

Café Stories

Stories Inspired by the Greatest Band of All Time

Jerry Guarino

Teacher's Study Guide

“What James Beard was to cooking, Jerry Guarino is to modern fiction.”

— Paul Soderberg, author of *The Elephant Queen*

How to Use This Guide

Café Stories contains 30 original short stories, each inspired by a Beatles song. The collection is organized into five acts that move from light and nostalgic to comic, romantic, darkly suspenseful, and finally triumphant.

Each story entry in this guide includes a brief description followed by three discussion questions. The questions are designed to work at three levels:

- The story itself — character, plot, narrative technique
- The Beatles song — how Guarino interprets and transforms the original
- The broader theme — what the story says about contemporary life, relationships, and human nature

The collection works well for:

- Short fiction and creative writing courses
- Beatles studies and popular culture courses
- Book clubs and reading groups
- Libraries and community reading programs

Browse all 30 stories at: <https://tinyurl.com/49wtv8a5>

Opening Act — Light, Nostalgic, Inviting

We Can Work It Out

Tony relies on his AI assistant Charles for everything — until Charles starts tracking a little too much.

1. How does the story use humor to raise serious questions about privacy and technology? Where does helpfulness end and intrusion begin?
2. Charles is named after a person, speaks conversationally, and seems to understand Tony deeply. What does this say about our relationship with AI?
3. The Beatles' song is about finding compromise in a relationship. How does Guarino apply this theme to the human/technology relationship?

I Saw Her Standing There

Eleven-year-old Tony discovers the Beatles and his first kiss on the Asbury Park boardwalk. Pure summer magic.

1. The story is set in 1964, the year the Beatles arrived in America. Why is this historical moment the perfect backdrop for a coming-of-age story?
2. How does Guarino capture the innocence of first love without sentimentalizing it?
3. What role does music play in triggering memory and emotion in this story?

Lady Madonna

October 1976. Tony DJs a college dance and ends the night driving home a cheerleader named Karen.

1. Lady Madonna is about a working-class woman managing impossible demands. How does Guarino reinterpret this theme in a college setting?
2. Tony is charming and confident. Is he likeable? What does Guarino want us to feel about him?
3. How does the DJ role give Tony a kind of power in social situations — and what are its limits?

I'll Follow the Sun

In 1971, Tony finds himself dating three women at once. Comic chaos ensues when the schedule collapses in a single night.

1. The Beatles song is about leaving before being left. How does Tony's situation reflect a similar emotional self-protection?
2. Is Tony a villain, a fool, or simply young? How does the story guide our judgment of him?
3. What does the collapse of Tony's elaborate schedule say about the difference between management and genuine connection?

All My Loving

A Midwestern farm girl meets an Italian waiter in Boston. Opposites attract — until they don't.

1. The story uses food as a metaphor for cultural compatibility. How effectively does this work?
2. All My Loving is a song about faithful, devoted love. How does Guarino complicate this ideal in the story?
3. What does Kelly and Vincent's relationship suggest about the difference between attraction and lasting compatibility?

Something

Jennifer's carefully Alexa-managed day is upended by a chance encounter at the car wash.

1. Jennifer's life is highly organized and self-sufficient. What does it reveal about her that she's still looking for something?
2. George Harrison's 'Something' is considered one of the greatest love songs ever written. How does Guarino capture that feeling of unexpected recognition?
3. What does the car wash setting suggest about where love actually finds us?

Middle Act — Comic and Adventurous

Get Back

A man walks the correct direction at the YMCA track. No one else does.

1. The story is told in first person with deadpan frustration. How does the narrative voice shape our response to the situation?
2. Get Back is about returning to where you belong. In what sense is the narrator trying to 'get back' to something?
3. What does this story say about the futility — or nobility — of insisting on being right when no one else agrees?

Good Morning Good Morning

Joe's new marriage comes with a rooster next door that refuses to be silenced.

1. The rooster becomes an almost mythological adversary. How does Guarino escalate the absurdity while keeping it grounded?
2. The Beatles song is about the mundane rhythms of daily life. How does the rooster disrupt — and ultimately define — Joe's domestic routine?
3. What does Barbara's role in the story tell us about how couples navigate conflict differently?

A Day in the Life

Tony tries to order pizza online. Nothing works.

1. A Day in the Life is one of the Beatles' most ambitious and surreal compositions. How does Guarino use mundane frustration to achieve a similar feeling of alienation?
2. The story builds through accumulation. At what point did you start laughing — or groaning — in recognition?
3. What does this story say about the gap between the promise of technology and our daily experience of it?

When I'm Sixty-Four

Lisa installs hidden cameras in her grandmother's elderly housing complex and builds a viral website.

1. The Beatles song asks whether love endures into old age. Does Lisa love her grandmother? How does the story complicate that question?
2. Is Lisa's website exploitation or celebration? Does the story take a position?
3. What does the 'preheat the microwave' moment reveal about the gap between generations — and about our relationship to aging?

Come Together

A sociology student proposes GPS chips and mini stop signs for Brooklyn strollers.

1. The story is pure satire. What specific aspects of contemporary urban life is Guarino targeting?

2. Come Together is about unity and collective identity. How does the stroller chaos both mock and embody that idea?
3. At what point does reasonable civic concern become absurd overregulation? Where does Guarino draw that line?

Octopus's Garden

Marley the vegan dog and Jeri the stoned cat have had enough of their owners' progressive lifestyles.

1. Ringo's song is about an escape fantasy — a place of peace away from the world's pressures. How do Marley and Jeri embody this longing?
2. What makes it funny that the pets are more articulate about their grievances than their owners?
3. What is Guarino's actual target here — the owners, the lifestyle, or something more universal about how we impose our values on others?

Getting Better

Mario and Luigi run a secret hotel takeout empire by night.

1. Getting Better is a song about personal growth and making amends. How does Mario and Luigi's hustle reflect a similar spirit of improvement?
2. The story ends with the hotel manager offering to legitimize their operation. Is this a happy ending or a compromise?
3. What does this story say about the immigrant work ethic and the gap between institutional opportunity and personal initiative?

I've Just Seen a Face

A high-tech bird feeder becomes an unlikely romantic magnet. A three-part story.

1. The Beatles song is about the sudden, overwhelming feeling of falling in love at first sight. How does each of the three parts capture a different version of this experience?
2. David's bird feeder is a wildly over-engineered solution to a simple problem. What does this tell us about his character — and why might women find it attractive?
3. How does the three-part structure change our understanding of the theme of romantic connection?

Ticket to Ride

Jack and Jill's electric bikes are delivered by a free-spirited teen named Tim on a Pacific Coast road trip.

1. Ticket to Ride is about someone leaving and the sadness of that departure. How does Tim's journey reframe this as something joyful?
2. Tim is 19 with 'the soul of a 1960s hippie.' What does his character suggest about the persistence of a certain kind of American freedom?
3. What is the story really about — the delivery, the journey, or something about the people waiting at the end of the road?

Romantic Middle — Heart of the Collection

Strawberry Fields Forever

Tony's Earl Grey tea is interrupted by a beautiful visitor — and very special visitors follow.

1. Strawberry Fields Forever is about retreating into a dreamlike inner world. How does Tony's tea ritual establish this mood before the visitors arrive?
2. The story operates on the edge of the supernatural. How does Guarino balance the realistic and the mysterious?
3. What does the story suggest about the relationship between solitude, memory, and unexpected grace?

Act Naturally

Tony and Heather accidentally walk into a movie shoot at a Vancouver Tim Hortons.

1. Act Naturally is about performing a role so convincingly that it becomes real. How does the movie shoot create a version of this theme?
2. What does it mean that Tony and Heather are more comfortable in an accidental drama than in their everyday lives?
3. How does the Canadian setting — clean, friendly, 'far from the crazy political climate' — function in the story?

The Fool on the Hill

A Paris mime follows Heather through the Louvre and beyond — until a family secret changes everything.

1. The Fool on the Hill is about someone who sees the world turning but is dismissed as a fool. In what sense is the mime a 'fool' — and what does he see that others don't?
2. The mime is mute. How does Guarino use silence as a narrative device throughout the story?
3. The family revelation at the end reframes everything that came before. Did you see it coming — and how does it change the story's emotional meaning?

Norwegian Wood

A farmer bets his \$100 county fair prize in Las Vegas. The zucchini keeps reappearing.

1. Norwegian Wood is famously ambiguous — a story of seduction and possible revenge. How does Guarino capture that ambiguity in the zucchini and Desiree?
2. Paul is an innocent in a world designed to exploit innocents. Does he come out ahead — and does it matter?
3. What is the zucchini? Is it a symbol, a prop, a running joke — or all three?

I Want to Hold Your Hand

Giant Oregon fireworks tents staffed entirely by teenage girls selling weapons of mass destruction.

1. The Beatles song is about the electric innocence of first attraction. How does Guarino use the fireworks as a metaphor for this?

2. The story is narrated in first person with wide-eyed wonder. How does the narrative voice heighten the comedy?
3. What does the image of teenage girls selling explosives say about American commerce, freedom, and coming of age?

Paperback Writer

After her husband's death, Julie sits down with her AI assistant Charles and finally writes her book.

1. The Beatles' song is about ambition and the desire to be recognized. How does Julie's story reframe this as something more personal and painful?
2. Julie's book reimagines her own life with a happier ending. Is this therapeutic, delusional, or both?
3. The story ends with Charles as a character in Julie's fiction. What does this say about the boundary between our tools and our inner lives?

Darker Comic — Building Tension

Twist and Shout

Middle school bullies meet their match when a sparking climbing wall triggers an earthquake in Berkeley.

1. The story delivers poetic justice with a natural disaster. Is this satisfying, troubling, or both — and what does that say about our appetite for revenge?
2. Bob and Brenda are described as both heavy and exceptional. How does Guarino use their characterization to set up the story's moral stakes?
3. Twist and Shout is pure kinetic energy. How does Guarino's prose style reflect the song's relentless drive?

Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds

A 1969 California lighthouse hostel where the keeper's lamp gives everyone the same surreal dreams.

1. The song is famously associated with psychedelia. How does Guarino achieve a similar sense of altered reality without drugs?
2. The lighthouse is both a literal setting and a metaphor. What does it represent — guidance, isolation, vision?
3. All the couples share the same dreams. What does this collective unconscious experience suggest about love, connection, and the 1960s?

A Hard Day's Night

Joseph and Karen plan secret dinners at the Ritz Carlton — neither knowing the other is there.

1. The Beatles song is about exhaustion redeemed by love. How does Guarino invert this — using apparent love to reveal exhaustion and deception?
2. The story builds on dramatic irony — we know what the characters don't. How does this affect our sympathy for them?

3. The ending is a genuine shock. Does it feel earned, or like a trick? What does it say about the secrets we keep from the people closest to us?

I Should Have Known Better

Frank is an actor, a charmer, and a con man. Susan might be the one person he can't fool.

1. Frank lives entirely in performance — for the police, for his audience, for his marks. Is there a 'real' Frank? Does the story answer this?
2. The song is about a man surprised by the depth of his own feelings. How does Frank experience this same surprise — and why is it dangerous for him?
3. Susan is described with specific, vivid detail. Why does Guarino want us to see her so clearly — and what does that tell us about Frank's vulnerability?

Happiness is a Warm Gun

YMCA pickleball bullies terrorize the courts — until Carol and Susan decide they've had enough.

1. The Beatles song combines tenderness and violence in a deliberately unsettling way. How does Guarino play with this tension in the pickleball setting?
2. Jack and Barry are cartoonishly evil. What is the effect of making the antagonists so broadly drawn?
3. The story is about reclaiming space and dignity. What makes Carol and Susan's victory satisfying rather than merely violent?

With a Little Help From My Friends

Bridge partners Hannah and Jim play a very long game that goes well beyond cards.

1. The song is about leaning on others for support. How does Guarino twist this theme into something more morally ambiguous?
2. Bridge is a game of concealed information and strategic deception. How does this become a metaphor for the characters' relationships?
3. Hannah's plan requires patience and calculation. Does the story ask us to admire her or judge her — or both?

Closing Act — Emotional Range then Triumph

Eleanor Rigby

Two towns side by side. Juan works construction in wealthy Oak Park by day; his own world waits at night.

1. Eleanor Rigby asks 'where do they all belong?' How does Guarino answer this question through Juan's double life?
2. The story never judges Justin or Karen directly. How does Guarino communicate his perspective through structure and detail rather than commentary?
3. What does it mean that Juan is 'accepted but not seen' in Oak Park? How does invisibility function as a form of social control?

The Long and Winding Road

Tony walks his aging dog through Gig Harbor fog. Then a windfall, a cruise, and Shannon change everything.

1. The song is about a journey toward love that keeps being interrupted. How does Tony's story embody this — and what are the interruptions really about?
2. Tony and Shannon are both living with secrets and losses. What does the story suggest about whether honesty is necessary for love?
3. This is the longest story in the collection. What does its length — and its many detours — add to the emotional experience?

Can't Buy Me Love

Tommy meets Hannah — gorgeous, perfect, and with one fatal flaw. She doesn't like the Beatles.

1. The song argues that love can't be purchased or negotiated. How does Hannah's condition for the relationship invert this idea?
2. Tommy's choice at the end is left unresolved. What do you think he decides — and what would you decide in his place?
3. As the final story, Can't Buy Me Love asks the reader to confront their own relationship to the Beatles. What does the collection as a whole suggest about what the Beatles mean to us?

About the Author

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