

I Will Call It Georgie's Blues Short Guide

I Will Call It Georgie's Blues by Suzanne Newton

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Overview

In Newton's award-winning novel, the Reverend Richard E. Sloan, pastor of the Gideon Baptist Church in Gideon, North Carolina would like everyone to think that he has the perfect family, but the private family is very different from the public one. While Mrs. Sloan tries to present a united front with her husband, older daughter Aileen has already shown her arrogance in dating the town's bad boy; and signs of rebellion are slowly growing in Neal, the Sloan's fifteen-year-old son. But perhaps the most complicated and terrifying changes are those that are going on unnoticed within meek seven-year-old Georgie. As Neal begins to see those changes, he realizes that he cannot cope with them alone and that there is no one for him to turn to for help.

I Will Call It Georgie's Blues was one of the first young adult novels to discuss the problem of emotional abuse within families. Without attempting to analyze the situation or discuss it from a psychological point of view, Newton tells the story of the Sloan family through the eyes of teen-age Neal. It is through Neal's eyes that the reader looks behind the calm, perfect facade of a minister's family to find rebellion, confusion, and psychological problems.

Critics have called this a powerful, emotionally-charged novel—one that is full of pain, suffering and hope.

About the Author

Born Suzanne Latham in Bunnlevel, North Carolina, on October 8, 1936, she started school as a third grader because of her reading ability. Although it took her some time to catch up to her classmates in cursive writing and arithmetic, she was always creating short stories and poems. After graduating from Duke University, she taught English, then married Carl R. Newton in 1957. She quit teaching within a few years to raise a family of four children. Although finding time in her busy life was not easy, she never stopped writing and was soon selling short stories to magazines. When one of her stories became too long to be published as a magazine article, she published her first book *Purro and the Prattleberries*. As her children became older, she reentered the teaching field to become a writer-in-residence at Meredith College and to serve as a consultant in creative writing for the North Carolina Artists-in-Schools program. She travels throughout the state helping young people express themselves through writing.

Several of Newton's early novels won awards for juvenile literature from the North Carolina chapter of the American Association of University Women. *I Will Call It Georgie's Blues* was the first to win national acclaim. In 1983, it was chosen as an American Library Association Notable Book, an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults, and a New York Times Best Book of the Year. Later it was selected as an American Library Association Best of the Best Books for Young Adults, 1966-1986.

Setting

I Will Call It Georgie's Blues is set in Gideon, North Carolina, a small southern town where everybody knows everybody else. A typical resident is Miss Patterson who is like "an outdoor TV camera" on Water Street where the Sloans live. According to Neal, she sees everything and tells everyone. This setting makes it even more surprising that the problems within the Sloan family have remained hidden for as long as they have.

Social Sensitivity

While several young adult novels have been written about the problems of physical abuse in families, little fiction has addressed the problem of emotional abuse. That this novel addresses emotional abuse within the setting of a minister's family makes the book even more powerful. However, Newton's novel is not about religion but about the decline of a family and the realization that problems can develop in any home. Like many works in the genre of the problem novel, the book does not analyze the abuse or present solutions; rather, its intent is to bring the problem into the open and provide a vehicle for discussion.

While *I Will Call It Georgie's Blues* does not really discuss religion, the book does ask the reader to deal with the stereotype of the "preacher's kid."

Although Aileen seems intent on doing everything that she can to be the opposite of the image, even if it means destroying herself, much is left for the reader to suppose. On the other hand, Neal shows that he can break out of the mold and just be himself, with his rebellion involving jazz music and a mild fight with Pete. That *I Will Call It Georgie's Blues* does not rely on profanity or descriptions of sex and physical violence to get its points across to the reader is a tribute to the subtle intensity of the novel.

Literary Qualities

Neal is a very effective narrator of this novel, for he seems to compose his thoughts the way he composes music.

The result creates more than an interesting story; it creates a mood as well.

His descriptions throughout the novel are enriched by figures of speech.

Thoughts "skittered away like little black bugs," and Georgie standing before Reverend Sloan reminds Neal of a "mouse in a python's cage." Early in the book, Neal looks at Georgie and sees a face "like that of an old person, full of pain and desperation." Even the Reverend Sloan's words "sizzled like spit on hot metal."

Music plays an important unifying role in this novel and comparisons with a musical composition can be seen throughout. Newton seems to create in words the way Neal creates in music.

The music that Neal plays is jazz, a musical form which is highly subtle and often features complex improvisations. Blues music, a foundation of jazz, is frequently melancholic and mournful and is a fitting style for Neal to use in his composition for his brother. The Sloan family itself is like a piece of music. When the individual notes stand alone they mean one thing.

But when they are put together, they become dynamic and take on new meaning. When one note or one member of the family changes, everything changes. The result is a novel that is like jazz music with its rhythmic intensity and with the characters serving as the syncopation in a jazz composition that finally converges into an emotional climax.



Themes and Characters

The story is told by Neal Sloan, one of the few people who has any possibility of knowing what the Sloan family is really like. Yet even Neal is unaware of everything that happens in the family. All the Sloans seem to be hiding something or denying the existence of reality. Mrs. Sloan is intent on being a good minister's wife and presenting a united front to the children although she realizes she is hiding her true feelings and often has to go to bed with one of her "headaches." Aileen, a senior in high school, has already turned into a "bad girl" by running around with Pete Cauthen, whom Neal calls the "ultimate bum." Now she is in danger of flunking English and failing to graduate. Young Georgie is the most fragile, delicate, and perceptive member of the family, always trying to please his parents and to earn their love but never quite succeeding.

Georgie is, in fact, afraid of his own father. Neal himself has tried to stay in the background, never drawing attention to himself, hiding his true feelings and his ability to play jazz piano. Even his piano lessons with Mrs. Talbot and his practicing on the church piano are hidden. None of this is seen or suspected by the community as a whole because Reverend Sloan is very careful of his public image. The anger and fear of failure that he feels is carefully hidden behind the exterior of the concerned and caring minister and the perfect minister's family.

A major thread throughout this novel is the difference between real and false, reality versus make-believe, and the public in contrast to the private lives of people. The problems within the Sloan family have existed for some time, unknown to any outside the family. It is the changes in Georgie which bring them to a head and make them public.

Everything about Georgie seems to be an afterthought. His Sunday suit is a hand-me-down from Neal. His bedroom is nothing more than a closed off space at the back of the second floor hall. When Georgie was first born, it was Aileen who assumed the role of his mother. Then, after she became interested in boys, there was no one to take her place. It is only when Neal begins spending less time at Mrs. Talbot's that he sees the frailty of Georgie and learns about his brother's theory of real and make-believe. In the end, it is Neal, not Aileen, who stands up to his father to save Georgie. But he is too late as Georgie turns within himself and suffers a total emotional collapse.

That Neal is able to stand up to Reverend Sloan develops naturally.

Throughout the work, he matures.

Newton shows the reader a young man ever more able to be honest to himself and to his father. In the end, Neal is finally able to rid himself of the last false thing in his life—his secret piano playing—and to let the whole community see the real Neal. Although nothing is really resolved, Neal leaves the reader with the hope that the rest of the family will become "real" too. In *Contemporary Authors*, Newton says that she tends to create heroic characters who stand up and say the right things.

In this novel, that character is Neal.



Topics for Discussion

1. Neal says that "preacher's kids aren't any different from anybody else." In reply, Pete says "maybe not but they're supposed to be." (Chapter 1) Why does Pete say that? What is the stereotype of a "preacher's kid"?
2. Describe a typical dinner at the Sloan house. Why does Neal compare dinner at home to a game of dodge ball? (Chapter 2)
3. What is ironic about the sermon title "Blessed Are the Peacemakers" that Neal and Georgie see in front of the Gideon Baptist Church? (Chapter 1)
4. Georgie tells Neal that he believes some people in the Sloan family are real and some are false. (Chapter 9) What does Georgie mean? Who does he think is real and who is false? Why?
5. Why does Neal think that his father would be happier with a robot family? (Chapter 17) How does Neal's idea of the robot family compare to Georgie's theory of real and false people?
6. On the steps of Bailey's store, Pete tells Neal that "being good all the time just ain't real." (Chapter 18) What does Pete mean? How does this statement fit in with Georgie's theory?
7. Each of the Sloan children has chosen a different way to deal with the family's problem. What are these ways and why was each selected?
8. What does Suzanne Newton do in the novel to insure that Neal does not become the stereotyped "preacher's kid"?
9. Neal tells Georgie that when Reverend Sloan finds out who started the rumor "he'll be the soul of Christian charity." (Chapter 17) However, when Reverend Sloan places the blame on Georgie he becomes "quietly violent."

Why?
10. Why does Mrs. Sloan ask Neal to stop visiting Mrs. Talbot? How does his decision bring about a change in Neal?
11. Describe Gideon. How does setting this story in a small southern town add to the impact of the novel? Compare Gideon to the town or city in which you live or to a town or city nearby.
12. What are the blues in music?

Why did Newton select I Will Call It Georgie's Blues for the title of the novel?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In a novel, a dynamic character is one who undergoes some basic change in character as a result of the effects of the events on that character. A static character remains basically unchanged.

Identify the major dynamic and static characters in this novel and justify your choices with examples from the book.

2. Research jazz music. What are the major types of jazz? In what ways is jazz similar to other types of music? In what ways is it different? Why did the author have Neal become a jazz piano player?

3. While physical abuse in families often appears in the news, emotional abuse is much more subtle. Research the issue of emotional abuse in families. What are its signs? What can be done to prevent it or to deal with it once it develops?

4. Write a brief paper on a famous jazz pianist such as Thelonious Monk, Count Basie, Nat "King" Cole, Dave Brubeck, Duke Ellington, or Fats Waller.

5. *I Will Call It Georgie's Blues* is told by Neal. Explore the influence that his point of view has on the story. Select an incident in the story and tell it from the point of view of another member of the Sloan family or from several different points of view.

6. While Neal has demonstrated his love of jazz to the entire town of Gideon, the author does not indicate exactly what happened to Georgie and the rest of the Sloan family. Examine other realistic novels and explore why many contemporary authors are using this type of open ending rather than "they lived happily ever after" in novels for young adults.

7. Georgie is suffering from "profound emotional shock," a form of psychological illness. Research this or another psychological illness. Then try to discover what forms of professional help and therapy are available in your area to deal with these problems.

For Further Reference

Holtze, Sally Holmes, ed. *Sixth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1989. Includes comments by Newton on her life and writing as well as a portrait.

Marowski, Daniel, ed. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 35. Detroit: Gale Research, 1985. Contains abstracts and complete reviews of her work through 1985 from periodicals such as *School Library Journal*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *The New York Times Book Review*. Also includes a portrait.

Metzger, Linda, ed. *Contemporary Authors*. New Revision Series. Vol. 14.

Detroit: Gale, 1985. Gives a brief overview of Newton's personal life and career, lists works and honors, and provides a few comments from Newton on her writing.

Ward, Martha E., ed. *Authors of Books for Young People*. 3d ed. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1990. Includes brief biographical information.

Related Titles

Although Suzanne Newton has written other adolescent novels, none has been as well received as *I Will Call It Georgie's Blues*. Several follow her pattern of creating characters who learn to stand up and be themselves. Rosalee Brigham in *C/O Arnold's Corners* helps the community learn to accept outsiders such as the "hippie" artist who has come to town. In *M. V. Sexton Speaking*, Martha Venable Sexton turns sixteen, gets her first job, and presses for information about her parents who died when she was six. Also learning to cope with family problems is Arden in *An End to Perfect*. Her brother Hill is going to live with his grandparents and her best friend Dor Jo runs away from her violent mother and is taken in by Arden's family.

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