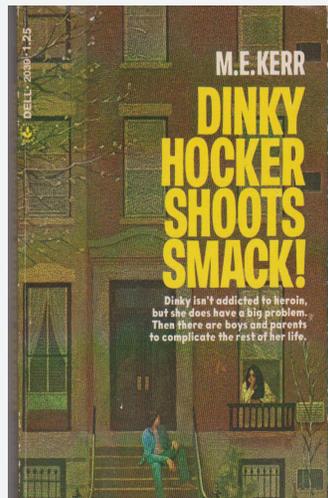


**First Opinion: M. E. Kerr's *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack!*:
A Fun, Quirky, Groundbreaking Young Adult Novel**

Kerr, M. E. *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack!* New York: Harper & Row, 1972.

Jeffrey Kaplan



M. E. Kerr's first attempt at a young adult novel resulted in *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack!*, the story of an overweight fourteen-year-old teenage girl, Susan "Dinky" Hocker, living in early 1970s Brooklyn, whose mother is so focused with helping teens and adults who are addicted to drugs that she virtually ignores her own daughter. Extremely successful, this poignant and amusing book for adolescents was generously received, resulting in recognition by the *School Library Journal* as one of 100 most significant books for children and young adults. In 1979, the book found further acclaim when it became an "ABC Afterschool Special", a then popular television series designed to capture the engagement of teens just home from school.

What made *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack!* so popular at its initial printing was its deft mix of humor and pathos. Adolescents love funny, and this debut novel was able to find the right balance between comedy and tragedy in its treatment of important themes relevant to lives of adolescents, most notably, unhappiness, loneliness, and depression.

Published in a decade when public outrage against the rise of drug use among youth was just beginning to become part of our public conscience, the primary aim of this novel is not drug use—despite its deliberately intriguing, yet misleading title—but the eternal problems inherent in human relationships. The struggle for parents to succeed and for adolescents to be

heard is the essential conflict of this good and enduring book, and as such, this young adult read is far more than a simplistic morality tale about the dangers of drugs.

Beyond asking teens to “just say no” to drug use, Kerr asks her young readers to evaluate their own lives and the lives of their caregivers as they struggle to find just the right balance in their eternal desire to communicate more openly and honestly with each other. By drawing realistic, quirky characters, *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack!* was one of many early books for young people where complex adolescents slowly, but surely, reveal their emerging talents and profound insecurities.

Kerr’s sensitive treatment of young love also marked the beginning of teen reads that departed from the stereotypical ‘boy meets girl’ storylines. Here, instead, burgeoning romance is treated as conflicting friendships that speak to the true nature of confused teenagers—where every moment is filled with drama and angst. As Kerr’s engaging narrative reveals, each idiosyncratic moment is significant because it is being experienced by young people who are coming into their own—for the very first time (Commire).

In *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack!*, the adult characters reveal an insensitivity that some might find offensive and unrealistic, but at the time (and still today) showed parents and caregivers as vulnerable, irrational, and sometimes misguided, but always well-meaning. In their actions and decisions, Kerr’s fast-paced and fun read depicts grown-ups and teenagers who exhibit conflicts and foibles that are universal in nature and thus, become emblematic of the confused world all human beings know too well.

Finally, Kerr’s debut novel was well-received by adolescents and adults alike because of her creative ability to construct an off-the-wall, yet believable hilarious cast of characters situated in a realistic, moving story. Using revealing dialogue and illuminating metaphors, this easy to read story captures the tone and subject matter of typical adolescent conversation, and unusual for its time—the use of an alternative, indirect conversational style. Tucker, Natalia, P. John, and our protagonist, Dinky, are drawn as teenagers who are often not sure what they feel and how they wish to express themselves as they frequently say ‘what they do not really mean in order to hide their insecurities and anxieties’ (Janeczke; Nilsen).

Maryjane Meaker (her pen name is M. E. Kerr) won numerous awards for her early, now classic, young adult novels. In 1993, she was awarded the American Library Association’s Margaret A. Edwards Award, an honor that recognizes writers for their significant and lasting contribution to young adult literature and specifically, for Kerr’s four books published from 1972–1986: *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack!* (1972), *Gentlehands* (1978), *Me, Me, Me, Me, Me: Not a Novel* (1983), and *Night Kites* (1986). Meaker has been called a pioneer in realistic fiction for teenagers because her characters and plots often deal with ordinary teenagers who once faced with extraordinary situations and events must make even tougher and demanding choices.

So, let us now praise *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack!* for leading the way in writing young adult novels that continue to speak to young adults in realistic and compelling voices.

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