

# Aunt Florrie Short Guide

## Aunt Florrie by Robert Westall

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## Overview

A middle-class English family has long had a Christmas problem: Aunt Florrie. For forty years she has arrived early on Christmas day, tormenting the family with nonstop talk and eating up their dinner and seasonal treats. Three generations of the family have submitted to her Christmas tyranny and endured the misery she brings. Then, inevitably, she dies.

Normal, enjoyable, quiet Christmases seem to be in the family's future. Yet, two years later a note from Aunt Florrie arrives, mentioning that she will, as usual, be over for Christmas. It has a recent postmark; the family's father takes the note to the police, who owe him favors, and they determine that "It's no forgery." Will, as younger brother Stan suggests, Aunt Florrie return as a vampire or another one of the undead?

## About the Author

"Aunt Florrie" was among the last works written by Robert Westall. He was born on October 7, 1929, in Tynemouth, Northumberland, England, where he attended school. In 1953, he received a fine arts degree from Durham University, then served from 1953 to 1957 in the Royal Signals 4462 Aunt Florrie of the British Army. After leaving the army, he earned his Doctorate in Fine Arts from the Slade School of the University of London. He then took the position of Art Master at Erdington Hall Secondary Modern School in Birmingham. He married Jean Underhill in 1958, and they had one son, Christopher. Westall said that he wrote *The Machine-Gunners*, his first novel for young adults, in order to explain to Christopher, who was then twelve years old, what England was like when Westall was twelve. Christopher died in a motorcycle accident when age eighteen.

Westall's works have received numerous honors. In 1976 he was the runner-up for the Guardian Award for children's fiction. The English Carnegie Medal was awarded to both *The Machine Gunners* and *The Scarecrows*, which also received the Boston GlobeHorn Book Award in 1977 and 1982. *The Machine Gunners* was chosen as one of the School Library Journal's Best of the Best Books for the period 1966 to 1978.

Robert Westall died of respiratory failure caused by pneumonia on April 15, 1993, in Cheshire, England.



## Setting

The first-person narrator notes that "There are Difficulties" with his family members and with Christmas. Some of the family are criminals, others are jerks, and others are poor. The relatives are an unpleasant lot who mostly avoid each other, "Except Aunt Florrie, who'd invited herself to our house for Christmas Day every year for forty years."

The family's father is an "Importer of Novelties," which seems to mean all things plastic, and the house is decorated accordingly. "Our home is lovely, too, at the moment. Ten-foot tree; holly and ivy and mistletoe everywhere, and they're all plastic. My mum is ever so happy there are no needles and bits to Hoover up." The lounge has a "three-seater English leather Chesterfield" with a permanent depression caused by enormous Aunt Florrie sitting in the middle of it—and taking it all for herself—every Christmas. It seems to be a daily reminder of the horrors she brings. Almost every room of the house has a television set; Stan once tried to hide with one in a bathroom during Christmas, pleading constipation, but Aunt Florrie found him and "began threatening him with senna pods."

## Social Sensitivity

The narrator of "Aunt Florrie" seems to be a snob and a member of a snobbish family; they dislike the company of poor relatives. This makes them less than endearing; if fact, they almost deserve the horrible Aunt Florrie. One effect of making the family unpleasant, at least for an American audience, is to make the bad events that befall them seem deserved and thus somewhat more tolerable than they would be if the family were enlightened enough to care for the needy.

The family's focus at Christmas seems to be on candies, dinner, and gifts—a secular attitude toward a religious holiday. Having the home decorated with plastic imitations of real trees and other decorations adds a background of artificiality to the family's celebration. This seems to reflect both their social class and a secular era; their blinkered preoccupation with the "goodies" of Christmas is shared by many well-to-do families.

Thus the story is only mild social criticism and is much more just a reflection of society.

## Literary Qualities

"Aunt Florrie" is narrated in the first person by an idiosyncratic voice as annoying sometimes as Aunt Florrie herself. This is an attempt by Westall to capture a teenager's manner of speech and the attitudes that prompt his words: the chip-on-the-shoulder defiance of established authority, the rebellious questioning of tradition, a desire to be free of responsibility, and the simmering tensions of sibling rivalry. The narrator's desire to have fun on Christmas is understandable; his annoyance at little brother Stan is also understandable. Yet his attitudes toward his relatives and parents color his depiction of them enough to make one suspicious of their accuracy. For instance, he seems somewhat contemptuous of his father's business, the importing of novelties. If one reads between the lines, however, one will notice that his father's business has won friends throughout the local community and provides the narrator with a privileged life. This suggests that other descriptions may be distorted by his superior attitude. For example, his Aunt Florrie's photographs may not be as bad as he asserts; the narrator may view them through the prism of his prejudice. Nothing seems quite good enough to suit him. By establishing an unreliable narrator, Westall urges his readers to look deeper at the characters and events than they might otherwise be inclined to do. This technique invites questions about what the characters are really like, about a privileged narrator's attitudes toward others, and about the events of the story itself.



## Themes and Characters

"Aunt Florrie always arrived early, and her mouth was going full out even before you opened the front door to her," the narrator tells us. Aunt Florrie is an overwhelming presence; her visit is anticipated with dread whenever the topic of Christmas comes up, year round, and when she arrives, every activity revolves around her. She seems to enjoy being with the narrator's family, and remains oblivious to their profound wish that she would go away and never return.

She is bossy and demanding. For instance, she insists that the family look at her vacation photographs: ". . .

she always went to Benidorm and photographed the same fat friends in front of the same pointless objects."

The family, cowed by the sheer magnitude and power of her personality, look at the photographs every year and even try to say something nice about them: "'That's a lovely drainpipe,' which I swear I once heard my father say." There is no escaping her presence once she is in the house; "Her voice could drown the telly even when it was turned up full, the way Maria Callas could drown the chorus at La Scala in Milan," the narrator recalls, and that voice could be heard throughout the home. When young Stan makes a break for peace, by hiding in a downstairs bathroom with a portable television, she pursues him, offering herbals for his supposed constipation. It is no wonder that the family feels relief when Aunt Florrie dies; the father "even paid twice what he meant to for a wreath, out of sheer relief that she was at last underground and real Christmas could begin, the first in forty years."

The young adult male narrator and his family are not especially likable either. They much prefer to stay away from other relatives, which in the cases of the criminals and alcohol abusers seems reasonable, but they also wish to stay away from those who are poor because of their straitened means, thereby showing the unpleasant trait of snobbery. They also miss most of the spirit of Christmas charity and forgiveness by excluding these poor relatives from their lives. The father even sends Christmas cards to people on the basis of their wealth, mailing little ones to the poor acquaintances.

Even so, they are as entitled as anyone to a peaceful Christmas, and after years of relentless noise from Aunt Florrie it is not surprising that the first Christmas without her "was a quiet Christmas, that one." The narrator seems as happy as any at celebrating a quiet Christmas, even though he seems to be sarcastic and condescending. If he were not so good at weaving a mysterious story of the supernatural, one would be tempted to leave him to his candies and gifts. But he has the redeeming qualities of a biting sense of humor and knowing how to delay resolution of the plot while building suspense.





Then comes Aunt Florrie's Christmas card, just days before what would be the second Christmas without her.

With the arrival of the card, the theme of the unwanted relative gains momentum. After a Christmas without her, Aunt Florrie's potential return makes the thought of her presence almost unbearable. "The postmark was two days before"—an ominous sign.

The family falls into a deep funk; having a living annoying relative was bad 4464 Aunt Florrie enough, but a dead one who could come back forever would be awful.

The narrator notes that "she'd made a pretty horrible human being, she'd make a truly appalling vampire." The card says that Aunt Florrie will arrive on Christmas, and "that Christmas card had all the awful certainty of a letter from the Inland Revenue."

Supporting the theme of the unwanted relative is the motif of the television sets. The family watches television everywhere in the house; Stan even watches horror movies when he is supposed to be asleep.

Filled with the images of countless supernatural television shows, the family easily imagines Aunt Florrie as "One of the Undead, sitting up waiting in the family vault at the cathedral cemetery." The family's overstimulated minds focus on the ominous possibility that an undead Aunt Florrie might once again inflict herself on them; they become so fixated on Aunt Florrie that "the trouble was, she was so much there already". In their minds, the family has allowed the overbearing personality of Aunt Florrie to assert its ghostly presence to already ruin Christmas.

When the father answers the door and sees a mask of Aunt Florrie, he faints, a sign of too much worrying.

But the person at the door is not Aunt Florrie, "It was her son, Albert. And all his family." Thus the theme of the unwanted relatives reaches its fruition— Aunt Florrie has managed to inflict herself upon the family once again, through her son and his family.

As when Aunt Florrie visited, the candies and foods are exhausted without the family having much chance to enjoy them. "There's more ways than one of being a vampire!" remarks Stan.

And he is right; the family has allowed itself to be sucked dry of patience and energy for over forty years. For the anticlimax, the family flees to New Zealand in order to avoid Albert's family.



## Topics for Discussion

1. What does the story's narrator have against poor relatives?
2. What can you deduce of the narrator's personality from what he says while he tells the story? Is he a nice person?
3. Why does Aunt Florrie not realize that she is unwanted by the family?
4. Why does the family put up with her staying on Christmas year after year?
5. When did you guess what the mysterious Christmas card from Aunt Florrie was all about?
6. If a family cannot fly off to New Zealand for Christmas, how might it escape unwanted relatives?
7. Why does the family in "Aunt Florrie" fear that Aunt Florrie has come back from the dead? Why does such a fear grow on them?
8. What is the point of having televisions in nearly every room? Why should almost every television have a VCR? What would make a VCR dangerous to have in a bathroom?
9. How does the story try to be funny? Does it succeed?
10. How trustworthy is the narrator?
11. Why not just tell Aunt Florrie flat out to stay away?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Why do many families focus on the food and presents of Christmas rather than the religious significance?

Do all families celebrate Christmas with food and gifts? What are some alternate celebrations that some people practice?

2. Find other stories that show young adults dealing sympathetically with annoying relatives such as Aunt Florrie? Compare them to this one.

3. Read *Christmas Cat* and *Christmas Ghost*, two books written by Westall near the time "Aunt Florrie" was written. Are the attitudes in those books similar to the ones in "Aunt Florrie"?

Do they provide a fuller picture of Westall's attitudes toward Christmas?

4. Westall wrote many short stories for young adults. Do you prefer the stories or his novels? Why?

5. What are some other father-son relationships in Westall's fiction? Are any similar to the relationship that exists in "Aunt Florrie"? Is the one in "Aunt Florrie" typical for Westall's fiction?

6. How important is the home to the events in "Aunt Florrie"? What are some other ways Westall uses homes in his stories? Do any resemble the one in "Aunt Florrie"?

## For Further Reference

Commire, Anne. "Robert (Atkinson) Westall." In *Something about the Author*. Vol. 23. Detroit: Gale, 1981, pp.

235-236. Mostly a listing of Westall's work with some quotations from Westall.

Hadley, Eric. "Robert (Atkinson) Westall." In *Twentieth Century Children's Writers*. Ed. by Tracy Chevalier. Chicago: St. James Press, 1989 (3d edition), pp. 1027-1028. Mostly a bibliography, with a short overview of Westall's writings.

"Robert Westall." In *Fifth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. Ed. by Sally Holmes Holtze. New York: Wilson, 1983, pp. 322-324. An interview of Westall, who mentions his development as a writer.

Rees, David. "Macho Man, British Style." In *Painted Desert, Green Shade*.

Boston: Horn Book, 1984, pp. 115-125. An uncomplimentary study of Westall's characterizations.

Westall, Robert. "How Real Do You Want Your Realism?" *Signal* 28 (January 1979): 34-36. An explanation of how Westall chooses his topics and the techniques he uses to develop them.

———. "Robert Westall." In *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*.

Volume 2. Detroit: Gale Research, 1986, pp. 305-323. Provides background for Westall's beginnings as a writer.

## Related Titles

Westall's short fiction frequently portrays alienated characters in sometimes mysterious situations. Aunt Florrie is such a character. She has a personality that invites dislike and she is lonely; she spends Christmas, the most important family holiday, not with her son and his family but with more distant relatives. Typically, the character is placed in a moment of crisis where survival is at stake; in the case of Aunt Florrie, the character's death lays the foundation for the crisis to come. The collection *The Haunting of Chas MacGill and Other Stories* (1983; see separate entry, Vol. 7) probably contains the Westall stories that most closely resemble the techniques and subject matter of "Aunt Florrie." The stories in *The Haunting of Chas MacGill and Other Stories* mix realism and fantasy, much as "Aunt Florrie" does; in "Aunt Florrie," realism wins out, but in some of the tales in *The Haunting of Chas MacGill and Other Stories*, the fantasy of haunting wins out.



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## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996