Paula Danziger's books are published in hardback by Heinemann at £6.95 each in paperback by Piccolo at £1.75 each:

The Cat Ate My Gymsuit, 0 434 96577 4, hbk; 0 330 29849 6 pbk

The Divorce Express, 0 434 96571 5 hbk; 0 330 29657 4 pbk

The Pistachio Prescription, 0 434 96576 6 hbk; 0 330 30018 0 pbk

Can You Sue Your Parents for Malpractice?, 0 434 96570 7 hbk: 0 330 30019 9 pbk

It's an Ardvaark-eat-Turtle World, 0 434 93414 3 hbk

There's a Bat in Bunk Five, 0 434 93413 5 hbk

This Place Has No Atmosphere, 0 434 93415 1 hbk (Autumn 87)

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