

The Last Song Study Guide

The Last Song by Nicholas Sparks (author)

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Plot Summary

The Last Song is a novel by bestselling author Nicholas Sparks. In this novel, Ronnie Miller has spent the last three years not speaking to her father because of his decision to leave the family. However, Ronnie finds herself forced to spend the entire summer at her father's home in North Carolina. Initially, Ronnie does all she can to avoid her father by hanging out with a new friend on the beach, but overtime Ronnie finds herself reconnecting with her father in a more meaningful way than she could ever have imagined. The Last Song is a novel of growth and maturity, but also a novel of love that takes the reader's breath away.

Ronnie Miller is angry with her father for leaving the family without explanation. Ronnie assumes that her father had an affair and this is what has caused him to abandon her, her mother, and her little brother, Jonah. For this reason, Ronnie has stopped playing the piano, a passion she and her father once shared, and has not spoken to her father for three years. However, Ronnie finds herself forced to spend the summer with her father.

In the beginning, Ronnie spends as much time away from the house as possible. Ronnie makes a new friend in Blaze, a girl her age who is also struggling with parental issues. However, when Blaze's boyfriend, Marcus, makes a public pass on Ronnie, Blaze retaliates by setting Ronnie up for a shoplifting charge, her third in recent years. Ronnie finds herself forced to turn to her father for support as she tries to get everyone to believe that she did nothing wrong.

A short time later, Ronnie's father shows her a nest of turtle eggs. Ronnie becomes obsessed with the nest, frightened that a raccoon might attempt to eat the eggs before they emerge. Ronnie spends several nights sleeping beside the nest and harassing a volunteer at the local aquarium to place a cage over the nest to protect it. This volunteer, Will, is a local teenager Ronnie literally ran into on the beach her first day in North Carolina. Will decides to spend the night sleeping with the turtle nest beside Ronnie in order to protect it before the cage can be placed.

Ronnie and Will spend an afternoon together after sharing guard duty over the turtle eggs. Ronnie greatly enjoys herself. However, Ronnie begins to doubt herself and her trust in Will when a girl tells her that Will is a serial dater. Ronnie shuts Will out, but later regrets her actions, asking for his forgiveness. Will and Ronnie begin to see one another regularly. Will's friends resent Ronnie's presence in his life because of the time it takes him from them and Will's mother dislikes Ronnie. However, Will and Ronnie manage to forge ahead despite these difficulties.

On the day that the turtle eggs hatch, Ronnie discovers that her father is dying from stomach cancer. Ronnie is devastated by this news, especially due to the fact that she did not speak to him for such a long time. When Ronnie's mother comes to take her back to New York, Ronnie makes the decision to stay with her father and help him through the final stages of the illness. Ronnie shuts out everyone in her grief, including



Will, struggling within herself to find a way to honor her father and make up for her childish behavior after the end of her parents' marriage. Eventually Ronnie realizes the best gift she can give to her father is to embrace her own gift, to return to the piano.

Ronnie finishes a song her father had been writing before his illness forced him to stop. Ronnie begins playing for her father each day as the cancer slowly takes away his life. After her father's death, Ronnie returns to New York and auditions to attend Julliard. Will, whom Ronnie thought was gone from her life for good, comes to New York to attend school and to be close to her.



Prologue and Chapters 1-4

Prologue and Chapters 1-4 Summary

The Last Song is Nicholas Sparks' thirteenth novel. Eight of his novels have vaulted to the number one spot on the New York Times' bestsellers list. This book was made into a movie starring Miley Cyrus.

In the Prologue, Ronnie is preparing for her father's funeral. Her mother comes into the room and asks her to tell her the story of her final months with her father. Ronnie thinks of when it all began and shows her mother a newspaper clipping of a news article about a church fire. Ronnie believes it all began with the fire.

In Chapter 1, Ronnie is in a car with her mother and her younger brother, Jonah. Ronnie is being forced to spend the summer with her father in North Carolina, a man she has not spoken to in three years because he deserted the family. Ronnie has also not played the piano in that amount of time even though she was something of a child prodigy because it was something she once shared with her father. Ronnie wishes she was already eighteen and could stay in New York, but she will not turn eighteen until August. Ronnie is also somewhat worried about some legal trouble she got into in New York when she was caught twice shoplifting. If Ronnie gets into trouble again, she could face more trouble back in New York as well as a criminal record.

In Chapter 2, Steve plays the piano as he waits for his ex-wife to arrive with his two children. When they arrive, Steve is thrilled to see them. Jonah returns Steve's enthusiasm, but Ronnie quickly disappears. Steve invites Kim, his ex-wife, into the house and they speak for a few minutes, mostly about Ronnie's behavioral problems since the separation and divorce. After Kim leaves, Steve takes him to the workshop in the backyard and shows him the stained glass window he is making for the church that was damaged in a fire the previous spring.

In Chapter 3, Ronnie goes to the beach where a carnival is taking place. Ronnie wanders around alone and ends up watching a volleyball game for a few minutes. Ronnie grows bored and begins to walk off, but a stray shot causes one of the players to run into her and spill her coke on her shirt. As Ronnie is attempting to clean her shirt a few minutes later, a girl runs into her and makes the mess worse. Ronnie ends up buying a Nemo shirt to cover her stained shirt. She also makes friends with the girl who ran into her, whose name she learns is Blaze. Ronnie meets Blaze's boyfriend, Marcus, but finds him somewhat frightening in his intensity and his sudden interest in her.

In Chapter 4, Marcus finds Ronnie fascinating almost as much as he has grown bored with Blaze. Marcus attempts to seduce Ronnie, suggesting the two of them run off to Florida together, but Ronnie brushes him off and goes to join Blaze where she is waiting in line to buy some French fries for Marcus.



Prologue and Chapters 1-4 Analysis

In the prologue of the novel, the reader learns that Ronnie's father has died. As she gets ready for the funeral, something that is a deep emotional struggle, suggesting Ronnie was close to her father, her mother asks her about the past six months she spent with her father. Ronnie suggests it began with a fire at a church. This suggests to the reader that the fire has a significant impact on the plot of the novel even though the reader is not clear what caused this fire or what this church has to do with the main characters of the novel at this point.

As the novel begins, the reader discovers that contrary to the deep feelings expressed in the prologue about Ronnie's relationship with her father, that Ronnie and her father have been estranged for three years because of her father's decision to leave the family. This abandonment, as Ronnie sees it, has caused Ronnie a great deal of emotional upheaval and caused disruptions in her behavior, suggesting that despite Ronnie's denials, she was very close to her father before the end of his marriage to her mother. This gives the reader a little more understanding into Ronnie and her actions and paves a path for the reader to follow in finding how Ronnie and her father eventually made amends.

Ronnie is angry at having to spend the summer in North Carolina, so she disappears so that she will not have to speak to her father. Ronnie meets several people on her first excursion into town, including Will, Blaze, and Marcus. Each of these people will play a significant role in Ronnie's life over the next six months. Already in these early pages, the reader can see that Marcus is a frightening person and his impact on Ronnie will not be positive. However, neither Will nor Blaze seem to present a malevolent attitude, giving the reader the impression that good friendships might blossom for Ronnie in these characters.



Chapters 5-10

Chapters 5-10 Summary

In Chapter 5, after the volleyball game, Will turns down a date with his ex-girlfriend, Ashley, causing his friend Scott to become angry with him because this means that Ashley's friend, Cassie, will not go out with him. As they debate this, they go to a nearby snack bar for burgers. Marcus and his friends come in and start a fight with Scott over a secret they all share from the previous spring. Ronnie breaks up the fight when she notices a toddler who is lost and is frightened by the yelling. When everything has calmed, Ronnie goes with Marcus and Blaze to Bower's Point, a local hangout spot. Will overhears this and finds himself telling her dad where she has gone when he shows up a few minutes later. A local cop, who is friends with Ronnie's dad, insists on going to get Ronnie for him.

In Chapter 6, Ronnie is hanging out with Marcus and the others when a cop shows up, telling them to leave. Then the cop turns to Ronnie and insists that he take her home. Ronnie is embarrassed and accuses her father of sending the cop intentionally to embarrass her. The next morning, Ronnie is convinced that her father will ground her and is surprised when he does not. Ronnie leaves the house and runs into Blaze.

In Chapter 7, the next day, Will cannot stop thinking about Ronnie.

In Chapter 8, Ronnie takes Blaze to a local diner to get some food. They talk and Ronnie tells Blaze about her legal problems. Marcus and his friends show up. Marcus insists on sitting next to Ronnie. Marcus and his friends steal all of Blaze's food even though she has not eaten in days. Marcus then makes a point of inviting Ronnie to a party that night.

In Chapter 9, after spending the day with Jonah, Steve waits up for Ronnie. As he does, he plays the piano and thinks about days he spent with his father just before his father's death. Steve's father was a difficult, unemotional man who refused to show affection to his son even as he lay dying. Kim once told a marriage counselor that it was this experience with his parents that left Steve unable to share his feelings.

In Chapter 10, at the party that night, Marcus makes a point of making it appear that Ronnie is coming on to him. Rather than do anything, Ronnie simply leaves. The next morning, Ronnie is worried about what Blaze might think so she decides to go look for her. Before she leaves, Ronnie hears her father playing some music she once played at Carnegie Hall on the piano and it annoys her. Ronnie tells her father she does not want to hear or see the piano ever again. Later, when Ronnie finds Blaze, it is in a local music store. Blaze is clearly angry with Ronnie and she storms out. As Ronnie follows a few minutes later, the store's alarms begin to ring. Blaze slipped some CDs and rare 45 records into her bag.



Chapters 5-10 Analysis

In these chapters, Ronnie's relationship with Blaze grows. It soon becomes clear to the reader that Blaze has problems with her parents' divorce and does not feel as though she fits in with her parents' new relationships. Like Ronnie, Blaze is rebelling against her parents in a way to act out her confusion and sense of betrayal that is a result of their divorce and new relationships. Blaze has turned to Marcus, a boy who is trouble in this small town and the last person her parents would ever want Blaze to hang out with. Marcus is using Blaze, causing her a great deal of heartache as he turns his attentions to Ronnie. The reader can see danger in this relationship for Blaze as she continues to cling to him and he continues to use her. Not only this, but Marcus is clearly trouble for Ronnie as well, especially when the reader considers his sudden obsession with her.

Ronnie tries hard to make everyone think she is this hard, troubled teen when in reality she has a big heart and is deeply sensitive. Ronnie is attracted to Blaze because she is someone who needs a friend, someone Ronnie can help. This shows the reader that Ronnie is full of contradictions and that her bad behavior is clearly just a reaction to missing her father. Therefore it is easy to believe that Blaze set her up for her latest shoplifting charge.



Chapters 11-17

Chapters 11-17 Summary

In Chapter 11, Steve and Jonah spend the day putting up a barrier in front of the alcove where the piano is located so that Ronnie will no longer have to see it. Later they go to fly kites on the beach. When Ronnie calls to ask Steve to pick her up at the police station, he goes without question and listens to her story. Steve tells Ronnie that he believes her and will do all he can to help her. Then Steve shows Ronnie a turtle egg nest on the beach. Steve has a restless night as Ronnie insists on sleeping on the beach and he worries for her safety.

In Chapter 12, Ronnie wakes tired and sore on the beach. Will comes up and tells her he is there to mark the nest as a volunteer for the aquarium but that the cage that is designed to protect the nest from raccoons will not arrive until the following day. Will promises to call and try to get the cage there sooner. When Will leaves, Ronnie has breakfast with her dad and Jonah before going in search for Blaze. When Ronnie finds Blaze, she tries to get her to tell the police the truth, but Blaze refuses. Blaze tells Ronnie even if she wanted to, she would not because she is afraid of what Marcus might do. Ronnie is deeply disappointed. Later that night, as Ronnie prepares for bed, she sees a raccoon approaching the turtle nest.

In Chapter 13, the next morning, Ronnie rushes into Blakelee Brakes where Will works and accuses him of doing nothing to help the turtle nest. Will chases Ronnie down after she leaves and tells her that he did call the aquarium, but that there are multiple other turtle nests all along the beach. That night, Will shows up as Ronnie prepares to sleep with the turtle nest and insists on helping her protect them. They talk for a while and Will learns new things about Ronnie. The next day, Will takes Ronnie to the aquarium to see a full grown loggerhead turtle, the same type of turtle in the nest Ronnie is protecting. Afterward they spend the day together.

In Chapter 14, Ronnie goes to watch Will play in a volleyball game. During the game, Ashley comes up to Ronnie and tells her that Will is a serial dater and everything they did that day he had done with dozens of other girls. Ronnie feels played and goes home alone. At home, Ronnie begins to pack, determined to go back to New York. Steve stops her, not because he wants her to stay but because of her legal troubles. He wants to check with the cops first. Later, Will shows up and Ronnie refuses to speak to him. Will decides to wait on the beach and he waits there for hours. Finally Ronnie goes out to speak to him. Ronnie tells him what Ashley said and learns that Ashley is his ex-girlfriend. Before Ronnie can apologize, Will leaves. Out on the beach, Ronnie can see Marcus playing with a fireball.

In Chapter 15, Marcus is disappointed to see that Ronnie and Will are together. Marcus is happy now that Blaze has set up Ronnie.



In Chapter 16, Steve thinks of the day he wandered into Pastor Harris' church for the first time as he puts Jonah to bed. The next morning, Steve aches with a desire to play the piano. Notes begin to play in his head and he quickly writes them down. Later he finds himself thinking about God and his desire to find proof of him.

In Chapter 17, Ronnie wakes to find her father outside speaking with Pastor Harris and Officer Pete. Ronnie is disappointed to learn that the owner of the music store will not consider dropping the charges against her. Over breakfast, Steve encourages Ronnie to make amends with Will. Ronnie goes to Blakelee Brakes and apologizes to Will. Will not only accepts her apology, but he kisses her. When Ronnie returns to the house, Steve tells Ronnie about his reasons for making the stained glass window for Pastor Harris's church.

Chapters 11-17 Analysis

Ronnie is arrested for shoplifting, but rather than punish her, Ronnie is surprised to find that her father believes her to be innocent. Ronnie's experiences with her mother have shown her that parents blame first and listen second, which causes her a great deal of surprise each time her father fails to punish her for her behavior. In fact, if the reader will notice, Steve has gone out of his way to make Ronnie happy by making her meals that fit her vegetarian diet and by covering up the piano so she will not have to see it. Steve clearly wants to make amends with Ronnie and make this summer pleasant and, despite herself, Ronnie is quickly finding herself willing to allow amends to begin.

Will makes another appearance in Ronnie's life the day after she is arrested. Ronnie and Will find themselves protecting a turtle nest from raccoons, a situation that allows them to spend time together and to find some common ground. Soon they are spending the day together and enjoying each other's company. When Ronnie hears from Ashley that Will is something of a player, she quickly believes her even though she should not have. This is a lesson in trust for Ronnie that she learns quickly. It is clear to the reader that although Ronnie is quite mature for her age, she still has a great amount of growing up to do.



Chapters 18-24

Chapters 18-24 Summary

In Chapter 18, Scott complains to Will that he is damaging Scott's chances of getting a volleyball scholarship by spending more time with Ronnie than practicing volleyball. A few minutes later Ronnie comes and invites Will to dinner at her house. Will insists on going to his house to change his clothes. Ronnie is shocked when she sees Will's house.

In Chapter 19, Ronnie is shocked when she learns that Will is the son of Tom Blakelee, owner of Blakelee Brakes. On top of this, when Ronnie meets Will's mother, it is clear that she does not approve of Ronnie. Tom, on the other hand, is very kind and shows Ronnie is remote control airplane. Will, on the other hand, fits in well with Ronnie's family and enjoys playing liar's poker with them.

In Chapter 20, after losing at liar's poker to Jonah, Will and Ronnie go for a walk on the beach. Will thinks of the differences between Ronnie and Ashley and finds that Ronnie is much more substantial than Ashley. They talk and Ronnie tells Will his wealth makes no difference to her. Will tells Ronnie about the death of his brother in a car accident several years ago and how Scott, who was in the backseat with him, saved him and his mother. It is for this reason that Will constantly feels he owes Scott something.

In Chapter 21, Ronnie and Will spend the afternoon playing in his pool. Again Ronnie feels the disapproval of Will's mother. Later, Ronnie tells Will all about her legal problems. Will is sympathetic and offers to go to court with her. Will tells Ronnie his plans to go to Vanderbilt and she tells him that she has been offered a place at Julliard, but she is not sure she wants it.

In Chapter 22, Marcus watches Ronnie and Will on the beach and is jealous. Marcus thinks about a party he plans to throw that night in a house he has broken into.

In Chapter 23, Will thinks the summer is passing too fast and he is worried about what will happen when he and Ronnie are separated. They are spending more time sleeping with the turtle nest because of recent attacks on other nests and spend one night hunting spider crabs. While they are the beach, Scott comes up and asks Will if he will start attending more practices before the big tournament that is coming up, the same weekend as the wedding for Will's sister. Ronnie makes him agree to go, but in exchange she has to agree to go to the wedding. When Will takes Ronnie home, they take a look at her dad's stained glass window.

In Chapter 24, Ronnie goes to the church and finds her father working on a song that is more contemporary than anything he has written before. Ronnie notices for the first time how thin and tired her father looks after he has a coughing fit.



Chapters 18-24 Analysis

Scott is placing a great deal of pressure on Will to help him win the volleyball tournament so that he might get a scholarship for college. Will feels that he has to help Scott because Scott once saved his and his mother's lives after a car accident that took the life of Will's baby brother. When Will tells Ronnie about this car accident, the reader finally understands why Will is so determined to keep the secret that Scott burned down Pastor Harris' church while playing with bottle rockets on the beach. It is a lot of pressure for Will to keep this secret for his friend, but he does it. Will is a loyal friend and it is a pity that Scott takes advantage of that fact.

Ronnie has clearly come to trust Will, as evidenced by the fact that she tells him about her legal troubles, but she continues to struggle with trust with other people in her life, such as her dad. The relationship between Ronnie and her dad is changing, however, perhaps leading to a more mature relationship that will help Ronnie move past the anger that caused her not to speak to her father for so long. The reader worries, however, that with the knowledge that Steve dies at the end of the novel that Ronnie will not be able to fully forgive him quickly enough to allow him to know it before he dies. That moment is clearly coming, as the reader can see by Steve's coughing fit, fits of pain, and weight loss.



Chapters 25-28

Chapters 25-28 Summary

In Chapter 25, Steve and Jonah have a conversation in which Jonah asks to move in with his father on a permanent basis. It breaks Steve's heart to have to say no. Later, Steve comes to the realization that walking the beach to find God as Pastor Harris often does will not work for him because Steve has found God in his children.

In Chapter 26, Ronnie tracks down Blaze to ask her once again to tell the truth and finds out that Blaze's mother has kicked her out of the house. Ronnie feels bad for Blaze and offers her a place to stay if she ever needs it. At home, Ronnie worries about what to wear for the wedding. Jonah gives Ronnie all the money in his piggy bank, all money he has taken from Ronnie to keep her secrets.

Ronnie goes to the wedding for Will's sister, Megan, but feels out of place and finds herself standing alone a great deal of the time. Toward the end of the evening, Ronnie is standing on the deck near Tom's yacht when Will finds her. Will asks Ronnie onto the boat with him when Marcus suddenly appears. Marcus makes some unfortunate comments and Will charges him. They fall into the stakes holding up the back of the tent under which the wedding reception is continuing to take place. The back edge of the tent collapses. Ronnie is humiliated, especially when she can hear Will's mother blaming her for the whole ordeal. Ronnie asks Tom to take her home and tells him to inform Will she will not see him again. The next morning, however, Megan comes and asks Ronnie to rethink her decision to end her relationship with Will.

In Chapter 27, Marcus is proud of his scheme to cause Will to knock down the tent at the wedding reception. He becomes worried that by doing this he has given Will ammunition to cause Marcus to go to jail. Marcus decides to split town, but in order to do so, he must make more money than usual. Marcus has Blaze make nine fireballs, three more than usual, not noticing that she has gotten lighter fluid on her shirt.

In Chapter 28, Will plays well in the volleyball tournament because Ronnie is there and she has asked him to do his best. Will and Scott make it through each level of the tournament and are playing the final game for the championship when Will sees Blaze catch fire on the pier during one of Marcus' fire shows. No one seems to be helping Blaze, so Will rushes to her and finds the fire out, but Blaze writhing in pain on the pier. Marcus is nowhere around. Ronnie has rushed to the scene as well. Will decides there is no time to wait for an ambulance and instructs Ronnie to help him drive her to the hospital in his truck. Once there, Will and Ronnie wait for hours for word on Blaze's condition. When Blaze's mother finally comes down, Ronnie consoles her.

After leaving the hospital, Will finds Marcus and his friends at Bower's Point. Will beats up all three of them for what they allowed to happen to Blaze. The next morning, Scott is very angry with Will for leaving the game so close to winning. Will tells Scott that he is



done protecting him and that he should tell the police the truth about the fire at Pastor Harris' church.

Chapters 25-28 Analysis

Even as Steve seems to have found some peace in his life, Ronnie's life turns to turmoil. The wedding of Will's sister, Megan, is intimidating and leaves Ronnie wondering if she is good enough for Will. This doubt is made worse when Marcus shows up and causes Will to collapse part of the tent where the wedding rehearsal is taking place. Now Ronnie knows for sure what Will's mother thinks of her and she cannot see the possibility of a future with Will. It seems that their relationship is over when Megan surprises Ronnie by asking her not to let their mother roll over her so easily.

Ronnie is still struggling to find her place in the world and to understand who she is as a person. For this reason, being disliked by Will's mother makes Ronnie doubt her own self-worth and her ability to be a good partner for Will. Ronnie allows these self-doubts to get the better of her, but eventually gives in to her heart by going back to Will. The reader, however, sees this episode as foreshadowing, a suggestion that walking away from Will might be a habit for Ronnie when things grow difficult.

Blaze, who has blindly followed Marcus because she feels as though she has no other hope, learns the hard way just how little Marcus cares about her. Blaze catches on fire during one of Marcus' fireball shows and Marcus simply walks away from her. It is Will and Ronnie who come to Blaze's rescue, an old classmate and the girl she purposely created trouble for. It is ironic that these two people, two people who should care less about what happens to Blaze, are the ones who take the extra step to help her.



Chapters 29-34

Chapters 29-34 Summary

In Chapter 29, the next week is tense for Ronnie and Will, not only because of the events of the recent past, but because it is nearly time for Will to go off to college and Ronnie to face the consequences of her shoplifting arrest. The tension is lifted somewhat when the nest of turtle eggs finally hatches. The hatching draws a big crowd and Ronnie is somewhat annoyed at having to share this moment, but is awed by the actions of the tiny turtles. Afterward, Ronnie, Jonah, Will, and Steve are talking about the experience when Steve has a coughing fit that leaves blood smeared on his face.

In Chapter 30, Steve learned in February that he was dying. When he learned that he had stomach cancer that had metastasized into his lungs and pancreas, he knew no amount of chemo therapy or radiation would save his life. For this reason, Steve choose instead to live the remaining year of his life enjoying a visit from his children.

In Chapter 31, Ronnie is devastated to learn her father's prognosis. Ronnie tries to cling to hope, but Steve is honest with her about his situation. Ronnie immediately begins to regret her behavior toward her father and her choice not to speak to him for three years. Ronnie is further devastated when she hears Jonah begin to cry and protest when their father tells him the news. Pastor Harris joins Ronnie and tells Ronnie how much this visit from her and Jonah has meant to their father. That night, Will insists on staying with Ronnie and Jonah, sleeping on the couch. Ronnie cannot sleep and she spends most of the night looking through her father's Bible.

In Chapter 32, Will offers to stay with Ronnie and Jonah until their father gets out of the hospital, but Ronnie insists that he leave for college on time. As they talk, they can see Jonah outside by the work shed. When they go out, they find Jonah attempting to finish the stained glass window for his father. Will and Ronnie offer to help and spend the next day and night working on the window. Pastor Harris stops by the next day and is amazed by the window. When Will learns what the window is for, he tells Ronnie about Scott, the bottle rocket, and the fire at Pastor Harris' church. Ronnie becomes angry when she learns that Will has been protecting Scott all this time. Ronnie ends their relationship. Afterward, Will goes to his father and asks a favor.

In Chapter 33, in the hospital, Ronnie asks her father a lot of questions about their summer together, finally forcing him to admit to her that he played the piano to keep the pain at bay. This causes Ronnie a great deal of guilt because he covered up the piano for her. Ronnie also grills him about his pain level and what will happen to him as the cancer progresses. Kim, Ronnie's mother, arrives a short time later. Kim wants to take Ronnie and Jonah home with her, but Ronnie announces that she wants to stay. Ronnie does not want her father to die alone or be left to a hospice. As she argues with her mother, Ronnie realize it was her mother who was unfaithful in her marriage, not Steve as Ronnie had always thought.



In Chapter 34, Steve recalls the day he returned to New York during a concert tour break to surprise Kim and accidentally saw her in a restaurant with a man who was clearly her lover. Steve recalls returning to the city where his next concert was scheduled without seeing Kim or telling her what he saw. Kim and the kids come to say goodbye to Steve. Steve has trouble saying goodbye to a devastated Jonah.

Chapters 29-34 Analysis

Ronnie learns that her father is dying and suddenly sees the past three years through the eyes of an adult and regrets every lost moment with her father. Ronnie pulls away from everyone around her except her father and begins to mourn. Ronnie even pushes Will away, at first out of grief and later out of the mistaken idea that Will has harbored the criminal who took some joy away from her father. In reality, Ronnie comes to realize that she is more guilty than Scott of taking away her father's joy, but that her father's love for her was more important to him than a stained glass window or playing the piano.

The reader watches Ronnie struggle with her sudden thrust into adulthood and wonders how she will handle the next few months as her father dies. Ronnie takes a very adult stand when she refuses to go home and allow her father to die alone. There is no anger at her mother when she learns the truth about the end of their marriage, which is a surprise. However, Ronnie has matured enough at this point to realize that anger does not solve anything. Besides, Ronnie has already punished her father for three years for something he did not do. Ronnie makes the decision to remain with her father, a decision that is both selfless and courageous. Ronnie has clearly done a great deal of growing during this summer, but also needs to do a great deal more. The reader suspects that the next few months will bring on that necessary growth for Ronnie.



Chapters 35-37 and Epilogue

Chapters 35-37 and Epilogue Summary

In Chapter 35, after her mother and Jonah leave, Ronnie prays with Pastor Harris. After that they pray frequently together. Ronnie has her mother send her the stack of letters her father sent to her over the past three years and she finally reads them. As the weeks pass, Ronnie notices how fast her father is growing frail. However, he continues to go on walks each day and watching the progress of rebuilding Pastor Harris' church. The rebuilding effort had been stalled due to a lack of money, but recently a new benefactor has come forward. Ronnie sees Will's dad there one day and wonders if he is the source of the new money.

Through September and October, Ronnie and Steve fall into a routine. When Steve feels well enough, they go fishing or sightseeing, when he is not they stay in and read. One day Steve and Ronnie come home from a trip to the pier and see Blaze and her mother waiting for them. Blaze tells Ronnie that she has told the district attorney that Ronnie is innocent in the shoplifting case. Blaze also told the district attorney that Marcus was responsible for the burning of Pastor Harris' church, that he lit it on fire intentionally after seeing Scott shoot a bottle rocket in that direction. Later that night Ronnie sees on the news that Marcus has been arrested.

In November, Ronnie begins asking her father questions about his life so she can remember everything about him after he is gone. Steve has grown worse and one morning has trouble breathing. While he is in the hospital, Ronnie finally realizes the one thing she can do for her father is to finish his song and play it for him. Blaze helps Ronnie take down the wall blocking off the piano. When Steve comes home, Ronnie plays for him for hours.

In Chapter 36, Steve makes peace with God just before he dies.

In Chapter 37, Ronnie finishes her story to her mother, leaving out the final moments with her father with the sense that those moments are precious between she and her father. After the funeral, Ronnie sees Will's parents in the back of the church. Ronnie thanks them for coming and for the donations they made to make the reconstruction of the church possible. Ronnie will forever be grateful that her father lived long enough to see his stained glass window placed in the church. Will's parents tell her that Will is outside. Ronnie rushes out to see Will, but she feels awkward with him at this point when she does not know where she stands with him. Will tells her he is going out of the country for the holidays, but will contact her when he returns.

In the Epilogue, Ronnie has returned to New York and begun the process to audition for a spot at Julliard. One afternoon, soon after her first audition, Ronnie gets a call from Will. Ronnie had thought that the long silence from Will meant that he no longer wanted



to be with her, so she is surprised by this call. Ronnie is more surprised when she learns that Will is in New York and will be attending Columbia University in January.

Chapters 35-37 and Epilogue Analysis

In these chapters, the reader reads how Ronnie stood by her dad through the final few months of his illness and finally came to the realization that the best gift she could give her father would be to honor the gifts God gave to her. Ronnie begins playing the piano again and composing, first finishing her father's last song before beginning work on a few of her own. Ronnie even makes the decision to try to attend Julliard as her father and always wanted her to do. This is something Ronnie has always shared with her father and with his death she has finally found her way back to it.

Ronnie has truly matured a great deal in the few months that this novel covers. The reader can see the changes in Ronnie with the death of her father, the maturity that helps her deal with her future a little better. Ronnie's relationship with Will is also a reflection of this growing maturity. The reader can imagine that no matter what happens between Ronnie and Will, she will continue to grow and mature in ways that she had never thought possible before living through the death of her father.



Characters

Ronnie Miller

Ronnie Miller is the daughter of Steve and Kim Miller. When Ronnie was younger, she began to play the piano and quickly proved to be something of a prodigy. Ronnie was taught by her father and throughout their childhood they often wrote original compositions together. All of this ended when Steve left the family, first to become a touring concert pianist and later when his marriage failed. Ronnie blamed her father for the destruction of the family and stopped talking to him for three years.

The novel begins with Ronnie being forced by her mother to spend the summer with her father. Ronnie is angry and resentful, spending as little time at her father's house as possible. However, a new arrest for shoplifting and the discovery of a turtle nest behind the house gives Ronnie the reasons she needs to begin talking to her father again. Over time an easiness returns to their relationship, thanks in part to her father's selflessness and Ronnie's growing romance with Will.

As the novel develops, Ronnie begins to mature, facing the future in a way she had not thought to do before. However, learning her father has cancer causes Ronnie a great deal of turmoil and leaves her feeling unanchored even as she suddenly has a purpose in her life, to help her father through the final months of his life. In the end, Ronnie realizes that by giving up music she not only hurt her father, but she hurt herself. Ronnie returns to her music and to life in New York, happily accepting Will's desire to be a part of her future.

Steve Miller

Steve Miller is a complicated man who never really learned how to deal with his emotions as a child because of emotionally cripple parents. However, Steve's marriage to Kim helps to a certain degree, helping Steve to learn how to deal with other people's emotions. When Steve is diagnosed with cancer, his first thought is how difficult it was to watch his father die slowly from the same cancer. Steve knows what is in his future and he does not want his children to have to go through it with him. For this reason, Steve keeps his diagnosis a secret even as his children come to spend one last summer with him.

Steve does all he can do to make his children happy when they come to spend the summer with him. Steve gives Jonah just about everything he asks for, except for a cookie before meals and the right to live with his father year round. For Ronnie, Steve gives up the piano, a device that had been helping him deal with his pain. Steve also goes out of his way to accomadate Ronnie, even going so far as to change the family's diet to accommodate Ronnie's vegetarian diet.



In the end, Steve is forced to tell the children the truth about his cancer and his prognosis. To Steve's surprise, Ronnie insists on staying with him until the end. Steve is touched, but also frightened for what the future holds for his daughter. In the end, however, Steve finds joy in his relationship with his children and in the future that he knows his children will enjoy.

Will Blakelee

Will Blakelee is a child of privilege who has grown up in this small coastal community. Will, however, has grown weary of the girls of privilege who have been his playmates and lovers over the past few years. Therefore, when Will meets Ronnie, a girl who is not impressed by his family's enormous wealth, Will finds in her a person of substance, just the kind of girl he has been looking for. Will and Ronnie forge a strong bond between themselves that is never truly broken even when Ronnie sends Will away after learning he has been hiding the truth about the fire at Pastor Harris' church. In the end, Will proves to be a great deal like Steve, a good man who is patient enough to allow Ronnie the space she needs to grow and ask for help.

Galadriel aka Blaze

Galadriel, nicknamed Blaze by Marcus, is a girl with a great deal in common with Ronnie. Galadriel's parents have also divorced and Galadriel has not taken it well. As a result, Galadriel has taken up with Marcus, the local pyromaniac, and allows him to control her and her actions. Galadriel soon finds herself kicked out of her mother's house and dependent on Marcus even though Marcus has lost interest in Galadriel. When Galadriel is burned during one of Marcus' fireball shows, she finally breaks away from him and tells the truth not only about the shoplifting charge she created for Ronnie, but also the burning of Pastor Harris' church.

Marcus

Marcus is a young sociopath who lives in the coastal community where the novel takes place. Marcus is a pyromaniac who is smart enough not to set too many fires and cause himself to get caught. Marcus burned down Pastor Harris' church in the spring before the novel begins because he thought it would be funny to set Scott up for arson. However, Pastor Harris was injured during the fire. Marcus also becomes obsessed with Ronnie, causing trouble for her and Will during the summer. In the end, however, Marcus is arrested and faces punishment for his crimes.

Kim Miller

Kim Miller is Steve's ex-wife. When the marriage between her parents ended, Ronnie automatically assumed the fault was her father's. However, as the novel progresses, Ronnie soon learns that the fault laid with her mother, not her father. By the time she



learns this, it is too late for Ronnie to fix the punishment she gave to her father in not speaking to him for three years, but she has grown mature enough that she does not punish her mother for her actions. Ronnie has finally grown up enough to realize that her parents faults are not her own and she does not need to become involved. Ronnie has also come to a place where she realizes that her parents are precious to her and she should value every moment with them.

Jonah Miller

Jonah Miller is Ronnie's little brother. Jonah is a precocious child who was born premature and is therefore smaller than kids his age. Jonah loves everyone and is very close to his father during the summer he and Ronnie spend with him. When Jonah learns that his father is dying, he wants to remain with him, but his parents will not let him. Jonah is angry that his father is being taken from him so prematurely, but continues to have a good relationship with him up until the end.

Scott

Scott is Will's childhood friend. When Scott was just twelve, he saved Will and his mother from a car accident that took the life of Will's younger brother, Mike. For this reason, Will feels that he owes Scott some sort of debt. To this end, Will hides the fact that Scott caused the fire that burned down Pastor Harris' church despite the fact that it turns out that this was not the truth.

Pastor Harris

Pastor Harris is the pastor who runs a small church that sits on the beach in the small community where Steve Miller grew up. Pastor Harris was Steve's first piano teacher and ignited in him a lifelong love of music. Steve would grow up to be a teacher at Julliard and a concert pianist. Later, when Steve returns to his hometown, Pastor Harris gives him a place to live and counsels him through his battle with cancer.

Mr. and Mrs. Blakelee

Mr. and Mrs. Blakelee are Will's parents. Tom Blakelee is a kind, easygoing man who built a automotive empire with Blakelee brakes. Tom is almost childish and seems to like everyone else. Mrs. Blakeless, on the other hand, is a stern woman who suffered greatly when her youngest child was killed in a car accident. Mrs. Blakelee dislikes Ronnie because she does not believe the girl is good enough for her son. However, the reader suspects that Mrs. Blakelee is simply a mother who wants the best for her child. In the end, Mrs. Blakelee seems to understand Will deep connection to Ronnie and moves out of their way, even going so far as to help Will switch schools so that he can be closer to Ronnie.



Objects/Places

Letters

Steve wrote to Ronnie multiple times during the three years after he left the family, but Ronnie refused to read the letters. During the final months of Steve's illness, Ronnie finally reads these letters as well as a new one her father has written for her.

Song

Steve begins composing a new song shortly after Ronnie and Jonah arrive in North Carolina, but struggles to get it just right. Ronnie fixes the song for Steve and plays it for him in the weeks before his death.

Piano

Steve has a piano in his house that he often plays to keep the pain from his cancer under control. When Ronnie arrives, she thinks her father plays the piano to entice her back to playing it so she tells him she never wants to see it again. Steve walls up the piano to make Ronnie happy and it remains that way until Ronnie tears down the wall with Galadriel's help.

Fireballs

Marcus and his friends do an act on the pier with fireballs to earn money. It is during one of these shows that Galadriel catches on fire and Marcus leaves her to burn. It is after this incident that Galadriel drops the nickname of Blaze and returns to her given name.

Pastor Harris' Church

Pastor Harris' church is located on the beach near Steve Miller's home. This church was severely damaged in a fire the spring before the novel begins.

Stained Glass Window

Steve Miller is making a stained glass window to replace one that was lost in the fire that damaged Pastor Harris' church. The previous window had great meaning to Steve as a child and it is for this reason that he has agreed to make a new one.



Turtle Nest

Ronnie and Steve find a loggerhead turtle nest on the beach near the back of Steve's house early in the novel. Ronnie spends a great deal of time protecting this nest from raccoons with Will, creating the catalyst that begins their romance.

CDs and 45s

Blaze puts a bunch of CDs and 45s in Ronnie's purse in retaliation for Blaze's boyfriend, Marcus, making a pass at Ronnie. This arrest is Ronnie's third for shoplifting and can lead to more trouble for her.

Julliard

Julliard is a prestigious music school in New York City. Steve taught at Julliard for many years and Ronnie has a chance to attend the school.

Vanderbilt

Vanderbilt is a prestigious school in Tennessee. Will's parents and grandparents attended the school as well as his sister. Will is expected to go to Vanderbilt too, but they do not have the courses he wants to take and he later transfers to Columbia.

Columbia

Will transfers to Columbia in the middle of the college semester at the end of the novel so that he can take environmental science courses and be closer to Ronnie.

North Carolina

The novel takes place along the coast of North Carolina.

Themes

Love

The main themes of this novel revolve around love. The obvious theme of love is present in the relationship between Ronnie and Will. Both Ronnie and Will have had a difficult childhood, Will's marred by the death of his baby brother and Ronnie's by her parents' divorce. These two young adults search each other out and find kindred spirits in one another. They survive rumors, doubts, and the dislike of Will's mother for Ronnie. However, it seems that they cannot survive the truth when Will tells Ronnie that Scott is responsible for the fire at Pastor Harris' church and he has known all along.

The theme of love is the more important theme of the novel. While Ronnie's relationship with Will is new and fresh, an inspiring love story of a girl's first real romance, it is the relationship between Steve and his children that is the stronger love theme. Steve is a man who has been accused of being an emotional cripple because of the inability of his parents to show affection. However, the reader soon discovers that Steve's love for his children is so deep that it transcends even Steve's own emotional damage. Steve learns he is dying and the first thing he thinks of is his children, his need to be with his children. Through his children, Steve finds the peace in himself and with his God that allows him to move on to the next stage.

Ronnie's relationship with her father is not always a good one. Ronnie does not talk to her father for three years after his failed marriage to her mother ends. Ronnie blames her father because he is the one who has abandoned the family in her eyes. It takes a great deal of growing up and the realization that her father is dying that finally helps Ronnie to see her father did the best he could under the circumstances and that he loves his children more than anything else. Ronnie has taken this love for granted and abused it, but she discovers that it is still there even after all her childish behavior. In a book filled with multiple themes of love, this love relationship is probably the one that will stick with the reader long after the final words on the page.

Guilt

Guilt is a theme of the novel because it is a thing that is thrown around a lot in the novel. In the early pages of the book, guilt is assigned to Steve by Ronnie for the destruction of the family unit. Ronnie does not know for sure what happened between her parents to end their marriage, but she makes the assumption that it was her father's fault and for this reason she punishes him by quitting the piano and not talking to him for three years.

Guilt also comes into the novel when Ronnie is accused of shoplifting CDs and 45s in a local music store. Although Ronnie did not commit this crime, she is arrested and forced to face possible prosecution in court because of the actions of another. In a parallel to



what Ronnie has done to Steve, Ronnie is being punished for something she has not done.

At the end of the book, Ronnie, who has been assigning guilt and running from responsibility the entire novel, finally realizes that there are things that are truly her responsibility, for which she is guilty. Ronnie learns that her father did not play the piano to force her to begin playing again, as she suspected early in the novel. In truth, Steve's playing the piano had nothing to do with Ronnie, but was a way in which he was able to handle the pain, both emotional and physical, of his cancer. Ronnie is filled with such guilt that she struggles to handle it. In the end however, it is the piano and this guilt that helps Ronnie find her way back to the piano and back to her father.

Truth

In the beginning of the novel, Ronnie is convinced that she knows all there is to know about her father's roll in the end of his marriage to Ronnie's mother. Ronnie believes that her father is completely at fault, that her mother did nothing wrong. Even though Ronnie is wrong about this fact, she does not want to hear the truth from anyone and no one is too anxious to set her straight. At the same time, Ronnie expects everyone to believe her when she tells the truth, but finds that her mother, especially when it comes to Ronnie's excuses about shoplifting, does not want to hear the truth. Ronnie is angry with the world and finds that the world is pretty much exasperated with her.

At the same time Ronnie struggles to find someone to believe her truth while she refuses to see the truth in front of her, Will finds himself hiding the truth from the world in order to protect his friend. Will believes Scott to be responsible for the fire at Pastor Harris' church, but he hides this truth because he does not want him to lose his chance at college. However, if Scott had told the truth to the world, he would have forced Pastor Harris to make sure he was punished, something that would have caused Pastor Harris great sadness, and it would have all been a lie. In truth, Scott had nothing to do with the fire. Marcus set the fire to make Scott think he had done it.

The truth is not a clear thing in this novel. Steve hides the truth from his kids, both about the destruction of his marriage and about his cancer. Steve also discourages Ronnie from telling Pastor Harris about Scott's role in the fire at his church. Steve knows that sometimes the truth can do more harm than good. In the end, Ronnie learns that truth about everything and in a way it no longer matters in the new circumstances of her life. For this reason, truth, both telling it and hiding it, are themes of the novel.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is the third-person omniscient. The author uses multiple characters to tell his story, using the name of each character at the first of the chapter to alert the reader to who the narrating character will be in that chapter. In this way, the author is able to tell a story from several points of view, to give back ground information on the events in the novel and the characters, while also cluing the reader in to information that might not be available to the main characters but is important to the development of the plot.

The point of view of this novel works well with the plot because it allows for the author to tell a better-rounded story. Although the novel is primarily about Ronnie and her relationships with both Will and her father, there are other aspects to the plot that need to be explained and can only be explained with the help of other characters. For this reason, the use of third-person omniscient as a point of view in this novel works well with the plot.

Setting

The novel is set primarily in a small community outside of Wilmington, North Carolina. Most of the novel takes place in the home that Steve Miller shares for the summer with his children and the beach that unfolds outside his back door. It is summer when the novel begins, creating a warm and carefree atmosphere for a novel that deals with some very tense themes. For this reason, the setting of the novel is both a background to the novel, but also a contrast to the events unfolding in the plot of the novel.

The setting of the novel is unique in the fact that it is a lesser used locale for a beach setting. Most modern bestsellers that have settings at the beach take place in California. This novel takes place in North Carolina, a place that brings to the plot not only the laid back atmosphere of the beach, but also the flavors of a southern lifestyle. This settings gives the reader a sense of relaxation, a place where people go to be with friends and family to relax and have a good time. However, this novel is not about a family on vacation, but a family in turmoil that somehow finds a way back to one another. In this way the setting is not only unique, but it presents a contrast to the plot of the novel, giving the novel a rich sense of complexity that it might not have if it were set elsewhere.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple English. There are no foreign phrases or unfamiliar words that an average reader might find difficult to understand. The novel uses some



terms used in music and art that are appropriate to the subjects being discussed, but the language is so common that the average reader would be familiar with these words.

The language of the novel is appropriate to the novel because it is a novel about a teenager who is trying to find her way in the world. The language is the kind of language that a person like this would use, therefore the language helps to create a believable and credible character. Not only this, but the language is simple enough that even younger readers should have little trouble understanding the narrative.

Structure

The novel is written with thirty-seven chapters, a prologue, and an epilogue. The chapters are fairly short with a few exceptions. Each chapter begins with the name of the character who narrates that chapter. The novel is told mostly in narrative and dialogue, showing a story rather than simply telling it.

The novel contains one main plot and multiple subplots. The main plot of the novel follows the growth and changes in the main character, Ronnie Miller. Ronnie has been struggling with her relationship with her parents since their divorce and this has caused Ronnie to stop talking to her father, but this summer she is forced to live with him. A subplot of the novel follows Ronnie's relationship with Blaze. Another subplot follows the development of Ronnie's romance with Will Blakelee. The various plots of the novel come to a satisfying conclusion as the main plot reaches its conclusion.



Quotes

"Even though I wasn't there when it happened, I think the summer really began with the fire." (Prologue, p. 3).

"Sometimes she wished her father had started her on the electric guitar. Or at the very least, singing lessons. What was she supposed to do with an ability to play the piano?" (Chapter 1, p. 10).

"He'd known she would follow them. They always did. Especially the new girls in town. That was the thing with girls: the worse he treated them, the more they wanted him. They were stupid like that. Predictable, but stupid." (Chapter 4, p. 38).

"Under normal circumstances, Ronnie probably would have appreciated an evening like this. In New York, the lights from the city made it impossible to see many stars, but here, it was just the opposite." (Chapter 6, p. 57).

"What mattered was that she allowed him not only to find his passion, but to pursue it, even if she distrusted the reason. And that somehow she kept his father, who ridiculed the idea of earning a living through music, from stopping it as well. And for this, he would always love her." (Chapter 11, p. 101).

"When she noticed him watching her, he knew one of two things was going to happen. Either she's come out and talk to him in hopes of getting Blaze to tell the truth, or she'd act all scared like she had earlier and run inside. He liked the fact he could scare her. He could use it to his advantage. But she did neither of those things." (Chapter 15, p. 162).

"She wasn't like anyone he'd met before. He was sure he wanted never to let go of her hand; their fingers seemed to fit together in just the right way—effortlessly clasped, like perfect complements." (Chapter 20, p. 213).

"He smiled, but as he gathered up his sheet music and turned out the light in the church, she was struck by how tired and frail he looked." (Chapter 24, p. 243).

"Marcus was not like other people; he'd known that for a long time. Growing up, he never felt guilty about anything, and he liked that about himself. There was power in the ability to do whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted to do it, but the pleasure was usually short-lived." (Chapter 27, p. 277).

"Leaving the office, Steve took a deep breath, armed with the knowledge that he had less than twelve months to live." (Chapter 30, p. 307).

"But I have to finish it, because maybe if I finish it, then Dad will get better. He has to get better, so I tried to use the chair to reach the middle of the window, but it broke and I fell into the glass and I got made and then I wanted to use the crate, but it's too heavy." (Chapter 32, pg. 327).



"But the moments in which she watched her father draw his last breaths felt intensely private to her, and she knew she would never speak of them to anyone. Being at his side as he left this world as a gift that he had given her, and only her, and she would never forget how solemn and intimate it had felt." (Chapter 37, p. 377).



Topics for Discussion

Who is Ronnie Miller? Why is she so angry with her father? What does Ronnie believe her father has done? Why does Ronnie refuse to play the piano anymore? What are the results of this refusal? How does Ronnie's father react to her refusal to play the piano? How does this make Ronnie feel? Why is Ronnie continuously confused by her father's refusal to yell at her or punish her for her various acts of rebellion in the first few days of her visit?

Who is Will? What is his secret? Why is Will keeping this secret? Who does Will believe he is helping by keeping this secret? Is Will really helping this person? What happens when Will finally reveals his secret to Ronnie? How does she react? Why? What does Ronnie's father say when she tells him about this secret? How does Ronnie feel about her father's advice?

Who is Marcus? Why does Marcus begin coming on to Ronnie upon meeting her? What does Marcus think of Blaze? What does he think of Ronnie? Why does Marcus become so fixated on Ronnie? What does this cause to happen? Why does Marcus decide to leave town? Why does Marcus run away when Blaze catches fire during a show? How does Will react to this? Why?

What role does music play in Steve's life? How did music change his childhood? How has it changed his adulthood? Why does Steve decide to quit teaching and to become a touring concert pianist after the death of his father? How does touring as a concert pianist impact Steve's life? What caused the end of Steve's marriage? How much blame does Steve take for this? How much blame does Ronnie assign to Steve? Is this fair?

What is shoplifting? Why is Ronnie accused of shoplifting? Is she a thief? Explain. Why does Blaze put the CDs and 45s into Ronnie's bag? Did Ronnie do something to deserve this act? Why will Blaze not tell the truth about what she did? What will happen to Ronnie if the charges are not dropped? Does Ronnie worry about this?

What is a stained glass window? What does the stained glass window in the church represent for Steve? What does it come to represent to Jonah? Why does Jonah insist on finishing the window when he learns that his father is dying? How does this impact Steve when he learns about it? How does it affect Steve when his window is finally placed in the church? Why does Pastor Harris say this is his gift to Steve? How is this window a symbol of Steve and Pastor Harris' beliefs in God?

Discuss parallels in the plot of this novel. What is a parallel? How are Ronnie and Blaze's characters similar? How are they different? Why do you think the author chose to create two such parallel characters? How are Will and Steve similar? How are they different? In what ways has the author created parallel characters in Will and Steve?