

The Girl of His Dreams Short Guide

The Girl of His Dreams by Harry Mazer

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Contents

The Girl of His Dreams Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	6
Social Sensitivity.....	7
Literary Qualities.....	8
Themes and Characters.....	9
Topics for Discussion.....	11
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	12
For Further Reference.....	13
Related Titles.....	14
Copyright Information.....	15



Overview

The *Girl of His Dreams* is a novel of romance and self-discovery. Willis Pierce, the protagonist, daydreams of being a world-class runner and of meeting his dream girl. When Willis meets Sophie Browne, she in no way resembles his ideal. Although Sophie falls in love with Willis quickly, it takes much longer for Willis to let go of the vision of his physically perfect dream girl and recognize Sophie's special qualities. Their relationship develops with difficulty, and it is only when Willis almost loses her that he realizes how much he cares for Sophie.

A subplot dealing with Willis's other daydream of being a champion runner is woven into the novel. Sophie's help and encouragement enable Willis, in a somewhat comic way, to make this dream a reality. At the end of the novel, a new world has opened up for Willis. Sophie and Willis's relationship has been greatly strengthened, and both athletic and educational opportunities of which Willis had never even dreamed have been presented to him.

About the Author

Harry Mazer was born on May 31, 1925, in New York City. His parents, Sam and Rose Lazernick Mazer, were both dressmakers in a factory.

His family of cousins, aunts, and uncles were Polish and Russian Jewish immigrants. During Mazer's childhood, reading was his greatest pleasure.

However, since there were few books in his parents' home, mostly sets of classics that were obtained through various newspaper promotions, the library became the place that could satisfy his hunger for reading. As a young boy, he had a plan to read all the books in the library, starting with the letter A. During high school, he made some attempts at writing, but was not satisfied with the results. All he could do, he said, was compare what he had written with the classics he had read, and the contrast made his efforts seem hopeless. Still, he dreamed of writing.

After graduating from Union College in 1948, Mazer married Norma Fox, who also loved books and was a writer.

During the early years of their marriage, though, life provided few opportunities for Mazer to write. Kept busy with the business of being a husband, father, and provider, he worked at various times as a longshoreman, railroad worker, teacher, welder, and iron worker. However, he became more and more dissatisfied with this work and yearned to devote his attention to writing. Mazer credits his wife, Norma, with encouraging him to pursue his writing career. While trying to support his family by working at various jobs, he and his wife would rise at 3:30 in the morning, so that they both might write for three hours before Mazer had to leave for work. Not until he was in his middle thirties did Mazer feel confident enough about his writing to forego the security of the factory paycheck and become a full-time writer.

Harry and Norma, who has also become an acclaimed young adult novelist, have collaborated on three novels: *The Solid Gold Kid* (1977) and more recently, *Heartbreak* (1989) and *Bright Days, Stupid Nights* (1992). Although most of their literary work has been done separately, they do discuss and consult with each other about what they are writing.

Critics have pointed out that Harry Mazer writes about young people who are caught in moral dilemmas, which they, themselves, have often created. In extricating themselves from these crises, they discover who they are. Thus, many of his protagonists find themselves in trouble, run away from the problem confronting them, and yet in the end return to face the problem with new strength and insight. Mazer's novels for young adults have received numerous awards, including Kirkus Choice list, 1974, for *The Dollar Man* and Children's Choice list (International Reading Association), 1977, for *The Solid Gold Kid*. His work has been selected for the American Library Association's Best Books for Young Adults list: in 1977, for *The Solid Gold Kid*; in 1978, for *The War on Villa Street*; in 1979, for *The Last Mission*; in 1981, for *I Love You, Stupid!*; in 1986, for



When the Phone Rang; and in 1987, for *The Girl of His Dreams*. He has received a Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award nomination, 1979, for *The War on Villa Street*. His book *The Last Mission* appeared in the New York Times Best Books of the Year list, 1979, the New York Public Library Books for the Teen Ager list, 1980, and the ALA Best of the Best Books list, 1970-1983. *Snowbound* was placed in the Booklist Contemporary Classics list, 1984, and received the German Preis der Lesseratten.

He received the Arizona Young Readers Award nomination, 1985, for *The Island Keeper*. The book *When the Phone Rang* was included in the Iowa Teen Award Master list. Some of Mazer's novels have been translated into German, French, Danish, and Finnish.

Setting

Most of the action of this contemporary novel takes place in a large city, presumably in the northeast, although the exact location is never pinpointed.

Willis knows and loves the city, preferring to live there in his own apartment and work in a factory, rather than live with his parents, who have moved to the warmer climate of North Carolina.

In contrast to Willis's city background is the country setting of Sophie's upbringing. Sophie has left the family farm, after having experienced some difficulty involving her brother and his wife, and has come to the city to start a new life for herself. She finds a job operating a newsstand that is located next to the factory where Willis is employed. This difference in background between Willis and Sophie provides the initial conflict between the two characters. The city boy thinks the country girl is more than a little naive about city life and about boy-girl relationships.



Social Sensitivity

While language in some of Mazer's works might cause concern for parents and teachers, such is not the case with this particular novel. The dialogue realistically reflects teen-age conversation without being offensive. The novel deftly handles sexual situations, which are hinted at but never made explicit.

The novel ends with Willis suggesting that Sophie and he live together. However, Sophie questions the benefits of such an arrangement. Thus, the novel, without taking a moral stand on couples living together before marriage, does realistically depict an issue that sometimes faces young adults.



Literary Qualities

Strong characterization provides the underlying framework for *The Girl of His Dreams*. The author effectively shows the inner workings of two ordinary young people who, on the surface, seem very different from one another, but yet on another level, share the same yearnings and the same dreams.

The author conveys realistically the inner feelings of both characters by varying the perspective from which the relationship is viewed. Although the author uses a third-person narrator throughout, some chapters are written solely from Willis's perspective, while others are written from Sophie's. This technique better enables the reader to understand the flaws and vulnerabilities of each character as they stumble toward each other in establishing a tenuous relationship.

Another technique, which Mazer has implemented in other novels, is the open-ended conclusion. Sophie and Willis are together at the end of the novel, but whether they will remain that way is not certain. The disparity in their backgrounds is about to widen, since Willis has been offered a college athletic scholarship, while Sophie, because of family difficulties, never graduated from high school. Additionally, another argument between the two seems to be brewing over where Willis will live while he is attending college.

Willis thinks he could save money by sharing an apartment with Sophie, but Sophie questions whether living together is really such a good idea. This open-ended conclusion realistically shows the pattern of a developing relationship—with the two characters reaching toward each other, but pulling back before moving forward again.

Regardless of whether Sophie and Willis work things out, though, the two characters have grown and matured as individuals. Thus, the conclusion emphasizes not a happily-ever-after resolution, but the ongoing struggle of individual people to establish and maintain relationships.

Mazer uses the dog Zola to foreshadow and parallel Willis's developing relationship with Sophie. Willis finds the abandoned, injured dog and reluctantly takes the animal home to nurse it back to health. Despite his resolution not to become attached to Zola, he finds that resolution wavering as the dog gains strength and becomes obviously devoted to Willis. In somewhat the same manner, Sophie unexpectedly comes into Willis's life when Sophie injures her hand while working at the newsstand. Willis, who just happens to be nearby, is there to lend assistance. Certainly, Willis, at this chance meeting, has no romantic interest in Sophie. However, Sophie's persistence in involving herself in Willis's life and in his dream of being a champion runner finally makes her an indispensable part of Willis's world.



Themes and Characters

Eighteen-year-old Willis Pierce is both a loner and a dreamer. His days are filled with little else other than working in a factory and running. As he runs, he dreams of meeting the "right" girl and of becoming a champion runner. At the beginning of the novel, it seems neither dream is likely to become reality, because both dreams, in order to come true, would require that he interact with other people. However, he does not see himself as someone who avoids others, but as someone who is simply more comfortable being alone. With other people, he is always on guard. Still, he persists in dreaming that someday all this will change; the perfect girl will be his, and adoring fans will cheer him as he runs.

Another side of Willis's character is shown when Willis, while running one day, finds a small injured dog that has obviously been abandoned by its owner and left to die. Against his better judgment, Willis takes the dog home. At first, Willis seems irritated that he has allowed himself to be trapped into nursing a dying dog back to health. However, he soon becomes very attached to the animal and names it "Zola" after the female Olympic runner Zola Budd. In naming the dog after this runner, Willis shows how much empathy he has with the underdog, with the one who strives to survive or to excel despite the obstacles confronting him.

Sophie Browne, who is twenty-two years old, is the other main character in the novel. In some ways, she is the antithesis of Willis. Not at all on guard with others, Sophie is open and friendly, to the point, Willis thinks, of being too eager. These are qualities which Willis at first finds a little disconcerting and which he attributes to Sophie's rural upbringing. Sophie had moved on her own to the city from the family farm where she had lived with her brother Floyd, his wife, and their children. More and more though, she had come to feel that she was an outsider to her brother's growing family. Sophie's decision to leave all that she had known behind her and to strike out on her own in a large city in order to establish a life for herself shows her to be a very courageous, independent, and determined individual. Unlike Willis, she does not simply dream of a different, better life, but takes definite steps to make that life a reality.

Physically, Sophie is plain and large.

She is a hard worker, capable of doing heavy farm labor, as well as repairing automobiles. She sometimes wishes she could radiate an aura of cool detachment, so that Willis would be attracted by a sense of mystery which would surround her. However, Sophie, forthright, honest, and eager, is not capable of such womanly wiles.

Through the course of the novel, Willis and Sophie have several squabbles, which are mostly caused by Willis's attitude that he is more knowledgeable than she and therefore in some ways superior. However, he often finds himself scrambling to maintain this notion of his own superiority.



Sophie manages to see beyond his aloofness and his distant demeanor and succeeds in breaking down the guard that has kept Willis only a dreamer, instead of a doer. Through Sophie's influence and encouragement, Willis, instead of just dreaming of winning at track events, finds himself in a race against Aaron Hill, a famed champion runner. Instead of just dreaming of the perfect girl who will someday be his, he begins to recognize Sophie's special qualities and see her as an important part of his life.

Some of the minor characters include Benny, who works with Willis at the factory, and Benny's girlfriend Lee, who embodies Willis's dream girl image. Mazer employs the character Lee to emphasize Willis's vision of his dream girl. She is without any characteristics that would make her real or human; she is only beautiful. Consequently, in the few instances where Willis and Lee are together, he makes no attempt to know her or to see her as a real person. Instead, he is simply awestruck by her beauty.

The novel's theme concerns personal growth and discovery. Because of Sophie, Willis finally begins to let go of his tough guy exterior and become less of a loner. This new openness with others brings its own problems, however, for as Willis states at the end of the novel, "Being close with someone isn't easy." Nevertheless, Willis has found the real-life relationship with Sophie, fragile as it may be, much more interesting than what he had dreamed such a relationship to be. This theme of personal growth and discovery is one common to many of Mazer's novels.

The message which the author succeeds in conveying is that change is possible.

We have the inner strength to be more than what we are. We can effect this change, Mazer suggests, only when we use our inner strength to wrestle with the circumstances of our lives, rather than retreat from them.



Topics for Discussion

1. Before meeting Sophie, Willis has a very clear mental image of his dream girl. Compare Sophie to this image.
2. What parallels exist between Sophie and Willis's dog Zola? Consider how they both came into Willis's life and his initial reaction to each of them.
3. At the beginning of the novel, what are Willis's two dreams? Why are these dreams not likely to come true?

By the end of the novel what has happened to his two dreams? In what ways have they come true?

4. How does Benny's girlfriend, Lee, fit Willis's image of his dream girl?

How is she different from Sophie? Consider both the appearance and the personality of each character.

5. Willis is a very different person at the end of the novel from who he was at the beginning of the novel. In what ways has he changed?
6. A subplot in the novel concerns Willis's dream of becoming a champion runner. How does Sophie help make that dream a reality for Willis?
7. Sophie is attracted to Willis the first time she sees him. For her, it is almost love at first sight. At what point in the novel does Willis realize he loves Sophie?
8. Considering Sophie's feelings for Willis, why do you think Sophie questions Willis's suggestion at the end of the novel that they live together?
9. At the end of the novel, Willis thinks, "Being close with someone isn't easy." What do you think he means by this statement? How have his experiences shown this to be true?
10. Do you think Sophie and Willis will stay together? Consider that Willis has the opportunity now to attend college, while Sophie has not graduated from high school. Do you think this difference in education could seriously affect their relationship? Why or why not?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the names "Zola Budd" and "Mary Decker." Explain who these people are and what they did. Explain, too, why "Zola" is an appropriate name for Willis's dog.
2. Read Mazer's novel *The War on Villa Street*, in which Willis Pierce, an eighth grader, is the main character.

Show in what ways Willis's characterization is the same in both novels and in what ways it is different.

3. The phrase "opposites attract" is sometimes used when referring to couples who seem to have little in common but are still attracted to one another.

Are Willis and Sophie truly opposites to one another, or are these two characters similar in some ways? Compare and contrast Sophie and Willis.

4. In thinking of his dream girl, Willis only seemed to think of the physical qualities she would have. Write a paper in which you describe your ideal mate. Is it important that this person's attitudes, goals, interests, and background be similar to yours?

5. At the end of the novel, Sophie questions whether Willis's suggestion that they live together is really a good idea. Research statistics and information concerning couples who marry before living together versus those who live together who may or may not eventually marry. Present information you have found concerning what sociologists or psychologists say about this issue.

6. Even though Willis and Sophie have jobs, they both seem to have very little money. Research what living expenses would be in your area for a teen-ager earning minimum wage. Take into account rent, car expenses, food, utilities, insurance, clothing, entertainment, and other significant expenses.

Write out a budget to show what an individual could expect to earn in one month and what necessary expenses he would incur.

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*. Vol. 31. Detroit: Gale Research, 1983. Contains an autobiographical sketch, in which Mazer discusses his beginnings as an author and some of his works.

Holtze, Sally Holmes, ed. *Fifth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983. Contains an autobiographical sketch of the author.

Locher, Frances C., ed. *Contemporary Authors*. Detroit: Gale, 1981. Contains an interview with Mazer, in which he discusses his work and his philosophy about writing for young adults.

Review. *Horn Book* (March/April 1988): 209-210. Describes *The Girl of His Dreams* as a "well-paced story" that is a "fine illumination of everyday life."

Senick, Gerard J., and Melissa Reiff Hug, eds. *Children's Literature Review*.

Vol. 16. Detroit: Gale Research, 1989.

Contains a biographical sketch and excerpts from various reviews and criticism of Mazer's works.

White, Libby K. Review. *School Library Journal* (January 1988): 86-87. Refers to *The Girl of His Dreams* as no ordinary boy-meets-girl romance, and says it is a "special treat" when read in conjunction with *The Dollar Man* and *The War on Villa Street*.

Related Titles

The character of Willis Pierce first appears in Mazer's novel *The Dollar Man* (1974). Here, a much younger Willis is a minor character and not a very likeable one. He cruelly torments and makes fun of the main character, who is overweight and awkward. Mazer, himself, was intrigued by this character whom he had created. He felt that Willis's tough, insensitive behavior would probably be a facade, which prevented him from revealing the goodness underneath. In *The War on Villa Street* (1978), Mazer lets the reader see beyond Willis's tough guy facade. Here, Willis, an eighth grader, is the main character. He is a loner who runs to vent his frustrations caused by a gang that torments him and a father who is an alcoholic. His father's drunken appearance at an important race causes him to become even more of a loner and to refuse participating in any other running events. This humiliation is perhaps the reason why in *The Girl of His Dreams*, Willis runs alone and only dreams of being a champion runner.



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Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

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