



Just before the outbreak of the Second World War, Willie Beech, a thin, withdrawn eight-year-old boy, is evacuated from London. He is placed with a gruff widower called Tom Oakley, who has been a recluse since the death of his wife and child 40 years earlier. Tom is horrified by the abuse Willie has experienced. With quiet authority, patience and sensitivity, Tom takes care of Willie and a bond develops between them. Gradually, Willie's physical and emotional scars begin to heal.

Characters

Willie

At the beginning of the novel, Willie Beech is malnourished and terrified due to physical and mental abuse from his mother. With Tom's encouragement, Willie gradually develops into a healthy boy and begins to embrace life. He is also known as 'William' and 'Will' at different points in the novel.

Tom

By all appearances, Tom Oakley is a gruff, stern, 60-something man, left embittered by the premature death of his wife and son about 40 years before. Beneath the bad-tempered outer appearance is a man of great compassion and generosity, who is highly respected by those around him.

Mrs Beech

The presence of Willie's mother is felt from the beginning of the book even though she does not appear until later. The reader knows what she's like from Willie's injuries and frightened reactions when he first meets Tom. Willie often thinks about the things she taught him, and this has influenced his view of the world.

Zach

Zacharias Wrench is a charming, confident child who befriends Willie soon after he arrives in Little Weirwold. He is also an evacuee but is from a different background to Willie. Like Tom, he encourages Willie's self-belief and love of life.

Themes

- change and development
- dealing with grief
- effects of abuse
- loneliness
- love
- trust

Settings

Tom's house

Tom's home is lived-in, comfortable and a place to relax with 'an old threadbare armchair' and 'shelves filled with books, old newspapers and odds and ends'. His house is a retreat for Tom and Willie.



Little Weirwold

Little Weirwold is a prosperous, lively village that is 'unruffled' by the war, with welcoming, friendly people. The landscape is pastoral and restorative, and there are many references to the seasonal beauty of nature. Willie grows stronger as he spends time outdoors and his presence encourages Tom to participate in the community.



London

Seen through the eyes of Tom, London is poverty infested, noisy and battered by the Blitz. It is a massive contrast to the protected world of Little Weirwold. When Tom visits London, it allows him to understand the world Willie inhabited before being evacuated.



Image from: Weirwold (Creative Commons)

Story timeline

These are some of the key chapters in the novel. When you read the chapters, use the questions as starting points for discussion.

Chapter 1

Willie Beech is evacuated to Little Weirwold to escape the bombing in London. He moves in with a stern man called Tom Oakley. What are the two characters' first impressions of each other?

Chapter 7

Willie is starting to settle in with Tom and is changing in many ways. How is he changing? What do you think has caused the change in Willie?

Chapter 14

There is a lot of change for Willie. He starts his new class and has some surprising news at the end of the chapter. How do you think he feels about the changes?

Chapter 16

Tom is worried about Willie and goes to London to see him. What are Tom's impressions of London? Do you think Willie will be happy to be back in London?

Chapter 22

Will has received some tragic news. How does he cope with it over the course of the chapter?

Chapter 23

Will has settled in with Tom and has found ways to cope with the news from the previous chapter. How has Will changed during the book?

Language

Michelle Magorian uses simple noun phrases and plentiful adverbs to write in an understated, observational style that suits the sensitive subject matters in the novel. How characters feel is suggested using adverbs and is not always explained directly. For example, Willie squeezes his bag '*tightly*' to show his fear and Tom taps Willie '*tenderly*' to show his kindness.

Accent and dialect

Accents and dialect are used in the novel to make characters more realistic and unique. They also show social and regional differences between characters. As Willie's health recovers, he begins to lose his cockney accent and adopts George and Tom's speech patterns. This change suggests he is shedding his past and now belongs with Tom in Little Weirwold.

Structure

The novel is an example of historical fiction and has some features of a pastoral novel. It has a linear structure, but the timescale and pace vary. The first third of the novel takes place over six days. The pace is gentle at this part of the book while Tom and Willie's relationship slowly develops. Gradually, the novel builds in details about Willie's mother. The middle third of the book explores Willie's growth and self-discovery so the reader really feels for him when he must return to his mother in the final third.



Literary terms

accent

A way of pronouncing words that is often like other people from that area or country. For example, Will has a strong cockney accent that is reflected in how he pronounces certain words.

dialect

The pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary that are often used by people from the same area or country. For example, Tom says '*Ent they?*', which means '*Aren't they?*'

historical fiction

Historical fiction stories take place at a real time in the past, but the events might not have really happened.

linear

A linear narrative is a story that is told to the reader in the order in which the events happen. The story is in a logical order, progressing from what happens at one point in time to the next. Flashbacks are not normally used.

pace

The pace is the speed at which the story is told. For example, an action story often has a fast pace, with lots of events happening one after another. Historical novels, like *Goodnight Mister Tom*, may have a slower or gentler pace.

pastoral

A pastoral landscape refers to land that is used for grazing sheep or cattle. A pastoral novel is about the benefits of living in the countryside.