

# The Machine Gunners Short Guide

## The Machine Gunners by Robert Westall

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



# Contents

<a href="#">The Machine Gunners Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>

## Overview

Told from the point of view of an adolescent boy, Westall's book gives a fresh and interesting account of the bombings of an English town during World War II. Constant exposure to the atrocities of war forces the main characters in *The Machine Gunners* to grow up too quickly. Chas McGill, the narrator, attempts to survive in a confusing world by exercising some control over his corner of Garmouth. His inability to remain a passive child in the face of terror results in his transition from a naive collector of war souvenirs to a stoic overseer of an underground fortress.

Westall provides vivid and realistic descriptions of the bombings and their aftermath. Chas safely collects pieces of shiny shrapnel in the streets but also comes face-to-face with a dead, disfigured, and decaying German soldier.

The realism in *The Machine Gunners* draws the reader into a world where people have no choice but to live with the brutality of war on a daily basis. Death and destruction become so commonplace that Chas's Uncle George can pull dead children from the rubble of a destroyed building and then proceed to sit comfortably down to lunch.

The novel also touches on the irony of war, and reveals that the "enemy" is often only another human being with familiar feelings, concerns, and experiences. The young people in this novel learn that love and respect for individuals is more powerful than the hatred of figurative enemies encouraged by wartime propaganda. When they release their German prisoner Rudi, the characters exhibit an appreciation for love that transcends political beliefs.

## About the Author

Robert Atkinson Westall was born on October 7, 1929, in Tynemouth, Northumberland, England, and lived in this same town—which resembles *The Machine Gunners'* Garmouth—during World War II. After graduating from a local high school, he continued his education at the University of Durham.

In the 1950s, he served two years as a corporal squadron clerk with the Royal Signals in the British Army and then returned to his studies at the University of London. He has taught art in a private secondary school, worked as an antiques dealer, and contributed freelance material to various newspapers and magazines.

Westall has written novels since 1941, when he was only twelve years old. *The Machine Gunners*, his first success, was not published until 1975. The inspiration for this story came from a newspaper article about a group of Dutch children who in 1969 found an Allied bomber, repaired its rear gun turret, and planned to fire it. Fortunately, the Dutch authorities intervened before the children's plan materialized. After the appearance of *The Machine Gunners*, the author published, in rapid succession, eighteen books over the next fourteen years.

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

# Setting

The Machine Gunners takes place in 1941 in Garmouth, a small coastal town in northern England. World War II has begun to intrude in the lives of the townspeople. The sound of guns sends them running, panic-stricken, to their bomb shelters; when the bombings cease, the people return to the streets to confront the horrors of destruction.

Fourteen-year-old Chas McGill's feelings of helplessness in the face of the German soldiers and his sense that God has abandoned him compel him to take control of his life. Thus, much of the story takes place in and around an elaborate underground shelter built by Chas and his schoolmates. The fortress, hidden beneath a bombed-out house and equipped with a captured German machine gun and provisions for Chas's circle of trusted friends, serves as the only place where the children feel powerful and safe.



# Social Sensitivity

In his attempt to realistically portray the lives of schoolchildren during World War II, Westall includes some harsh language, sexual innuendos, violent behavior, and religious allusions. Because the occasional use of unpleasant language by the young characters is usually in response to stressful or frustrating situations, these realistic lapses should be of little concern to most parents and teachers.

Sexual innuendos are infrequent but present. In one instance, Chas is briefly confronted by Mrs. Nichol's open dressing gown, leaving him feeling a bit strange. Hints about this woman's illicit sexual activities serve to help the reader understand both Nicky's home environment and the other parents' reluctance to let their children play at the Nichol home. The children, however, already know the difference between right and wrong. Chas is even disgusted when a neighbor sits with her knees apart, inadvertently revealing knickers.

War in itself is violent, but the children in the story are also involved in violence that is not directly connected with the war. The boys fight aggressively, hitting each other with heavy objects, dunking each other's heads into toilets or rivers, and kicking each other in the ribs to the point of nausea. These outbursts may only be related to the stress of dodging bombs, but the children's preference for the use of violence as a means to an end is reinforced not only by the war but also by the adults in their lives. Parents angrily grab at their children after the fortress is discovered and, in an ironic scene, the schoolmaster hits Chas with a cane to punish the boy for using a weapon in a street fight.

While *The Machine Gunners* is not a religious novel, Chas wonders about God. When a church burns down, Chas, worrying that God has lost control of the situation, begins to fear the war in earnest. He reasons that if God is not safe from Hitler, no one is. In another instance, a woman who is outspoken about her faith is treated as an annoying character. While Westall does not elaborate on her beliefs, the police sergeant's reaction to them might seem offensive.

*The Machine Gunners* is unflinchingly realistic in its approach to the unpleasantness of war. When a bomb hits the grocery store, the clerk is found later—half of her in one location, and half in another. When Chas discovers a downed plane, he also discovers, by scent, a dead pilot whose missing eye is covered by a teeming mass of angry flies feasting on the decay. When Rudi speculates on his possible fate, he envisions himself blown full of holes, like a colander dripping blood.

The characters' reactions to these atrocities are equally realistic. Chas's mother hunches her shoulders and tries not to cry over the girl from the market.

Chas becomes violently sick after seeing the decaying pilot. Rudi decides that the boring routine of corned beef stew in the fortress is quite tolerable. These people, affected by war and unable to escape its horrors, adapt and carry on with their lives.

Their determination and courage is admirable, and Westall's choice of details enhances his readers' understanding of life during this period of history.



# Literary Qualities

Westall's interest in art leads to startling word pictures in his prose. The crisp, clear imagery in *The Machine Gunners* draws on the author's firsthand knowledge of wartime England: Nicky's house rises above a "necklace of winter trees"; slum children with stiff, coarse hair are referred to as "lavatory brushes"; and Chas and Cem, after diving for cover during an air raid, are described as "two small flies crawling across a white tablecloth." Westall compares the safety of being inside a shelter with the pleasure of being indoors on a rainy day. He reveals the panic-stricken state of Garmouth's citizens when he has Chas, who is running for cover, notice that the shelter door appears to get farther away the harder he runs. The Fry's Chocolate sign, hung upside down on a fence, reflects the feelings of disarray that war brings. The school cafeteria's atmosphere resembles the dismal landscape of the town. Chas's confusion about the war is aptly reflected in his opinion that the "world seemed broken in half."

The two halves of Chas's world are further divided into conflicting groups.

Westall pits adults against young people, heroes against cowards, safety against terror, life against death, sanity against insanity, peace against war, and friends against enemies. But none of these conflicts are clearcut. Chas and his friends become confused as to who the enemy really is, wondering, in the conclusion, whether it would be worse to have the Germans or their own parents invading the fortress. The turmoil these conflicts create permeates the novel, heightening the tension Chas feels and symbolizing his internal conflict over the lure of the comfortable dependency of childhood and the counter-lure of the independent state of maturity.

In this novel about the maturation of wartime adolescents, it is particularly effective to hear the story from Chas McGill's point of view. For him, the war is, at first, both the inconvenience of being locked up in the shelter with his neighbor and her "perfect" son, and the opportunity to see his souvenir collection grow. But soon Chas begins to think more seriously about the war and to doubt the adults he previously depended on. When he understands that the adults only seem to be in control, he begins to rely more exclusively on himself for survival.

Although many of Westall's descriptions are wrenchingly graphic, they are never overdone or gratuitous. When a bomb blows someone in two, Westall simply reports the incident. Fortunately he realizes that humor, especially unintentional humor, was also a part of life during World War II. When, during an air raid, Mrs. Spalding comes hopping from the "lav" to the shelter, knickers around her ankles, while her selfrighteous son Colin remains at the lav to tend to the flushing, the reader appreciates the opportunity to think about the ridiculous aspects of wartime.

Westall generates a great deal of suspense by shifting the story's focus from one incident to another without resolving the problems of each scene.





Accounts of Rudi's dilemma in the fortress interrupt Chas's pursuit and entrapment at critical points. Likewise, in the novel's conclusion, Westall details the reactions and plans of four different families, effectively heightening the tension and prolonging the resolution of the story.

Ironic twists enhance both the comedy and the tragedy of the story. Immediately upon promising to punish Chas, the headmaster has the class sing a hymn entitled "New Every Morning Is the Love." But the greatest irony occurs when the children, in a moment of panic, shoot Rudi, the only adult who truly understands them and the only adult they believe is not an enemy.



## Themes and Characters

Throughout the novel, adults and adolescents clash in increasingly tense scenarios that finally climax with the tragic shooting of the German soldier near the bomb shelter. Chas McGill, the book's central character and the driving force behind the fortress-building, is an intelligent fourteen-year-old who lives in Garmouth. Chas knows how to manipulate his parents: he condescendingly tolerates his mother's apparent ignorance, and he tricks his father into building a tripod for the machine gun.

Chas has only a surface relationship with his parents, and he knows that things run more smoothly at home when he is not there. His questions often annoy his father and mother, who avoid discussing things that they consider embarrassing, such as the drunken widow's home full of sailors. This lack of information frustrates Chas and makes him feel overly protected. Heavily influenced by the war tales told by his grandfather, whom he calls "Granda," Chas keeps Granda's war souvenirs with him during his stay in the fortress, to give him courage.

While he is not above using people for his various projects, Chas is willing to amend his opinion of schoolmates whom he discovers are unjustly maligned. Two of them, Audrey and Nicky, are considered social outcasts, but Chas learns to feel a great deal of affection for them.

Audrey Parton, a "strapping lass," is shunned by her female classmates because she has not acquired their interest in stockings and powder puffs. Chas and his friend Cem initially accept her because they need her to help move their treasure, the machine gun. Audrey earns the boys' respect when she demonstrates her sensitivity to Nicky's parents' deaths and to Rudi's delirium.

Chas and Cem's acceptance of her inspires Audrey's loyalty to them, and when her family tries to flee on the night of the invasion, she decides to stay with the boys and fight.

Nicky Nichol, a small, meek child who is picked on by the school bullies, becomes the group's "pet." The four other group members are protective of him, possibly because he reminds them of the child within each of them. The loneliest of all the characters, Nicky is also the most openly emotional. He eventually overcomes his propensity for crying and matures into a self-assured young person who tells a police sergeant to "get stuffed" in order to maintain his loyalty to his friends.

Chas's friend Cemetery Jones, Jr., known as "Cem," provides comic relief with his quick wit and creative thinking.

When confronted with an unappetizing meal in the school dining hall, he transforms it into an artistic conglomeration he calls the "potato irrigation scheme."



His intelligence saves him from Patrolman Fatty Hardy when he invents a story about a murder and cleverly persuades the slow-witted constable to release him. Cem demonstrates his strong loyalty to his peer group by verbally attacking the bully Boddser Brown and by fleeing from his family on the night of the invasion.

Clogger, also Chas's friend, is a brawny, streetwise boy who joins forces with the others in the fortress. He never flaunts his strength but does not hesitate to use it in support of his friends. Although capable of violence, he reveals his compassion when he decides to run away from his aunt's home to live with the newly orphaned Nicky in the underground shelter.

The war confuses and corrupts the values of these young people, leading them to lie and steal in the belief that their survival depends on these activities. Out of desperation, they decide to take control of their own lives.

Chas McGill's parents are loving but preoccupied. Overwhelmed by the stress of the constant bombings, his mother begins to worry obsessively about material things—insurance papers, shopping baskets, underwear—in an effort to suppress her concerns about the safety of her loved ones. Chas's father works nights and spends his days attending to the casualties of the war. He openly dislikes authority and is fiercely defensive about Chas's integrity when questioned by the police. His son admires him and his wife loves him, but he remains distant from both of them. On the job, his sense of duty leads him to abandon his wife as she searches for their missing son.

One character provides a bridge between the young characters and the adults in *The Machine Gunners*. Rudi, the German fighter pilot, becomes sensitive to the young peoples' feelings, perhaps because they are his only source of companionship and he needs them for his own survival. He realizes how seriously they take themselves and respects their authority over him, treating them as his peers. He demonstrates his understanding by admitting to the youngsters that he could never harm them, by protecting their pride, and by fulfilling a difficult promise. His concern for their well-being eventually leads him to risk his life for their safety.

The most pervasive theme in *The Machine Gunners* is simply that war has no redeeming qualities. War destroys communities and confuses values. Westall helps the reader understand that all people suffer in a war. *The Machine Gunners* also examines the idea that people need to have some measure of control over their lives. The loss of such power can lead individuals to behave in unlikely ways. Chas begins to panic about the Germans but subdues his fears by confiscating the machine gun. Possession of this powerful weapon makes him feel confident and in control of the situation.

Chas also seeks control over his fate by playing magical counting games intended to determine whether or not his house will be bombed. Similarly, Stan Liddell, the schoolmaster, becomes dependent on his Home Guard uniform, wearing it continually to avoid being caught unprepared, and the class bully, Boddser Brown, picks on weak children to hide his feelings of helplessness. Like much of humankind, the characters in

Westall's novel desperately try to establish order and a sense of mastery over the unpredictable events that influence their lives.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Initially, the dead pilot and the machine gun frighten Chas; this terror, in turn, stimulates Chas's desire for the gun. What does he hope possession of the gun will do for him?
2. How and why do children grow up faster during wartime?
3. Cemetery Jones has a friend in an embalming class who eats lunch while leaning against a corpse. Chas's Uncle George eats lunch directly after removing dead bodies from the rubble on Saville Street. What do these incidents tell us about human nature?
4. Why does Mrs. McGill consider it so important to have chrysanthemums at Christmas?
5. When the police come to his house to investigate Clogger's disappearance, Chas feels that his father makes it easy for him to lie. Why does his father do this?
6. Why does Mrs. McGill focus her fears on the possibility of Mr. McGill being injured or killed while wearing dirty underpants?
7. What causes Chas to suddenly hate everyone who is advancing on the fortress in the last chapter of the book?
8. Early in the novel, Chas screams such epithets as "Nazi pigs!" and "Get the bastards, kill the bastards!" How does he feel at the story's end?
9. When the boys first visit Nicky's garden, they inquire about the wooden cross with no name on it. Why is it so difficult for them to face Nicky when he answers, "That's for my father"?
10. Why do Chas and Clogger wear helmets marked Caparetto while in the Crow's Nest?
11. Why does Chas feel terrible when his father offers to build a tripod?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Many of the terms used in this story are British. Define those terms that are most unfamiliar and discuss their importance.
2. Why does Great Britain celebrate Guy Fawkes Day? What is the significance of Fawkes's role as a "character" in *The Machine Gunners*?
3. There are many instances in *The Machine Gunners* when Chas feels the need to be in control of his life. How does he react to his feelings?
4. Describe Rudi, the German captive, concentrating on his compassionate nature. Why does he get along so well with the young people?
5. Compare Chas's personality traits with those of his father. How does this comparison explain many of Chas's actions?
6. Compare Westall's *The Machine Gunners* to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. How are the two books similar?

## For Further Reference

Chambers, Aidan. "Letter from England: Children at War." *Horn Book* (August 1976): 438-442. This article critiques *The Machine Gunners*, comparing it to other books about the war written for young adults and praising its insights and themes.

Flowers, Ann A. "Review." *Horn Book* (February 1977): 61. This review serves to reassure American audiences that the British slang that appears throughout *The Machine Gunners* will not detract from the enjoyment of the novel.

Forman, Jack. "Review." *School Library Journal* (December 1976): 63. This reviewer feels that the odds against the adults in *The Machine Gunners* are overwhelming.

Hearne, Betsy. "Review." *Booklist* (November 1, 1976): 412-413. This reviewer finds Westall's book to be a convincing observation on human nature.

Kay, Ernest, ed. *International Authors and Writers Who's Who*. Cambridge: Melrose Press, 1986. Includes a short article that relays basic biographical information about Westall.

"Review." *Center for Children's Books Bulletin* (November 1976): 51. A review praising Westall's writing style and his ability to vary the realism in his book with humor.

## Related Titles

Garmouth, the setting for *The Machine Gunners*, is also the setting for two other of Robert Westall's novels. *The Watch House* is a ghost story about a young girl, Anne, who spends the summer with her mother's old nannie. *Fathom Five* is another war story featuring Chas McGill, Audrey, and Cem. The plot focuses on their search for a German spy. Chas McGill also reappears in another World War II setting in a book of short stories named after him: *The Haunting of Chas McGill and Other Stories*. Here Chas discovers the ghost of an AWOL soldier from World War I and helps the soldier escape from a dismal fate.





# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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

Includes bibliographical references and index

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

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

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

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

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

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

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

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