

# Sara Will Short Guide

## Sara Will by Sue Ellen Bridgers

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## Overview

Sara Will is not usually discussed as a young adult novel because the principal characters, Sara Will Burney and Swanee Hope Burney Calhoun, are adults. However, there are two young adults in the novel, Eva and Michael, and the story focuses on bringing these two generations together.

Sara Will and her sister Swanee Hope have been living together in rural, western North Carolina. In the isolation of their mountain family home, the two sisters have grown to tolerate and love each other despite their obvious differences. However, their slow and quiet lives are soon interrupted with the arrival of a middle-aged bachelor and his unwed teenage niece and her infant daughter.

## About the Author

Sue Ellen Bridgers was born in Winterville, North Carolina on September 20, 1942, in the same small town where both sets of her grandparents lived. Bridgers attributes her oral history and heritage to these grandparents and their stories that she used to sit and listen to for hours. Her mother encouraged reading as a leisure activity and Sue Ellen and her sister soon became active readers.

Bridgers attended East Carolina University and served as the typist for the school's literary magazine, which published her first prose and poetry. In 1963, after three years of college, she left East Carolina to marry Ben Oshel Bridgers. They travelled with the U. S. Air Force until Ben returned to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to pursue his law degree. Sue Ellen also returned to college, and in 1976 graduated from Western Carolina University summa cum laude with a B.A. degree in English.

Bridgers first received critical success with the publication of *Home Before Dark* (1976). She is the recipient of numerous awards for her writing: in 1976 she received the Breadloaf Writers' Conference Fellowship, and in 1979 she received the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for *All Together Now*, which was also named to the American Library Association list of best books for young adults. She received the ALAN Award in 1985 for her outstanding contributions to young adult literature. Each of her novels for young adults has been on the ALA list of best books for young adults.

# Setting

Sara Will is set in Tyler Mills, a small, agrarian community in the western mountains of North Carolina. The small town setting is important to the development of the novel because it is in the rural community that the characters find refuge. The novel begins in the autumn, and as the seasons change, so do the characters. They endure a harsh winter but find a renewed sense of living in the spring. The immediate story occurs in the 1980s, but flashbacks into Sara's past cover a twenty-year period.

## Social Sensitivity

The novel deals with one sensitive issue—an unwed, pregnant teenager who has run away from home and has been living with her older bachelor uncle. The fact that the setting is part of the conservative southern "Bible belt," adds to the sensitivity of this social issue. However, Bridgers deals with this issue in a matter of fact, nonjudgemental manner, and the reader develops an empathy for all of the characters.



# Literary Qualities

Bridgers is a story-teller in the southern tradition. Each character has a distinguishing heritage, such as Uncle Fate losing the use of his left arm and almost losing his life. The novel is rich in the art of the oral tradition as each character tells his or her story.

Through her aptly drawn characters, Bridgers depicts the language, lifestyles, and culture of Appalachain North Carolina.

Bridgers use concrete imagery and detail to contrast these two sisters.

Swanee Hope hardly ever moved except to make a marble cake or dust or sweep the porch. She liked to cook sweet things: puddings smooth with patience, and angel cakes folded slowly, in the rotating bowl easing its circle against her curving rubber spatula. Sara Will hadn't the patience for it or the desire. . . She'd take her blackberries plain or mixed with a little sugar and poured over a hot sweet biscuit she needn't a mixer to make.

As the seasons come and change, so do the characters. The novel begins in the autumn as we are introduced to the characters. The plot and the characters develop through a harsh winter and a budding spring. As spring comes, Sara too is renewed with a new sense of life and living; she realizes that life is for the living and that one can not dwell on the past. Bridgers's characters are so well defined and realistic that many readers will find themselves identifying with one or more of the family members. The love of family that binds members together, no matter what, is the heart of the novel.



# Themes and Characters

As her name implies, Sara Will survive and endure! Some might call Sara Will an old maid; indeed, she is an older woman, probably in her late fifties, and she has never been married.

She is more a product of the past than the present. It is as though Sara Will's life has been frozen in time, since the death of her sister, Serena. Bridgers describes Sara Will's outdated clothing, car, and lifestyle and makes the reader keenly aware that Sara Will does not like modern "conveniences" and change. Sara Will's goal and unthwarted ambition seems to be to get an access bridge and road built to Serena's grave. She is consumed in a battle to get the TVA, who routed the river through the family cemetery, to build the bridge and road.

Sara lives with her other sister, Swanee Hope, in the run-down family home in the rural mountain area of Tyler Mills, North Carolina. She came to live with Sara after her husband died; her only child, a grown son, lives in California and rarely visits. As with Sara Will's southern double name, Swanee Hope's name implies her attitude about life. She is an eternal optimist, one who looks for the good in everyone and who always sees the silver lining. Unlike Sara Will, who will embrace nothing of the modern world, Swanee Hope likes to watch game shows on TV and to cook on the electric stove.

These two sisters are living a very quiet life when three uninvited guests enter their home: Lafayette (Fate) Jessop, his niece Eva, and Eva's infant daughter Rachel. It turns out that the three are related to Sara Will and Swanee Hope; Fate is the brother of their former brother-in-law, the one whom Sara holds responsible for Serena's death. Serena died in childbirth, and Sara Will has never forgiven her husband.

A fourth "intruder" comes to the Burney family home in the middle of the night on a motorcycle. His name is Michael, and at first, the two sisters think that he is the father of Eva's illegitimate baby; however, he is not—although he wishes that he were.

Like the archangel Michael, this Michael has come to "rescue" Eva and Rachel. He and Rachel went to high school together and he has always loved her. She, however, has always thought of Michael as a brother.

The plot and themes of the novel are centered around this unlikely family.

Although Sara Will is the principal character, the reader feels the anguish and the despair of each character in his or her moments of trial.

At the beginning of the novel, Sara Will's life centers on her dead sister Serena. Sara Will focuses all of her attention of cleaning the family cemetery and getting the TVA to build an access road and bridge to Serena's grave. Near the novel's end, the reader sees a different Sara Will, one who focuses on life and giving love to the living.





## Topics for Discussion

1. Sue Ellen Bridgers has chosen names for her characters that seem to be symbolic. Discuss the symbolism of these names: Sara Will, Swanee Hope, Eva, Michael, and Fate.
2. Describe the setting of the novel and discuss how it adds or detracts from the plot.
3. How is the novel divided? Do these sections have any significance?

Explain.

4. Compare and contrast Sara Will and Swanee Hope.
5. There are two romances in this story. How would you compare the two?
6. Sara Will involves the families of three generations. With which generation do you identify? Why?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. This novel takes place in Tyler Mills, North Carolina. Does such a town exist? If not, what town or towns does Tyler Mills seem to be based on?

Find the area on a map.

2. Research the Appalachian mountain area. Write about the customs, crafts, and dialects of this area.

3. Sue Ellen Bridgers has been called a "southern" writer. What are the characteristics of southern writers. Do you agree that Bridgers fits into the category?

4. What is the TVA? When was it started and for what purpose? Does the TVA still exist? If so, how has it changed?

5. Compare the settings of *Permanent Connections*, another novel by Bridgers, and *Sara Will*.

## For Further Reference

Bridgers, Sue Ellen. "My Life in Fiction." ALAN Review (Fall 1990): 2-5.

Bridgers discusses various influences on her writing.

———. "Stories My Grandmother Told Me," ALAN Review (Fall 1985): 44-47; and Part II (Winter 1986): 53-55, 61.

Bridgers discusses the influence of her roots and her family life. She notes that family life is at the core of her writing.

"Bridgers, Sue Ellen." In Contemporary Authors. New Revision Series. Vol.

36. James G. Lesniak, ed. Detroit: Gale Research, 1992: 49-52. This reference gives a brief biographical ketch of the author, a list of her publications and awards, and an analysis of each novel.

"Bridgers, Sue Ellen." In Contemporary Literary Criticism. Vol. 26. Jean C. Stine, ed. Detroit: Gale Research, 1983: 90-93. This reference offers a variety of book reviews of Bridgers's earlier novels, including *Home Before Dark*, *All Together Now*, and *Notes for Another Life*.

"Bridgers, Sue Ellen." In *Something About the Author*. Vol. 22. Anne Commire, ed. Detroit: Gale Research, 1987: 39-52. This article lists Bridgers's novels and awards, gives a biographical sketch with quotations from Bridgers about her writing, and provides a brief discussion of her earlier novels.

Carroll, Pamela Sissi. "Southern Literature for Young Adults: The Novels of Sue Ellen Bridgers." ALAN Review (Fall 1990): 10-13. This article is a condensation of Carroll's dissertation, "Sue Ellen Bridgers' Southern Literature for Young Adults." Carroll discusses why Bridgers has been labeled a southern writer, and uses examples from *Home Before Dark*, *All Together Now*, *Notes for Another Life*, *Sara Will*, and *Permanent Connections* to support her argument.

## Related Titles

Another Bridger novel that has family and rural life at the core of the story is *Permanent Connections*. The main setting is a farm house six miles from Tyler Mills, North Carolina. The young adult characters, Rob and Ellery, are both in the mountainous rural area under protest: Rob Dickson has been sent from suburban Montclair, New Jersey, to take care of his injured uncle because the location is too remote and the family too cantankerous to find local help. Ellery Collier is living with her mother, who left a successful banker husband in Charlotte to pursue weaving and her own identity on the mountainside above the Dickson house.

Ellery misses her now-broken home, her friends back in Charlotte, and her music lessons. Both are unhappy outsiders in the region and in school, in a place where everyone else appears to be settled and secure.



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