

Read with a Purpose Read this story to see how Priscilla handles the bullies at her school.



Priscilla and the Wimps

by **Richard Peck**

Literary Focus

Setting The first sentence tells you that the story is set in a school. The time period is not as obvious, but as you read further, look for details that signal the story takes place before you were born. (It was written in the late 1970s.)

Listen, there was a time when you couldn't even go to the *rest room* in this school without a pass. And I'm not talking about those little pink tickets made out by some teacher. I'm talking about a pass that could cost anywhere up to a buck, sold by Monk Klutter.

Not that Mighty Monk ever touched money, not in public. The gang he ran, which ran the school for him, was his collection agency. They were Klutter's Kobras, a name spelled out in nailheads on six well-known black plastic windbreakers.

Monk's threads were more . . . subtle. A pile-lined suede battle jacket with lizard-skin flaps over tailored Levis and a pair of

ostrich-skin boots, brassed-toed and suitable for kicking people around. One of his Kobras did nothing all day but walk a half step behind Monk, carrying a fitted bag with Monk's gym shoes, a roll of restroom passes, a cashbox, and a switchblade that Monk gave himself manicures with at lunch over at the Kobras' table.

Speaking of lunch, there were a few cases of advanced malnutrition among the newer kids. The ones who were a little slow in handing over a cut of their lunch money and were therefore barred from the cafeteria. Monk ran a tight ship.

I admit it. I'm five foot five, and when the Kobras slithered by, with or without Monk, I shrank. I admit this, too: I paid up on a regular basis. And I might add: so would you.

This school was old Monk's Garden of Eden.¹ Unfortunately for him, there was a serpent in it. The reason Monk didn't recognize trouble when it was staring him in the face is that the serpent in the Kobras' Eden was a girl.

Practically every guy in school could show you his scars. Fang marks from Kobras, you might say. And they were all highly visible in the shower room: lumps, lacerations,² blue bruises, you name it. But girls usually got off with a warning.

Except there was this one girl named Priscilla Roseberry. Picture a girl named Priscilla Roseberry, and you'll be light years off. Priscilla was, hands down, the largest student in our particular institution of learning. I'm not talking fat. I'm talking big. Even beautiful, in a bionic³ way. Priscilla wasn't inclined toward organized crime. Otherwise, she could have put together a gang that would turn Klutter's Kobras into garter snakes.

Priscilla was basically a loner except she had one friend. A little guy named Melvin Detweiler. You talk about The Odd Couple. Melvin's one of the smallest guys above midget status ever seen. A really nice guy, but, you know—little. They even had lockers next to each other, in the same bank as mine. I don't know what they had going. I'm not saying this was a romance. After all, people deserve their privacy.

1. **Garden of Eden:** In the Bible, the paradise where Adam and Eve first lived.
2. **lacerations** (las uh RAY shuhnzh): cuts.
3. **bionic** (by AHN ihk): having artificial body parts; in science fiction, bionic parts give people superhuman strength or other powers.

Literary Focus

Plot The writer provides an introduction to the basic situation of the story. Peck identifies the main characters and explains the central conflict: The school is being bullied by a gang. As you read, look for **complications**—new problems—that affect the main characters.

Reading Model

Reading Focus

Sequencing Pay attention to the order of events in the story. Peck uses the phrase *Until one winter day* to signal the timing of a new event that changes the relationship between Priscilla and the Kobras. Watch for the sequence of events that follows.

Reading Focus

Retelling This is an important event in the story. Retell important events in your own words to make sure you understand what happened. For example: "Priscilla puts her books away and then chops the Kobra's hand, breaking its grip on Melvin. Afterward, the hallway is really quiet because no one had ever hit a Kobra before."

Priscilla was sort of above everything, if you'll pardon the pun.⁴ And very calm, as only the very big can be. If there was anybody who didn't notice Klutter's Kobras, it was Priscilla.

Until one winter day after school when we were all grabbing our coats out of our lockers. And hurrying, since Klutter's Kobras made sweeps of the halls for after-school shakedowns.

Anyway, up to Melvin's locker swaggers one of the Kobras. Never mind his name. Gang members don't need names. They've got group identity. He reaches down and grabs little Melvin by the neck and slams his head against his locker door. The sound of skull against steel rippled all the way down the locker row, speeding the crowds on their way.

"Okay, let's see your pass," snarls the Kobra.

"A pass for what this time?" Melvin asks, probably still dazed.

"Let's call it a pass for very short people," says the Kobra, "a dwarf tax." He wheezes a little Kobra chuckle at his own wittiness. And already he's reaching for Melvin's wallet with the hand that isn't circling Melvin's windpipe. All this time, of course, Melvin and the Kobra are standing in Priscilla's big shadow.

She's taking her time shoving her books into her locker and pulling on a very large-size coat. Then, quicker than the eye, she brings the side of her enormous hand down in a chop that breaks the Kobra's hold on Melvin's throat. You could hear a pin drop in that hallway. Nobody'd ever laid a finger on a Kobra, let alone a hand the size of Priscilla's.

Then Priscilla, who hardly ever says anything to anybody except Melvin, says to the Kobra, "Who's your leader, wimp?"

This practically blows the Kobra away. First he's chopped by a girl, and now she's acting like she doesn't know Monk Klutter, the Head Honcho of the World. He's so amazed, he tells her. "Monk Klutter."

"Never heard of him," Priscilla mentions. "Send him to see me." The Kobra just backs away from her like the whole situation is too big for him, which it is.

4. **pun:** humorous play on words, often involving two meanings of the same word or phrase.

Pretty soon Monk himself slides up. He jerks his head once, and his Kobras slither off down the hall. He's going to handle this interesting case personally. "Who is it around here doesn't know Monk Klutter?"

He's standing inches from Priscilla, but since he'd have to look up at her, he doesn't. "Never heard of him," says Priscilla.

Monk's not happy with this answer, but by now he's spotted Melvin, who's grown smaller in spite of himself. Monk breaks his own rule by reaching for Melvin with his own hands. "Kid," he says, "you're going to have to educate your girl friend."

His hands never quite make it to Melvin. In a move of pure poetry Priscilla has Monk in a hammerlock. His neck's popping like gunfire, and his head's bowed under the immense weight of her forearm. His suede jacket's peeling back, showing pile.

Priscilla's behind him in another easy motion. And with a single mighty thrust forward, frog-marches Monk into her own locker. It's incredible. His ostrich-skin boots click once in the air. And suddenly he's gone, neatly wedged into the locker, a perfect fit. Priscilla bangs the door shut, twirls the lock, and strolls out of school. Melvin goes with her, of course, trotting along below her shoulder. The last stragglers leave quietly.

Well, this is where fate, an even bigger force than Priscilla, steps in. It snows all that night, a blizzard. The whole town ices up. And school closes for a week.

Read with a Purpose How does Priscilla deal with the bullies in this story? How else could she have handled them?

Literary Focus

Plot The **climax** is the most suspenseful moment in the story. It occurs when we find out how the conflict will be resolved. This story's climax is a confrontation between Monk and Priscilla.

Reading Focus

Summarizing Remember that summarizing involves identifying only the key details. This paragraph can easily be summarized in one sentence: "Priscilla shoves Monk into her locker, locks him in, and then leaves with Melvin."

Analyzing Visuals

Viewing and Interpreting

Which of Priscilla's character traits, as described in the story, do you see in this photograph?



MEET THE WRITER

Richard Peck

(1934–)



Taught by His Students

As a high school English teacher, Richard Peck became familiar with the reading habits of his teenage students: "It was my students who taught me to be a writer, though I had been hired to teach them. They taught me that a novel must entertain first before it can be anything else."

Although Peck liked his students and found their lives fascinating, he eventually decided the classroom wasn't the best place for him. He wanted to write young adult fiction—novels for readers around his students' ages. He has written more than thirty-two books to date, all of them on a typewriter. Before he left teaching, however, he learned about far more than his audience's taste in stories; he also learned about the problems that young people face both inside and outside of school. His books have been praised for dealing with such problems bravely and realistically.

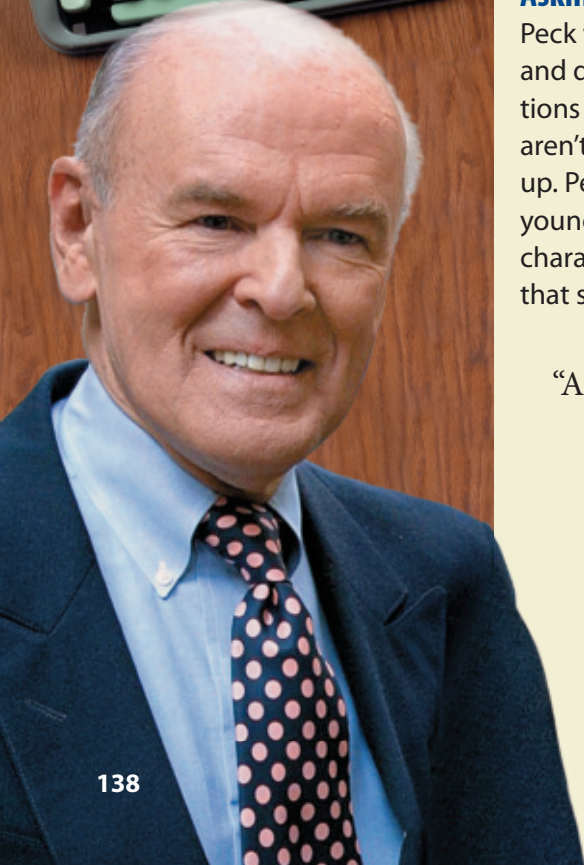
Asking Honest Questions

Peck writes about tough topics, such as peer pressure, censorship, and death. He says that a goal of his writing is to "ask honest questions about serious issues." Although the answers to such questions aren't always pleasant, dealing with serious issues is a part of growing up. Peck hopes that his books help young people do just that. In his young adult novels he hopes that "the reader meets a worthy young character who takes one step nearer maturity, and he or she takes that step independently."

"A novel is never an answer; it's always a question."

Think About the Writer

Peck wants his writing to "ask honest questions about serious issues." What questions does he ask about bullying in "Priscilla and the Wimps"?



Into Action: Summarizing the Plot

On a separate sheet of paper, draw and complete a diagram like this one to summarize the main events of "Priscilla and the Wimps":



Talk About . . .

1. Retell your favorite part of "Priscilla and the Wimps" to a partner. Then, explain why you liked the story. In your explanation, try to use each Academic Vocabulary word listed on the right at least once.

Write About . . .

Answer the following questions about "Priscilla and the Wimps." For definitions of the underlined Academic Vocabulary words, see the column on the right.

2. What is the major conflict in the story?
3. How does Priscilla interact with Melvin, with other students who are not Kobras, and with the Kobras?
4. What does Priscilla achieve for all students when she defeats Monk?

Writing Focus

Think as a Reader/Writer

In Collection 2, the Writing Focus activities explain how writers create interesting plots and memorable settings. You'll have a chance to write about these methods and even practice them yourself.

Academic Vocabulary for Collection 2

Talking and Writing About Plot and Setting

Academic Vocabulary is the language you use to write and talk about literature. Use these words to discuss the stories you read in this collection. The words are underlined throughout the collection.

achieve (uh CHEEV) *v.*: succeed in getting a good result or in doing something you want. *The conflict in a story develops because of something the main character wants to achieve.*

create (kree AYT) *v.*: make something new exist or happen. *Writers use descriptive words to create a story setting.*

interact (ihn tuhr AKT) *v.*: talk to and deal with others. *Conflict can develop when characters interact and don't get along.*

major (MAY juhr) *adj.*: very large and important, especially compared with other things of a similar kind. *The major event in a story is the climax.*

Your Turn



Copy the Academic Vocabulary words into your *Reader/Writer Notebook*. Then, write a paragraph about the plot and setting of another story you've read. Use each Academic Vocabulary word at least once in the paragraph.