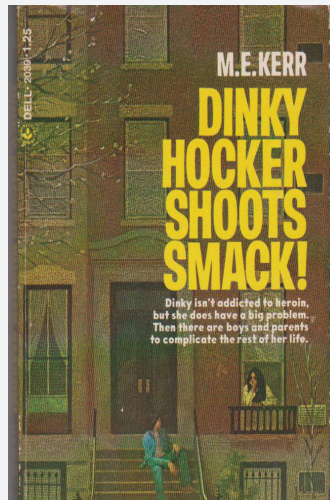


## Second Reaction: M. E. Kerr's *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack* Encapsulates an Era

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

Barbara A. Ward



Ah, I remember when I first read *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack!* Like the characters in the book, I knew a lot less than I thought I did. I was in a college literature course, and the novel was on a long list of suggested problem novels. I was shocked by its provocative title despite being unclear on exactly what “smack” was or how or why anyone would “shoot” it. Despite my fuzziness on those vocabulary terms, I approached the book ready to be titillated.

Instead, the book broke my heart—just as it broke again upon a recent second look. Once again my heart ached for the witty, outspoken, and honest (about everything and everyone but herself) Dinky Hocker whose mother expends most of her energy helping recovering addicts while being unable to relate on even the most elemental level with her own daughter and the problems that are growing in her own home. When the overweight Dinky falls in love with another pudgy teen, P. John Knight, Mrs. Hocker belittles her daughter and any romantic possibilities with her would-be boyfriend. Although the two share body image issues, both are well read and highly opinionated, and it just might be a match made in Heaven. He treats the girl with respect and even takes issue with the family’s use of the dismissive and ironic nickname Dinky instead of the more formal Susan (Kerr 51). Once he disappears from the scene, Susan withdraws and continues to drown herself in food. She gets revenge and attention from her parents in a most public fashion, humiliating her mother during Mrs. Hocker’s moment of glory.

The book's events are viewed by fifteen-year-old Tucker Woolf, something of a social misfit himself and perfectly suited for the role of observer. He hides many of the truths about himself, including his affection for cats and how he feels most at home in the library where even some of the librarians are just as nervous as he is. He is drawn to Natalia, a troubled relative who is staying with the Hockers. She speaks in rhymes when she is nervous, and the two of them resort to writing their unspoken thoughts inside balloon bubbles on sheets of paper. It's difficult to tell which one of them is more nervous and paralyzed by social anxieties, and their attempts at small talk are painful to witness. As the book proves so effectively, image isn't everything. There is far more to each of the four teens (Dinky, Tucker, Natalia, and P. John) than might be noticed at first glance or that the adults in their lives give them credit for having. Dinky's weight merely masks other underlying issues, such as a deep-seated anger over the fact that her parents have no idea whom she is or what her potential might be.

I am a bit troubled now—as I was on my first read—that Dinky's obesity is seen as her main problem when overeating actually conceals many other underlying issues. Nutritionists and counselors today are likely to react negatively to the oft-repeated adage that there is a thin person inside every fat person just trying to get out and that being overweight necessarily equates with being unhappy.

The book itself is poignant, humorous, witty, and filled with references to all sorts of must-read literature from Kurt Vonnegut and musical references to the Beatles, making it a tribute to those aspects of popular culture that spelled worldly sophistication for the time period. Clearly, this book is a wonderfully representative artifact of the 1970s when the times they were a-changing, women were returning to college to have more fulfilling lives, and organic food was just on the horizon. There are no cell phones, no texting, no computers, and no microwave ovens. Instead, readers are treated to a smorgasbord of individuals, adults and teens, on the verge of finding or losing themselves. While the lack of technology may leave today's teen readers feeling as though they are wandering in a foreign literary landscape without a handy GPS, the disconnection among many of the adults and the adolescents is something with which they will be familiar. In some respects, they may be even more familiar with this communication or generation gap since many choose to shut out the rest of the world in various ways through the devices that are at their fingertips.

Although Dinky Hocker shoots no smack in M.E. Kerr's story, she reminds readers of the dangers inherent in making assumptions about others and trying to force one's own values on them. By turns simple and yet quite complex, human beings are capable of change. As the book comes to an end, I feel hopeful for Susan and the world, filled with potential, opening in front of her.

### **Works Cited**

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

### **About the Author**

**Barbara A. Ward** is an assistant professor of literacy in the department of Teaching & Learning at Washington State University. She is an avid bibliophile who considers YAL her reading of choice. She is interested in the depiction of race and gender in children's and young adult literature and has written several chapters on issues related to the use of young adult literature in the classroom.