

About a Boy Study Guide

About a Boy by Nick Hornby

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Plot Summary

About A Boy by Nick Hornby is a novel of coming of age at middle age. Will Freeman is a thirty-six year old man who lives off the royalties of a song that his father wrote nearly seventy years ago. Will is commitment-phobic, so when he meets a single mother and discovers that this type of woman is just as reluctant to commit as he, he makes up a two-year old son so he can join a single parents group. Through this group Will meets twelve year old Marcus, a child who is completely opposite of Will. Marcus pushes himself on Will, hoping at first that Will might marry his mother, but later realizing that Will has all the knowledge Marcus needs to help him survive middle school. Together, Will and Marcus will struggle through everyday life and somehow help one another mature.

Marcus's mother has been depressed since moving to London and breaking up with her latest beau. At the same time, Marcus finds himself a target for all the bullies at his new school. Marcus attempts to get sympathy from his mother, but she is so focused on her own depression that she does not see how desperate Marcus truly is. At the same time, Will Freeman, who is commitment phobic, has recently discovered that despite his dislike of all children, dating single women can be beneficial to both him and them. Will has dated a single mother who is so jaded by the breakup of her marriage, that all she wanted from Will was a sexual relationship. This causes Will to decide that the only women he should date is single women. Will makes up a two year old son and joins a single parents support group.

After one meeting of SPAT, Single Parents, Alone Together, Will meet Suzie. Suzie is blond and beautiful. She is deeply angry at the man who left her for his secretary while she was still pregnant with their only child. Will manages to wrangle a date with Suzie, a picnic with the entire SPAT group. Unbeknownst to Will, this include Marcus, the son of Suzie's best friend. During the picnic, Will makes a halfhearted attempt to get to know Marcus, but Marcus has a dark sense of humor that Will cannot understand. However, when Marcus accidentally kills a duck by throwing a loaf of bread at its head, Will wins some respect on Marcus' part by lying to the wildlife officer about Marcus' intentions in throwing the bread.

Will and Suzie take Marcus home. When they arrive, they find Marcus' mother passed out on the couch from a drug overdose. Will accompanies the group to the hospital, unsure why he is there and unable to offer any consolation to Marcus. Over the next few days, Marcus finds himself dealing with the idea that his mother attempted suicide. Not only this, but tension at school has grown considerably worse. Marcus gets it into his head that his family needs to be increased by one more person so that he will not be alone should his mother succeed the next time she tries to commit suicide. To this end, Marcus decides his mother should marry Will.

Will offers to take Marcus out one afternoon to help him through the stress at home. Marcus insists that Will include his mother in the day out. However, Will and Marcus' mother have little to say to one another. However, Marcus is determined to continue



bringing them together. To do this, Marcus invites himself into Will's home, blackmailing him with the fact that there is no two-year-old son. Will allows Marcus into his home and even buys him new shoes to help him fit in at school. When Marcus' mother learns of this, however, she jumps to the wrong conclusions and refuses to allow Will to see Marcus again.

Determined to have the right to think for himself, Marcus defies his mother and begins visiting Will regularly. Marcus has decided that Will will never marry his mother, but is determined to remain his friend anyway. At the same time, the truth has come out about Will and his scam to date single mothers seems to have died. However, on New Year's Eve, Will meets another single mother for whom he falls instantly in love. Afraid of this feeling at first, Will pursues this woman and eventually discovers that commitment is not such a bad thing. At the same time, Marcus becomes involved with Ellie, a rebellious girl from his school and learns a few lessons of life himself.



Chapters 1-4

Chapters 1-4 Summary

About A Boy is a funny and poignant novel of self-discovery by bestselling British writer, Nick Hornby. The novel is told from the point of view of the two main characters, Will and Marcus, who switch off from chapter to chapter to tell not only the story of their own lives, but also the story they share.

In chapter 1, Marcus feels badly for his mother when he realizes her current boyfriend, Roger, has just ended their relationship moments before dinner is due to arrive. This new stress is added to the stress that Marcus and his mother have been under since their recent move to London from Cambridge. Marcus tries to cheer his mother, but finds himself able to only distract her.

In Chapter 2, Will Freeman is taking a coolness test in a magazine and finds himself to be of a high level of coolness. Will does not work, but instead works off the royalty checks from a song his father wrote in the thirties. Will is a habitual dater, preferring not to tie himself down to one woman, and he dislikes children. In fact, during a visit to an old friend who has just had his second child, Will finds himself making the decision to never have a child.

In Chapter 3, Marcus is having trouble at school because as the new kid, and a kid with some strange quirks, he finds that he stands out among his homogeneous schoolmates. Marcus has developed ways to avoid the bullies, such as arriving early and remaining indoors during recess breaks, but these tactics do not always work. Marcus blames his mother in part for his trouble because she does not allow him to listen to music beyond Joni Mitchell and prefers if he not play the same video games most of his schoolmates play. The teachers are also to blame, such as the English teacher who tries to better herself in the eyes of the students by suggesting Marcus is crazy because he sometimes sings out loud to himself in inappropriate situations.

In Chapter 4, Will dates Angie, a single mother he met by accident in a diner one afternoon. Angie did not tell Will she had children until their first date and by then he was so enamored of her that he decided to stick with her anyway. For several weeks they dated, including the children on most of their outings. When Will decided it was time to end the relationship, he was surprised to have Angie do it first. It was then that Will realized that single women are the perfect partner for a man afraid of commitment.

Chapters 1-4 Analysis

In these chapters, the reader gets to know both the main characters. First is Marcus, a boy of twelve who narrates alternating chapters in the third person point of view. Marcus lives with his single mother in London, where they have recently moved after living all of Marcus' life in Cambridge. Marcus' mother is depressed, both because of the move and



her struggles with romance. Marcus, too young to know what to do, realizes his mother is sad and tries to cheer her up, but finds it an almost impossible task. This, on top of the fact that Marcus is brutally teased at school by older and stronger boys makes Marcus' life quite difficult. Marcus is confused, scared, and feels as though he has no one to turn to.

Will narrates alternating chapters as well. Will is a thirty-six-year-old man who claims he will never marry and have children because they clutter up a person's life. Ironically, however, Will has decided that dating single women is the perfect solution to his commitment phobia. Single women, Will has decided, are jaded against men because of their past relationships, and they only need a man like Will to fill a hole until they have healed from their hurts and are ready to go on with their lives. For this reason, Will has decided he should only date single women, suggesting to the reader a way in which Will and Marcus might one day meet.



Chapters 5-8

Chapters 5-8 Summary

In Chapter 5, Marcus is frightened to note that his mother's crying began with breakfast this morning, but he still does not know what to do about it. At school, Marcus attempts to hang out with a couple boys from the computer club, but when a group of older boys teases them all, the other boys ask Marcus not to hang out with them again.

In Chapter 6, Will attends a SPAT, Single Parents, Alone Together, meeting for the first time. Will has made up a two year old son named Ned, but finds himself having trouble keeping track of the details of Ned's life that he has made up. However, during the meeting Will meets Suzie and he believes that he has convinced her of the truth of his own single parenthood. During the meeting, Will also hears so many horror stories about men who have lied, cheated, and abandoned their families that he almost wishes he were not a man.

In Chapter 7, Marcus continues to be teased by local children, including a group of boys who happen to come to the same newsagent's store as him. These boys try to make it look like Marcus tried to steal a bunch of candy, but the counter man knows Marcus and knows it was the boys who did it. When Marcus returns home, he finds his mom lying on the couch watching cartoons even though she should have been at work. Marcus' mother tells him that she has arranged for him to go to a picnic with her friend Suzie that day so that Saturday so that she might have some time to herself.

In Chapter 8, Will makes up a story about his ex-wife coming and taking Ned for the day when Suzie comes to pick him up for the SPAT picnic. Will is introduced to Marcus, but finds him to be sullen and difficult to get along with. At the picnic, Will is just beginning to get close to Suzie when Marcus runs up to tell them he believes he has killed a duck.

Chapters 5-8 Analysis

Marcus continues to struggle at school. With each chapter, the readers get a sense of the loneliness and desperation this poor child feels. Lots of children are bullied at school, but few of them have the double whammy of a single parent who is so depressed that she cannot care for herself, let alone the concerns of her twelve-year-old son. This causes Marcus to feel overwhelmed and left without any clue as to how to make things better.

While Marcus is dealing with some decidedly adult situations, Will is acting like a child by creating a fake son in order to get into a support group of single parents for the express desire of dating single mothers. This shows the reader how childish and immature Will is at this point, not only because of his lies and manipulation, but also because he actually believes this scheme, which in some cases is not much different from the despicable men who hurt these women in the first place, will work. However, it

has brought Will and Marcus together, leaving the reader wondering where this relationship will go from here.



Chapters 9-12

Chapters 9-12 Summary

In Chapter 9, Marcus takes Will and Suzie to the pond where he shows them the duck he hit with some bread. Will insists that Marcus must have wanted to kill the duck by the size of the bread he hit it with. However, when the park keeper comes over, Will lies and insists that Marcus was trying to hit the duck with the bread after it was dead to keep Suzie's daughter from seeing it. Afterward, Suzie and Will take Marcus home. Instead of dropping him off outside like she usually does, Suzie insists on walking Marcus in. When they enter the apartment, they find that Marcus' mother, Fiona, has taken an overdose of pills.

In Chapter 10, Will accompanies Suzie and Marcus to the hospital and waits while they learn Fiona's fate. Will tries unsuccessfully to console Marcus. It is arranged for Marcus to spend the night with Suzie and Will gratefully goes home to wash his hands of the unpleasant business.

In Chapter 11, Marcus finds a suicide note from his mother while he cleans the apartment in anticipation of his mother's homecoming. The note does not clarify things, but leaves Marcus wondering why he was not enough to give his mother a reason to live. Marcus then begins to think that his family should be bigger, more than two people, so that he might not be alone if his mother were to succeed next time. That night Marcus settles down to watch a comedy with his mother, but turns it off when the main character attempts suicide over and over again. To his disappointment, Marcus' mother insists on finishing the film anyway.

In Chapter 12, Will finds himself bored with his normal routine even though he tells himself it is nice to be able to fill his days anyway he wants. Will even occasionally applies for a job, but he never gets any offers because of his lack of job history. Thinking of Fiona and Marcus, Will calls Suzie and asks if she thinks it would be appropriate for him to take Marcus out one afternoon. Suzie promises to ask. However, Marcus calls Will and tells him he will only go out with him if they can invite his mother along. Then will buys a car seat so that he can continue the Ned farce with Fiona and Marcus.

Chapters 9-12 Analysis

On what Marcus calls the Dead Duck Day, he first begins to trust in and like Will. On this same day, Marcus returns home to find his mother has attempted suicide. This causes Marcus a great deal of emotional upset, especially when he realizes that his presence in her life, his love, is not enough to keep his mother from wanting to end her life. This leaves Marcus feeling very frightened and very alone. In fact, this leads Marcus to believe that his family needs to grow by at least one. At least this way, Marcus will not be alone if his mother should succeed in her desire to kill herself.

At the same time, Will begins to show some maturity when he begins to think about Marcus in his time of emotional crisis. However, the reader gets the impression that Will wants to reach out to Marcus not out of a sense of kindness, but out of a need to have something new to fill his days. In the end, it does not seem to matter what his strategy is, Will is doing a nice thing. Marcus too seems to be up to something when he insists on bringing his mother on an outing with Will. Perhaps Marcus would like Will as a stepfather.



Chapters 13-16

Chapters 13-16 Summary

In Chapter 13, Marcus insists that Will take him and his mother to Planet Hollywood, but when they arrive the lines are so long Will convinces Marcus to go elsewhere. Over lunch, Marcus tries to force his mother and Will into conversation, but the more he pushes them, the less they talk. Finally, Fiona and Will talk about Ned and Marcus begins to imagine what it will be like when his mother and Will wed.

In Chapter 14, Will is convinced that Fiona is not his type. In fact, Will has no intention of seeing either Fiona or Marcus again. However, Fiona calls and invites Will to dinner and they spend the evening eating a vegetarian meal Will finds unappetizing and singing romantic ballads he has no interest in. When Fiona calls again, Will ignores the message. However, Marcus proves harder to ignore when he shows up at Will's apartment and then accuses him of lying about Ned.

In Chapter 15, Marcus visits Will again and manages to get into the apartment even though Will tries to keep him out. They watch television together for a short time and then Marcus explores the flat. Marcus tells Will about some of the trouble he has at school and Will suggests he might change his appearance to make it easier. Marcus continues to visit Will frequently through the autumn. After a time, Will stops blocking him at the door and even invites him to remain longer.

In Chapter 16, Will finds himself looking forward to Marcus' visits in the afternoons. They talk a lot, sometimes about school, sometimes about Marcus' father. One day when Marcus arrives there are a group of older kids pelting him with hard candies. Will chases them off and then asks Marcus about it. That day Will decides to buy Marcus some new shoes, hoping more popular athletic shoes will help Marcus fit in at school better. Unfortunately, the shoes are stolen the next day.

Chapters 13-16 Analysis

The date between Will and Fiona does not go well, but Marcus does not notice. In fact, Marcus finds himself hoping that Will will marry Fiona and they can become a big family with Will and his son, Ned. However, Marcus follows Will one day and realizes he does not have a child. Then Marcus begins visiting Will for reasons the reader is not clear on, slowly forcing himself into Will's life. After a few months, Will begins letting Marcus into his life and even attempts to help him out with the bullies at school. Unfortunately, that does not work out well when the bullies steal his shoes. However, just the act of helping Marcus shows the reader that Will is beginning to grow up and his fear of children is beginning to ease.



Chapters 17-20

Chapters 17-20 Summary

In Chapter 17, Marcus is forced to tell his mother everything about Will, his visits, and the shoes when he comes home without any shoes on. Fiona is angry when she learns Will lied about his son, Ned, and about the visits Marcus has made unsupervised to his flat. Fiona tells Will and tells him to stay away from Marcus. Over the next few days, Marcus argues with his mother about his right to choose to do certain things that she does not approve of, such as eat meat and visit Will. In the end, Marcus tells Fiona he needs to see Will because he is a father-figure, something he needs in his life.

In Chapter 18, Will is unhappy because he has just heard his father's Christmas song a full month and a week before Christmas. Will decides he will not celebrate Christmas this year, but will stay in and drink. To make Will's day even more difficult, Will gets a call from Fiona asking him to see Marcus again. Will is not happy with Fiona after she nearly accused him of sexually molesting her son, so this request leaves him dumbfounded. Finally Fiona convinces Will to meet her for a drink. They discuss Marcus and Will convinces Fiona that Marcus only wants to be friend with Will because Will is cool and can help him with his troubles at school. Fiona decides that Will is self-centered and again she asks him to stay away from Marcus.

In Chapter 19, Marcus is forced to visit with the headmistress at his school because his mother filed a complaint about the stolen sneakers. While he waits, Marcus finds himself alone with Ellie, the school trouble maker. Ellie is wearing a sweatshirt with a picture of a man who looks kind of like Jesus. When Marcus asks who it is, Ellie tells him Kirk O'Bane and that he plays for the Manchester United soccer team. Marcus is then called into the office where the headmistress tells Marcus to stay away from the bullies even though the bullies followed him home. Marcus gets mad and walks out of not only the office, but the school.

In Chapter 20, Will is driving around just to listen to Nirvana at loud volume when he spots Marcus walking down the street. Will does not stop, but does realize that Marcus should be in school. Later when Marcus arrives at Will's flat, Will calls him out on his truancy. Marcus tells Will about the disastrous meeting with the school's headmistress and then asks about Kirk O'Bane. When Marcus describes the picture on Ellie's shirt, Will informs him that Ellie was making fun of him by saying Kirk O'Bane was a soccer player. Will then tells Marcus that the man's name is actually Kurt Cobain and he is the lead singer of the punk group Nirvana.

Chapters 17-20 Analysis

Fiona learns all the truth about Will and calls him out, accusing him of lying and molesting her child. However, Marcus makes it clear to Fiona that he likes Will and



wants to continue seeing him. Marcus then claims that he wants to see Will because he is a father figure, a statement that makes Fiona feel guilty for moving her son away from his biological father. This causes a great deal of guilt on Fiona's part. At this point in the plot, the reader can see some of the difficulties in Fiona's life and appreciate how difficult it is to be a single mother. Unfortunately, the reader's sympathy for Fiona does not fully explain her desire to commit suicide despite her commitment to Marcus.

Marcus continues to have trouble at school. However, he takes a stand and walks out on the headmistress, showing the reader he is beginning to develop something of a tougher skin. Marcus also meets a young girl who teases him by lying about who Kurt Cobain is. When Marcus learns the truth, he is confused, but the reader suspects with Will's influence, Marcus will begin to learn a lot of things that will help change his precarious situation at school.



Chapters 21-24

Chapters 21-24 Summary

In Chapter 21, Marcus runs into Ellie at school and tells her that he knows the man on her sweatshirt is Kurt Cobain. When Ellie pretends to not know this fact, Marcus tells her everything Will told him, making Ellie and her friend, Zoe, laugh. The next day, Marcus approaches Ellie again and they talk for a minute before Ellie is called into the headmistresses office for wearing her Kurt Cobain sweatshirt. A short time later, Zoe and Ellie come and get Marcus to take him to the ninth year classroom, which makes Marcus' classmates shocked by Marcus' newfound friends.

In Chapter 22, Marcus invites Will to Christmas and Will cannot find a polite way out of it. The meal is a disaster because it is some vegetarian loaf created by Fiona. The gifts were good, but there was a marked difference between the types Marcus' mother gave the child and the ones his father gave him. Will gave him a Nirvana album.

In Chapter 23, there is a fight between Fiona and Marcus' father, Clive, that causes tension between Fiona and Clive's girlfriend, Lindsey. Then Suzie shows up and yells at Will for lying about Ned. Marcus gives Suzie's daughter, Megan, a gift and she tries to share it with Will, underscoring Will's lack of knowledge when it comes to small children.

In Chapter 24, Will falls in love at a New Year's Eve party. While trying to find something interesting to say to this woman, Rachel, Will realizes the only thing interesting about him is Marcus. Therefore, Marcus allows Rachel to believe Marcus is his son. This leads to a long conversation that ends with hope of a future meeting.

Chapters 21-24 Analysis

Marcus has finally made a friend. This friend is Ellie, a tough troublemaker at his school of whom all the younger students are afraid. This is a huge deal for Marcus, because even the bullies are afraid of Ellie. However, the reader wonders if this relationship will outlast the one topic of conversation they seem capable of sharing, Kurt Cobain.

Will spends Christmas with Fiona and Marcus, finding himself in the middle of an awkward family reunion that includes Marcus' dad and his new girlfriend, as well as the girlfriend's mother. Will is completely uncomfortable, especially when Suzie arrives and berates him for his lies about Ned. However, the fact that Will faces this anger without running away suggests some growth in his character. Then Will meets someone and lies about Marcus being his son, taking Will right back to where he started. The reader is beginning to wonder if Will will ever grow up.



Chapters 25-28

Chapters 25-28 Summary

In Chapter 25, Marcus is surprised to find Ellie at Suzie's New Year's Eve party. Marcus and Ellie hang out and Ellie confesses that he knows Marcus' mother attempted suicide some months before. To help Marcus out, she makes him an alcoholic drink. However, Marcus scares Ellie away by asking her to dance. Ellie finds him later and takes him to see her mother making out with a man at the back of the house. Ellie finds it disgusting, but her mother insists it's her right to do whatever she wants.

In Chapter 26, Will promises to help Marcus convince Ellie to be his boyfriend if Marcus will pretend to be Will's son for the day. Marcus reluctantly agrees. However, when Rachel introduces Marcus to her son, Ali, Marcus begins to have second thoughts. Just as Rachel and Will settle down to have a conversation, Marcus runs out of the house.

In Chapter 27, Will finds Marcus at the bus stop. Marcus explains that Ali threatened to kill him and that is why he left. Will, however, convinces Marcus he is safe and to go back to the house with him. When they arrive, Ali is in tears and he apologizes to Marcus. A few days later, Marcus and Ellie go to a newsagent, but Marcus decides to wait outside because the clerk does not want too many people in the store. Outside, Marcus runs into the bully who has been bothering him so long. One of the boys steals Marcus' glasses. Ellie comes out and not only gets the glasses back, but punches the boy too.

In Chapter 28, Will decides to tell Rachel the truth about his relationship with Marcus. In fact, Will admits to everything, including SPAT and Ned. Rachel is confused at first, but realizes that the lies made her interested in Will and the truth will keep her coming back to him. This makes Will wonder if he might finally be ready for a commitment.

Chapters 25-28 Analysis

Marcus and Ellie meet up on New Year's Eve and Marcus gets to see some of Ellie's relationship with her single mother, a situation that helps to explain why Ellie is so tough and rebellious. It even makes Marcus realize that he is not the only child out there with a strange mother and a tough situation at home. Suddenly Marcus is not feeling as alone as he once was. Marcus also feels as though he is falling in love with Ellie, especially after she punches one of the bullies. Marcus seems to think Ellie is everything a boy like him could want and more, almost exactly as Will has come to think of Rachel.

Will tells Rachel the truth about Marcus and everything else that he has done in the plot of this novel. This shows the reader that finally Will is growing up. Not only this, but Will also has come to grips with the idea that he might be ready to commit to Rachel. This again shows the reader a change in Will's character, a growth that was not there before.

It is encouraging, leaving the reader rooting for Will as the plot continues toward its climax.



Chapters 29-32

Chapters 29-32 Summary

In Chapter 29, a few months pass. Marcus goes to Will when his mother begins crying in the mornings again. Will tells Marcus there is nothing he can do because he is not the kind of friend who can interfere in that kind of situation. Marcus is disappointed, but not surprised by Will's response to his cry for help. A short time later, Marcus finds Ellie crying at school because Kurt Cobain attempted suicide. Marcus becomes angry with Ellie suggests that Kurt Cobain would try again and most likely succeed. Ellie finally realizes her blunder and apologizes.

In Chapter 30, Will feels guilty about his response to Marcus in regards to his mother. Will knows that his main fear is that one thing, the point. Will does not know what the point to life is, therefore he cannot imagine himself trying to tell Fiona the point. Will talks it over with Rachel and, even though Will is not expecting it, they end up in bed. Afterward, Rachel suggests that she talk to Fiona.

In Chapter 31, Fiona tells Marcus that his father had an accident and he wants to see Marcus. Fiona says that the accident made his father reflect on his life and that includes Marcus. Marcus refuses to go, but when he tells Ellie about it, she suggests that she go with him and tell Marcus' father all the things Marcus cannot. Imagining an hour alone with Ellie on the train, Marcus quickly arranges it. On the day they are to leave, however, Marcus learns that Kurt Cobain killed himself. Marcus tries to keep Ellie from seeing the papers and learning about the tragic death, but she tells him she already knew.

In Chapter 32, Will meets Fiona in a bar where they are supposed to be joined by Rachel. However, when Rachel fails to show, Will realizes that Rachel set him up to make him talk with Fiona. Will takes Fiona to a pizza parlor and Fiona begins to talk about all the things in her life that have made her depressed. After a while, Will realizes that all Fiona needs is someone to talk to, almost like what he does when he is trying to seduce a woman. Will finds this situation surprising because he never knew he could be caring and supportive of a woman he does not have any sexual desire for. Afterward, Will accompanies Fiona home because he has learned of Kurt Cobain's death and he is suddenly concerned for Marcus.

Chapters 29-32 Analysis

In these chapters some time has passed. Marcus is still in love with Ellie, but has failed to find a way to reveal this to her. Therefore, when his father is injured and wants to see him, Marcus takes it as the perfect opportunity to spend some time alone with Ellie. Unfortunately, the same day they are to leave is the same day that Kurt Cobain is found



shot to death in his home. This causes an unforeseen circumstance that could lead to trouble for Marcus and his Kurt Cobain loving girlfriend.

Will has grown up and shows it by sticking with Rachel despite the lack of sex. Will also finds himself feeling guilty for refusing to help Marcus with his depressed mother. Will takes a step in the right direction when he discusses the situation with Rachel and ends up speaking with Fiona on his own. This opens Will's eyes to relationships and shows him that a man does not have to want to sleep with a woman to be a good and supportive friend. This is exactly what Will is to Fiona and might actually have helped save her life.



Chapters 32-36

Chapters 32-36 Summary

In Chapter 32, Ellie becomes drunk on the train and suddenly disembarks in Royston. As they walk down the street, Ellie sees a Kurt Cobain cutout in a music store window and becomes convinced that the store owner is trying to make money off of Kurt Cobain's tragic death. Ellie breaks the window with her boot and steals the cutout. As Ellie and Marcus wait for the police to come, Marcus realizes that Ellie is to blame for most of the trouble and pain that comes down on her. Marcus' father and Lindsey are the first to arrive at the police station. As Clive begins to make excuses for his own behavior, Marcus blows up and tells him that he is a useless father.

In Chapter 34, Will drives Fiona and Ellie's mother, Katrina, to Royston. On the way they bond in a strange way, making Will feel a part of their families. Shortly after arriving at the police station, the owner of the music store comes in to confront Ellie. Ellie is shocked to find the owner is a young woman who is just as big a Kurt Cobain fan as she is. Ellie apologizes. Fiona then attempts to make an impassioned speech for Marcus that is totally unnecessary and embarrasses Marcus. A short time later, the children are released and they all go to a hamburger joint for dinner.

In Chapter 35, Marcus goes home with his father where they have a long talk about their relationship. Marcus explains his new theory on family. Marcus believes that family is not just parents and children, but all the people around you who care about what happens to you. In this definition, Marcus includes Will and Ellie in his family, a fact that makes him feel much more secure about himself and his future. Clive then tells Marcus that Lindsey wants to have a baby and Marcus tells him that he thinks that would be nice.

In Chapter 36, Will takes Marcus and Ali out for the afternoon, a habit that has developed over the past few months. When Ali asks if Will will marry his mother one day, Marcus announces that he had wanted Will to marry his mother, but had given up that hope. Marcus tells Ali that he could do worse in a stepfather. Will, however, is still somewhat frightened of commitment although he has come to a point where he knows he would rather have Rachel in his life and risk being hurt than to not have her at all. When Will drops Marcus off at home, he talks with Fiona about him. Fiona is concerned that Marcus is growing up too fast, but Will assures him that he is a normal, healthy child who is growing up right.

Chapters 32-36 Analysis

Ellie gets Marcus into trouble when she breaks a music store window to protect the sanctity of Kurt Cobain's legacy. Marcus realizes that this act shows that all of the trouble and the pain Ellie has had in her life is all from acts she has brought on herself.



Marcus has come to see Ellie in a new light. Marcus no longer loves Ellie, but he still counts her as a valued friend, showing the reader that in some ways Marcus has grown up much more than Will in this novel. This is underscored by Marcus' theory on family that suggests anyone you care about is a member of your family, assuring the reader that as long as Marcus has good friends he will never be alone.

Will too has changed through the course of this novel. Will has gone from being a rich bum, sitting around his flat watching television and coming up with ways to get beautiful women into his bed to a man who cares about the people in his life and wants to do what is right to make their lives better. Will has fallen in love, made strong friendships, and continues to be a good mentor to Marcus. Will has come a long way and the reader nearly feels like cheering at the end of the book to congratulate him on his new maturity.



Characters

Marcus Brewer

Marcus Brewer is a twelve-year-old boy when this novel begins. The reader quickly learns that Marcus is the son of a single mother who is deeply depressed. Marcus struggles with his mother's illness alongside her, afraid from one moment to the next that his mother might attempt suicide and leave him alone. In fact, Marcus spends a portion of the novel attempting to find a man for his mother so that he will not be alone if she should die. This leads in part to the strong relationship that develops between Marcus and Will Freeman.

Marcus is a strange boy who is often teased by the kids at his new school because he often sings aloud without realizing what he is doing and because he dresses in old fashioned, cheap clothing that make him stand out in a crowd. Marcus tries to explain this to his mother, but both her depression and her hippy ideals keep her from understanding the impact these things are having on Marcus' life. Will, however, knows what to do to help Marcus and manages to give him the information, as well as some of the clothing, he needs to transition into a person the other students will not bully.

Will Freeman

Will Freeman is a rich bachelor who has never held a job. Will lives off of the royalty checks he gets for a song that his father wrote in the thirties. Will likes his life to be simple. He likes the freedom to spend all day watching television and all night at the pubs. Will finds commitment restrictive and children outright frightening. For this reason, Will is always in search of the kind of woman he can have a sexual relationship with without the restrictions of emotion and commitment. To this end, Will discovers that single mothers are often so jaded and distraught from their past relationships that all they want from a man is sexual release. It is upon this discovery that Will makes up a two-year-old son and joins a single parent's group.

Will lies his way into a date with Suzie, a young single mother with an infant daughter. This leads to Will being introduced to Marcus, whom he initially finds unpleasant and surly. However, after Marcus' mother attempts suicide, Will finds himself pulled into Marcus' life. Marcus comes to believe that Will should marry his mother, therefore he continually visits Will and forces himself into Will's life. In the end, Marcus comes to realize that Will and his mother are not suited to one another, but he also becomes one of Will's closest friends.

Through Marcus, Will finds himself forging a relationship like none he has never known before. Not only does Will come to care for Marcus, but he finds himself forging a platonic relationship with Marcus' mother in a way that he never thought possible. Will also falls in love with Rachel, a beautiful single mother who not only means romance for



Will, but who also opens Will to the all the possibilities of a grownup relationship. In the end, it is Marcus who helps Will grow up even as Will guides Marcus into maturity.

Fiona Brewer

Fiona Brewer is Marcus' mother. Fiona is clinically depressed. After moving from Cambridge to London and ending a relationship with her latest beau, Fiona finds herself unable to get out of bed in the morning. Fiona struggles with single parenthood, especially since she never truly wanted to be a mother in the first place. Fiona also struggles with her own self worth and the idea that she might be alone for the rest of her life. Fiona's emotional struggles lead to a suicide attempt that causes an emotional crisis in her son and a sense of instability that will take Marcus on a journey of self discovery with Will.

Suzie

Suzie is Fiona's childhood friend and a member of SPAT. Suzie meets Will at a SPAT meeting and takes him on a SPAT picnic. It is at the picnic that Will meets Marcus and finds him to be something of a surly child. However, it is also at the picnic where Will saves Marcus from certain trouble when a duck is accidentally killed. Suzie is with Marcus when he discovers his mother's suicide attempt and it is Suzie that takes care of the details. Suzie is something of a peripheral character, but she is important because she is the method through which Will and Marcus meet.

Ned Freeman

Ned Freeman is the two-year-old child Will makes up in order to join SPAT. Will tells Suzie that he and Ned's mother, Paula, were once married and that he got full custody during the divorce. Paula, however, often comes and takes Ned at a moment's notice, leaving Will without his son during crucial moments, such as the picnic with Suzie or dinner with Fiona and Marcus. Ned is a means to an end, but he becomes something of a real person in Will's mind for a short time as he goes to extreme measures to convince Suzie of his parenthood, including buying a car seat.

Ellie McCrae

Ellie McCrae is a schoolmate of Marcus'. Ellie is a troublemaker who often finds herself in the head mistress's office at school for such offenses as wearing an inappropriate sweatshirt. Ellie is a fan of Kurt Cobain and this leads to a conversation opening between she and Marcus after Will tells Marcus who Kurt Cobain is. Marcus finds Ellie exciting and convinces himself he is in love with her until the day Kurt Cobain dies and Ellie breaks a music store window. This shows Marcus that Ellie brings many of her own problems on herself. Marcus decides he no longer loves Ellie, but he continues to count her among his small list of really good friends.



Rachel

Rachel is a beautiful, single woman Will meets at a New Year's Eve party. Will finds Rachel exciting, but he cannot think of anything to talk to her about except for Marcus. When Rachel mistakenly believes that Marcus is Will's son, Will does nothing to change her perception. However, after he comes to realize how much Rachel means to him, Will tells Rachel the truth. This does not lead to a break up as Will might have feared, but to a more honest relationship that later blooms into exactly the kind of relationship Will has always feared.

Alistar 'Ali'

Ali is Rachel's twelve-year-old son. Ali is tall for his age and is a typical boy, interested in punk music and skateboarding. When Ali meets Marcus, he threatens to kill him if Will should attempt to date his mother. It later comes out that the last man Rachel dated was cruel and he caused both Rachel and Ali to be weary of new people. Eventually, Ali shows that he is a good and kind child and he befriends both Will and Marcus.

Clive

Clive is Marcus' father. Clive is something of a hippy. Clive smokes marijuana in front of his son, causing arguments with Fiona, and was never legally married to Fiona. Clive has a girlfriend named Lindsey who is young and kind, but whose very presence makes Marcus uncomfortable for his mother. Clive is also an emotional man who insists on apologizing to his son for his failings. However, Marcus proves he is much more mature than Clive by explaining to his father that family is not a traditional family, but a group of people who love one another.

Kurt Cobain

Kurt Cobain was the lead singer of Nirvana. Kurt Cobain was a passionate man whose music, while difficult for some to understand, struck a chord in the hearts of many others. Kurt Cobain was also prone to depression and he attempted to kill himself a short time before he was found dead from a gunshot wound. The death of Kurt Cobain affected many people deeply, including Ellie McCrae, one of the characters of this novel.



Objects/Places

Pills

Fiona attempts suicide by taking an overdose of pills, which are a sedative of some kind.

Athletic Shoes

Will buys Marcus a pair of athletic shoes in an attempt to help him look more conventional and to keep the bullies from torturing him. Unfortunately, the bullies steal the shoes the following day.

Ellie's Sweatshirt

Ellie wears a sweatshirt daily that has a picture of Kurt Cobain on the front. This begins the first conversation between Marcus and Ellie and gives Marcus something to talk to her about.

Car Seat

Will buys a car seat and covers it in junk food in order to make it appear that he is the father of a two year old boy.

Kurt Cobain Cutout

Ellie breaks a window in a music store and takes a Kurt Cobain cutout because she thinks the store's owner is using the cutout to take advantage of Kurt Cobain's death.

Magazines

Will reads all the popular culture magazines so that he can keep up the knowledge that he believes makes him cool. In fact, Will is taking a quiz in one of these magazines when the reader first meets him.

Dead Duck Day

Marcus refers to the day his mother attempted suicide as Dead Duck Day because it is also the day he accidentally killed a duck with a loaf of hard bread.



Santa's Super Sleigh

Santa's Super Sleigh is the name of the song Will's father wrote in the thirties that has been used on so many Christmas albums that he is able to live off of the royalties.

Nirvana

Nirvana is a punk-rock band that was popular during the time this novel is set. Kurt Cobain was their lead singer and primary song writer.

Cambridge

Fiona and Marcus once lived in Cambridge before moving to London. Clive continues to live in Cambridge.

Royston

Royston is the town where Ellie and Marcus get off the train and where they are arrested for breaking a music store window.

London

The novel takes place primarily in London and is where the majority of the characters live.



Themes

Depression and Suicide

In this novel, Marcus, one of the main characters, becomes aware that there is something wrong with his mother. Fiona, Marcus's mother, often cries late in the afternoon and then begins to cry before she has even eaten her breakfast. Marcus has no clue what could be so bad in the day before breakfast that his mother would cry over it. At first, Marcus makes attempts at cheering up his mother and to keep from being a burden on her. However, these things fail to affect his mother's mood. Then, when Marcus comes home one day to find his mother has attempted suicide, he begins to wonder if his mother even cares about him at all.

Marcus is a child and he cannot possibly understand the intricacies and struggles a person faces with clinical depression. However, Marcus is a highly intelligent child and he knows there is something wrong with his mother. Marcus believes that if he can find a man for his mother, if they could expand their family a little, that his mother might not be so sad all the time. Marcus also believes that if his mother continues to be sad, at least he will not be alone with her depression.

Over time it appears that Fiona is recovering from her depression. However, one day it suddenly returns, leaving Marcus once again desperate for a way to cheer her up. Marcus goes to Will and asks for help, but Will refuses because he cannot convince a person there is a point to live when he himself does not understand it. However, in the end Will comes to realize that Fiona only needs a friend to talk to. At the same time, Marcus comes to realize he is not alone in his fear for his mother.

Coming of Age

Marcus is twelve, which is an age at which a boy is slowly beginning to make the transition from child to adult. Marcus is struggling, however, because he has been forced to grow up quicker than most boys of his age. Marcus has to deal with his mother's depression as well as his own social problems at school. Marcus begins to think that he needs to expand his family, to have a father he can turn to in times of crisis, a cushion to keep him from being alone so much.

At the same time, Will has never grown up. Will is commitment phobic, unwilling to become involved in a relationship that might include responsibility and a future. Will is also frightened of small children and the changes they bring to a man's life. Will wants simplicity and order. However, when Will decides to make up a child in order to trick single mothers into dating him, he shows that he is still as emotionally immature as a teenager who might do something similar.

Will and Marcus become friends through a random sequence of events. This friendship is beneficial to both. For Marcus it means learning how to be more conventional and



cool. For Will it means learning how to forge a meaningful relationship. Through their friendship, both boys change their lives and grow, one learning to be a child and the other learning to be a man.

Lies and Deception

Will tells lies to get the type of women he wants. In fact, Will goes so far as to invent a two-year-old son for himself. This leads to a date with Suzie, Fiona's good friend, and to Will meeting Marcus. However, it was gained by lies and when Suzie learns the truth, she tells him how much like her lying and deceptive husband he truly is. It turns out that Will is not much better than all the men who cheated on and left their wives alone with children.

Lies also come into the plot with Fiona. Although Fiona is a good, loving mother, she lies to both herself and Marcus about her depression. Fiona refuses to admit that she has a problem, and when she does she promises she will never hurt herself again. However, no one can predict the course of clinical depression. Fiona lies to herself about the depth of the disease and never really tells Marcus how bad it is the second time around. For this reason, lies and deception are a theme of the novel.

Style

Point of View

The novel is told in the third-person and omniscient point of view. The narration moves from Marcus to Will in alternating chapters, Marcus beginning and Will coming second. The changing narration allows the reader to see the action of the novel through the eyes of each of the main characters, which occasionally includes a different view on the same event.

The point of view in this novel is common to most modern bestsellers. However, in this novel the author has two clear narrators who take turns telling the story. This is well thought out and organized, telling the reader a strong story through the eyes of two very different narrators. In fact, by telling the story in this fashion, the writer opens the door to a few comic situations that only the reader can fully appreciate. For this reason, the point of view works well with this novel.

Setting

The novel is set in London for the majority of the plot. This is a new setting to Marcus. London is a bigger city where he does not fit in at the school and is often bullied. This is a familiar setting for Will who has lived in London most of his life. By seeing this city through the eyes of two different characters, it becomes two different settings. For Marcus it is a city full of perils, but for Will it is a city full of fun and excitement.

The setting of this novel is important for several reasons. For one, Marcus sees the city as a large and impersonal place that highlights his sense of loneliness. Marcus feels as though he is alone in the world because his mother struggles with depression and takes little interest in his daily struggles. For Will, the city also highlights his loneliness, but for Will it is a loneliness that is less an emotion and more a sense of aloneness. As these two characters come together, they learn to deal with their difficulties together, but in different ways. For this reason, the setting plays an important role in emphasizing the themes of the novel.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is simple English. There are no foreign words in the novel, but there are words that are common in England that a reader from other parts of the world might not be familiar with. The grammar is also a little unfamiliar in some places, putting words in an order that readers from other parts of the world might not recognize but those in England consider normal, everyday conversation.

The language of the novel make it clear to the reader that the writer is English and his characters are English as well. There are words and grammar usage that are common



in England, giving the novel a definite sense of the culture and quirks of the people the characters in this book are defined by. The language gives the novel a sense of authenticity that makes the characters come to life, filling the pages with funny and confused people that the reader comes to care about.

Structure

The novel is divided into thirty-six chapters. Each chapter is fairly short. The odd chapters are narrated by Marcus and the even chapters are narrated by Will. The novel is told both in exposition and dialogue, showing the story to the reader rather than just telling it. There is a good amount of internal monologue in this novel as well, showing how Will and Marcus have been motivated and made decisions that impact the overall plot of the novel.

There is one main plot and multiple subplots in this novel. The main plot is about the budding and established relationship between the two main characters, Will and Marcus. One subplot follows Will as he makes up a son in order to join a single parents group so that he might meet single mothers to date. Another subplot follows the course of Fiona's deep depression and the impact it has on her son, Marcus. All these plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

"People quite often thought Marcus was being funny when he wasn't" (Chapter 1, pg. 7.)

"How cool was Will Freeman?" (Chapter 2, pg. 13.)

"He just wasn't right for schools. Not secondary schools, anyway" (Chapter 3, pg. 23.)

"But this was the scariest thing he'd ever seen, by a million miles, and he knew the moment he walked in that it was something he'd have to think about forever" (Chapter 9, pg. 94.)

"Filling days had never really been a problem for Will. He may not have been proud of his lifelong lack of achievement, but he was proud of his ability to stay afloat in the enormous ocean of time he had at his disposal; a less resourceful man, he felt, might have gone under and drowned" (Chapter 12, pg. 114.)

"He was one of life's visitors; he didn't want to be visited" (Chapter 14, pg. 149.)

"It shut her up, and it made her cry. It did the job" (Chapter 17, pg. 193.)

"It was good having a mum and dad who didn't decide things together, Marcus thought; that way you got the best of both worlds at Christmas" (Chapter 23, pg. 254.)

"There were no rules here, and he was old enough to know that when you went to a place, or a time, with no rules, then things were bound to be more complicated" (Chapter 25, pg. 286.)

"There were two words in particular that made him want to cover his ears with his hands; they always had done, and they always would, as long as his life revolved around Countdown and Home and Away and new Marks and Spencer sandwich combinations, and he could see no way in which he could avoid them in any conversation with Fiona about depression. Those two words were the point" (Chapter 30, pg. 337.)

"This thing about looking for someone less different...it only really worked, he realized, if you were convinced that being you wasn't so bad in the first place" (Chapter 34, pg. 407.)

"Will knew then, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that Marcus would be okay" (Chapter 36, pg. 424.)



Topics for Discussion

Who is Marcus? Why does his mother cry early in the morning? What trouble does Marcus have at school? Why does Marcus have this trouble? Why do two boys tell Marcus he cannot be their friend anymore? Why does Marcus kill a duck? How did this come about? What impact did this incident have on Marcus' relationship with Will?

Who is Will? Why does he not work for a living? What does he do all day? Why does Will dislike children? Why does Will not want a committed relationship? Why does Will believe that dating single mothers is the answer to all his dating troubles? What does Will do to meet single mothers?

Who is Fiona? Why does she not care about the bullies that are bothering her son at school? Why does she cry all the time? Why does Fiona send Marcus to a picnic with her friend, Suzie? Did Fiona expect to end her own life? What excuse does she give to Marcus about her actions? Why does Marcus seek help the second time his mother exhibits these kinds of behaviors? What does Will do about it?

Who is Rachel? How does Will meet Rachel? How does Will feel about Rachel? How is the relationship with Rachel so much different for Will than all the other relationships he has had in the past? Why does this relationship frighten Will so much? What does this say about Will's character? Has Will grown up by the end of the novel?

Discuss the theme of coming of age. What does coming of age mean? Which character in this novel comes of age during the course of the plot? What causes this change in the character? What character traits change with this coming of age? How does the reader recognize the moment of change? Is this change a good thing?

Discuss Kurt Cobain. Why does the author introduce a real singer into this novel? Who in the novel is touched by Kurt Cobain? For what reasons? What happens to the characters when Kurt Cobain dies? To what other music star is this death compared in the novel? What other stars might you compare the death of Kurt Cobain to? Did Kurt Cobain have this much impact on people in the real world? How does Kurt Cobain's death parallel Fiona's depression?

Discuss Clive and Lindsey. Who is Clive? What impact does he have on Marcus throughout the novel? Why? Why does Clive suggest that he is to blame for Marcus getting arrested toward the end of the novel? Why does Clive resent this? Who is Lindsey? How does Marcus feel about her? What about her character adds tension to the plot? Is this a good thing or a bad one?