The Runner Short Guide

The Runner by Cynthia Voigt

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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".

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Overview

The Runner is an introspective book, focusing on one person's journey toward maturity as he struggles with the conflicting ideas and ideals that make up his world. The novel is also a study in shared humanity: Through the character of Samuel "Bullet" Tillerman, Voigt explores the question of whether a person can remain an entity unto himself or, if by virtue of being born, must become a part of humanity.

Bullet is a senior in high school who is determined to be in complete control of his own life. He will not allow himself to become "boxed in" by the stern demands of his dictatorial father or the unvoiced needs of his repressed mother. Bullet disdains involvement in the social problems of his school, resists the entanglements that his friends would impose upon him, and mocks the efforts of his coach to make him a team player. Bullet's difference from his peers does not bother him because he is well aware that freedom is costly.

The only passion that Bullet allows himself is running. In keeping with his individuality, however, Bullet has chosen cross-country running as his sport because he cannot bear to run on a track, between the lines. He imposes running habits on himself that mirror the unrelenting discipline that directs the rest of his life. He runs to get better and to improve, and during races, he competes against only himself. The conflict for Bullet is that although he is stubbornly defiant (alternately shouting "No one can make me run" and "No one can keep me from running"), he finds himself unable to maintain his aloofness.

Voigt examines the pain of growing up as Bullet struggles to remain independent even as he is forced to acknowledge, by his caring for others around him, that he can never be totally free. The reader watches as he flails within the box he has created, struggling to remain safe from new ideas and feelings, even as his box begins to splinter. Not all will agree with Bullet's ultimate decision to leave home, but one is heartened that the decision is reached through new selfawareness and greater acceptance of himself. Voigt effectively banishes the specter of the misanthrope—the antisocial person—and gives the reader re3930 The Runner newed hope through this unlikely hero.

About the Author

Cynthia Voigt is a writer of impressive productivity. Since the publication of her first book in 1981, she has produced at least one book, and sometimes two, per year. At present, her body of work includes seventeen books for young adults, one for younger readers, and one for the adult market.

Voigt's books are marked by a wide variety of subject matter through which she explores ideas and interests that mirror those of her readers.

Voigt was born on February 25, 1942, in Boston, Massachusetts, the second of five children. She spent much of her childhood in rural Connecticut but returned to Massachusetts to attend Dana Hall School, a private girls' boarding school in Wellesley, and later entered Smith College. After graduating in 1963, Voigt relocated to New York City and took a job in an advertising agency. The following year, she married.

In 1965, after experiencing difficulties in the job market, Voigt decided to return to school for her teaching credentials, which she continues to consider the right choice. When Voigt received her certification, she relocated to Glen Burnie, Maryland, where she taught high school English for two years. In 1968, Voigt took a job at The Key School in Annapolis, Maryland, and taught there for a number of years as a part-time teacher and also served as department chair. In 1972, Voigt divorced her first husband and in 1974 married Walter Voigt, a Latin and Greek teacher at The Key School. The couple has two children, Jessica and Peter, and have recently moved to Maine.

In 1981, Voigt published her first book, Homecoming, which marked the beginning of her six-volume saga of the Tillermans, a family of four fatherless children who are abandoned by their mentally ill mother. Voigt has won numerous awards for her writing, including the 1983 Newbery Medal for Dicey's Song and the 1984 Edgar Allen Poe Award for The Callender Papers. A Solitary Blue was named a Newbery Honor Book in 1984 as well.

In addition to her life with her husband, son, and daughter, Voigt's interests include dining out, taking summer trips to the family's island in the Chesapeake Bay, and walking in old cemeteries.

Setting

The story takes place in the town of Crisfield, located on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, during the school year of 1967-1968. It begins in September and continues through March 21, when Bullet turns eighteen. The final chapter, a kind of epilogue, is set in December 1969.

Bullet lives with his mother and father on a farm inherited from his maternal grandfather. His brother, Johnny, and his sister, Liza, have already left home, driven away by the domineering ways of their father. Bullet attends Crisfield High School but takes little part in its social life other than track. His event is cross-country, and he is a superior runner, winning the state championship for two years. Bullet also works for Patrice, the owner of a small fishing boat and the only individual that Bullet respects. It is through the interaction of all these elements that Voigt develops her story.

Social Sensitivity

There are at least two issues in The Runner that might cause concern among teachers and parents. One is the use of racially charged language, often employed by Bullet before he overcomes his prejudices. The remarks always appear in the context of the story, and Voigt uses them to explore Bullet's feelings before he learns that Patrice is partially black. The language serves to heighten the significance of Bullet's metamorphosis when he makes an honest effort to overcome his unfair judgements. However, some may find such remarks objectionable in any context, for example, "You should come to school and see what they're [blacks] really like" or "This nigger is trouble, capital T, trouble."

The second issue with which adults may be concerned is the appropriateness of the language in general. In her dialogue Voigt attempts to present an accurate picture of the language used by high school seniors in the year 1967.

It is less colorful, less filled with vulgarisms, than the language found in most modern high schools, but the book does contain fad expressions.

Parents, teachers, and librarians must decide for themselves whether the language is appropriate or not.

Literary Qualities

The Runner is a gripping novel that plays out its story with moving intensity; it leaves the reader numbed at the end. But it is more than a well-crafted tale. Voigt has imbued her work with literary qualities that make it a superior novel.

Much literature has dealt with the issue of human interrelationships, and so the universality of its theme gives The Runner depth and substance. In reiterating this theme, Voigt presents ideas that echo the theme expressed by Cain when he asked "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Voigt's use of current events and prevailing attitudes gives a slice-of-life view of history. Some of the topical references Voigt makes include the long hair worn by boys; the burning of bras and draft cards as acts of protest; the debate over the Vietnam War and the legality of the draft; the failure of mandatory integration to achieve racial harmony, as the lunchroom in Bullet's school attests; and the continued ill treatment of blacks in spite of the Civil Rights Amendment. In an example of this final issue, Tamer Shipp is beaten when he violates the unspoken "Whites Only" rule of the student lounge.

The use of the third person to relate Bullet's tale is a literary technique that serves to distance the reader from the story. It is a subtlety on the part of Voigt that reflects Bullet's own distancing of himself from his emotions and his relationships with others.

The work is also enhanced by the use of the poetry of A. E. Housman. Portions of the poem "To An Athlete Dying Young," from A Shropshire Lad (1896) are used to introduce the book's two sections. The first section entitled "1967" includes the first verse of the poem and recounts a young athlete's victory in a race and describes the adulation of the crowd as he is carried shoulder high through the market place. The lines suggest Bullet's considerable abilities as a runner and foreshadow the track meet at which he agrees to run with the relay team. At the end of the race, Bullet is lifted onto the shoulders of his jubilant teammates and carried around the track on their shoulders. The introductory quote to the 1969 section, which consists of only one chapter, presents lines in which the young athlete is again carried on the shoulders of his friends, but this time it is to his grave. These lines foreshadow the phone call to Bullet's mother telling her of his death in the war.

Voigt refers to two additional poems by Housman within the text: "Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries" is quoted by Bullet's teacher as a possible comment on the Vietnam War, and an untitled poem from "A Shropshire Lad" aids Bullet in coming to terms with some of the confusing aspects of his life, especially the ongoing battle with his father. Bullet is profoundly affected by the line, "the old wind in the old anger," and recognizes that whatever happens, whatever his future, the wind will "blow on by." Voigt's use of Housman as the literary figure to whom Bullet relates is again subtle foreshadowing: Underneath the surface beauty of Housman's poetry lurks a profound pessimism.

Voigt's willingness to address the issue of dying young shows an honest approach to young-adult literature. It is a fact that people die young. As Bullet laconically points out, "Everybody ends up dead." However, few young readers would expect the demise of a character as vital as Bullet, who has worked hard to grow up and who seems on the verge of realizing his potential. The reader's gut response, therefore, may be to rip out the last chapter and throw away the pages, much as Abigail throws the phone through the window. Nevertheless, the pain and outrage caused by Bullet's death, both real and fictional, is a mirror of reality. Through the death of Bullet, Voigt portrays the irony of the human condition: To live is to assume the risk of dying.

Unable to erase the fact of Bullet's death, the reader is left with the question of his life. Did it have significance? What was the point in all the struggling if he dies so soon after it?

The reader must make some sense of his death or it becomes a mere plot device, a pointless manipulation of the reader's emotions. It is within Housman's symbolism of life as a race that Voigt finds her answers. Bullet has always run his own race; his goal has always been to run his best, with little thought given to the competition. And he has always known what the cost would be. In this way, the reader is able to come to terms with his death.

For Bullet to be free to run his own race, there must exist the possiblity that he will die. Knowing this, the reader cannot deny Bullet the freedom to choose his own destiny.

Themes and Characters

The Runner focuses on an adolescent's inner struggle with conflicting desires and feelings. Seventeen-yearold Bullet dominates the story and is a well-developed character with complexity and depth. He imprints himself on the hearts and minds of his readers, and it is this memorable portrayal that gives The Runner its compelling quality. However, as befitting an honest account, Bullet is no paragon. He is stubborn and prejudiced, and although he experiences change and maturation, he retains his feet of clay. Bullet leaves home with the same hostilities toward his father that he had at the opening of the novel, and he joins the army to avoid the draft because he sees the draft as a form of control. Furthermore, he remains a loner with virtually no friends. Bullet's mother assesses him best when she reminisces with him as he prepares to leave for the army. They recall a time when, as a child, Bullet was forced to attend a party. On the way to the party in the back of the family pickup, Bullet took off his clothes piece by piece and threw them away. When they arrived at the party, Bullet's parents found him naked in the back of the truck. In hindsight, his mother says, "It always seemed to me there wasn't anything else you could have done. Being you."

Bullet's mother and father are important characters in terms of influence, although they remain in the background. Much of what the reader knows of them is seen through Bullet's eyes, and the father comes across as a one-dimensional figure who is dictatorial, repressive, and uncaring. In the end, his autocratic ways drive Bullet from home just as they have driven his siblings away.

Bullet's mother is a complex character who is fully developed by Voigt.

She is a woman marked by contrasts, reticent and withdrawn, yet possesses a sense of humor. Although she bends her will to that of her husband, she still manages to provide Bullet with a sense of support. The reader suspects that there is more to Abigail Tillerman than meets the eye, but it is not until the final chapter that her full range of personality traits are presented: When she learns of Bullet's death in Vietnam, she cuts the telephone loose with a cleaver, takes it into town, and throws it through a window of the telephone company. In one dramatic act, she sheds her facade of indifference and reveals the depth of her passion. A woman of intense privacy, she displays publicly the wound inflicted by Bullet's death. At the same time, the book's closing lines underscore her stoic nature: "She lifted her shoulders and squared them, to take up again the burden of long life."

Two other characters, Tamer Shipp and Patrice, are important to the story, in terms of plot and of interest to the reader. Patrice is Bullet's employer and only friend, and he is wise, gentle, and caring—the antithesis of Bullet's father.

It is because Bullet respects and admires Patrice that he is able to overcome his racial prejudice and reach out to other people.

Tamer Shipp is a black runner who disrupts Bullet's safe, insular ways of thinking and forces him to take a close look at his snobbery. As a character, Tamer comes across as real and human and is in many ways more believable than Bullet. The reader is never certain what flows through Bullet's veins—at times it appears to be divine ichor, the fluid of the gods; at other times, it appears to be ice water. Tamer, on the other hand, is a hero on which the reader can depend. Bullet and Tamer never become close friends, but they learn to trust one another, and each has something to give the other. Bullet helps Tamer become a better athlete and makes certain that he stays out of Vietnam; Tamer helps Bullet gain insights into himself.

The theme of the runner is one of emerging adulthood as Bullet strives to determine which values are worthwhile and which stifle and narrow his vision.

Voigt espouses the idea that human relationship are what is important.

Patrice is more of a father to Bullet than his real father and is a more noble character as a result. There is much in Bullet to admire (his discipline, his courage, his hard work on the farm and the boat), but he does not merit affection and acceptance until he reaches out to help Tamer Shipp. He becomes even more endearing when he becomes a "team player" and runs a relay race. And when he makes deliberate plans to make his leave-taking easier on his mother, letting the love he has always felt for her surface, Bullet becomes a truly worthy hero.

There is a secondary theme in the book that deals with racial prejudice.

When the coach initially asks Bullet to train Tamer Shipp in running crosscountry, Bullet refuses because Shipp is "colored." But when Bullet learns that Patrice, the one person he trusts and respects, is partially black, he is forced to examine his feelings, and he comes to realize how unfair he has been in prejudging a person because of his race. Bullet coaches Tamer throughout the remainder of the track season and makes the ultimate turnaround when he drops the word "colored" and refers to Tamer as "black." Eventually, he is able to explain his feelings to Patrice: "You are what you are, and it is what you are that counts."

Topics for Discussion

1. Bullet was concerned that he not be "boxed in," not by his parents, his peers, his teachers, not even by his running. In what ways does he create a box for himself?

2. Bullet resents his father's dictatorial commands but does not openly defy him. Instead, he looks for ways to circumvent his orders. Why do you think Bullet does not argue with his father or openly protest his orders?

3. Bullet is admired and respected but has no friends. Why is he such a loner?

4. Bullet is an outstanding crosscountry runner, state champion for two years. Why did Voigt choose crosscountry as Bullet's sport? What other sports might have served her purposes as well?

5. The one person, besides his mother, for whom Bullet has affection is Patrice. What are the bonds that bind these two?

6. In what ways is Bullet like the "old man" he despises?

7. Were the goals of integration met in Bullet's school, where blacks and whites separated themselves into two groups?

8. When Bullet shoots his dog, he waits through the night for her to die, even though he could have finished her quickly. Why does he do this?

9. In the 1960s, many families fought over the length of their sons' hair, as did Bullet and his father. What other fads have been the subject of controversy within families? What would be comparable today?

10. Voigt uses the words Negro, colored, and black in reference to Tamer Shipp. Do these words have different connotations? Discuss these terms and how they have evolved over the years.

Cite examples of words which have gone through similar changes.

11. Bullet extracts a promise from Tamer Shipp to stay out of Vietnam.

Why is it importatant to Bullet that Tamer do so when he himself is enlisting?

12. Bullet's resolution to the conflict with his father is to leave home. What other ways could Voigt have resolved the problem?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. It is a turning point for Bullet when he learns that Patrice is partially black. He then reverses his stand about coaching Tamer and begins to reevaluate many of his old ideas. Discuss Bullet's metamorphosis in terms of its believability.

2. What is your reaction to Bullet's death? Discuss the impact of the book without the last chapter.

3. Abigail reacts to Bullet's death by throwing the phone through the phone company's window. Why does Voigt choose to have her react in this way?

What other reactions might Abigail have had?

4. Abigail is an important character in other books of the Tillerman cycle, in which she is the grandmother of the Tillerman children. Read Dicey's Song, Sons from Afar, or Seventeen against the Dealer. Compare the portrayal of Abi gail in these books with her portrayal as Bullet's mother.

5. Read Housman's poem "To an Athlete Dying Young." In it, he says it is better for someone who has achieved fame to die before the glory fades.

Think of examples of persons who have died young while at the height of their fame. Do you agree that it is better to die young and preserve one's glory?

What are some of the reasons Housman might have said this?

6. Many of the people you know are Bullet's contemporaries who reached adulthood in the 1960s. Interview one of these people as an oral-history project and find out his or her conceptions of what that era was like. Are these views similar to those expressed in The Runner?

7. Bullet's school was integrated, but de facto segregation still existed. Interview an African American who was a young person in the 1960s and obtain other perspectives on the status of race relations at the time.

For Further Reference

Irving, Elise K. "Cynthia Voigt." Horn Book (August 1983): 410-412. Written by a friend, the article addresses the question of what Cynthia Voigt as a person is really like. It accompanies Voigt's Newbery acceptance speech.

Kauffman, Dorothy. "Profile: Cynthia Voigt." Language Arts (December 1985): 876-880. A profile of Voigt based on interview material that explores Voigt's sources for her stories, the inspirations for her characters, and the reasons for the similarity of her settings.

Shadiow, Linda K. "Recommended: Cynthia Voigt." English Journal (April 1987): 71-72. Discusses the qualities that make Voigt's characters memorable—characters who "get to both their external and internal destinations."

Voigt, Cynthia. "About Excellence."

Language Arts (January 1986): 10-11.

Voigt discusses the idea of excellence and concludes that there is no reliable standard by which it can be measured.

——. "Newbery Medal Acceptance."

The Horn Book Magazine (August 1983): 401-409. This speech was given to the American Library Association on the occasion of Voigt's receiving the Newbery award. In it, she speaks of the excellence consistently found in children's literature and delineates the roles of editors, publishers, and librarians in fostering this excellence.

——. "On Teaching." Language Arts (November 1985): 740-741. This answers the question Voigt has often been asked since winning the Newbery—"Will you stop teaching now?"—and provides reasons why she continues to teach.

Related Titles

The Runner is one of seven books in the Tillerman cycle and is first in the cycle's internal chronology. Four of the books feature the children of Bullet's sister, Liza. Homecoming tells of her four children, who she abandons in a parking lot in a Connecticut shopping mall, and their efforts to get to their grandmother's home in Maryland. They are unsure if their grandmother knows of their existence or if she will be willing to take them. Dicey's Song continues the saga after they arrive at their grandmother's home, and it centers on the efforts of the children and grandmother to merge as a family. It includes the death of the children's mother. Sons from Afar relates the efforts of the two boys in the family to locate their father, who never married their mother and who abandoned them years before. Seventeen Against the Dealer brings Dicey to adulthood and deals with her search for a focus in life. It is the last of the Tillerman books, and in it Voigt attempts to draw together loose ends and point each character in a direction for the future.

A Solitary Blue and Come a Stranger derive from books about the Tillermans. A Solitary Blue tells the story of Jeff, a character introduced in Dicey's Song who becomes increasingly important in Dicey's life. Come a Stranger features Wilhemina Smiths, a friend of Dicey's who, like Jeff, is introduced in Dicey's Song. It also includes an older Tamer Shipp.

Voigt is highly successful throughout the series in keeping each character true to his own persona, and she masterfully interweaves events that occur in more than one of the books. For fans of the Tillermans, the sequels are satisfying, as they allow the reader to follow the various characters to their eventual destinies.

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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

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

Includes bibliographical references and index

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

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

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

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

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