

Shelter Short Guide

Shelter by Jayne Anne Phillips

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Characters

In the novel *Shelter*, Jayne Anne Phillips has chosen to balance four points of view, describing the events of this novel as they are experienced and reflected upon by Lenny, Alma, and Buddy (in eleven sections each) and by Parson (in ten sections). Of the other major characters, Carmody seems too angry and inarticulate to express himself, and Delia has retreated into passivity in order to escape the pain of her father's death.

Lenny Swenson, the first character introduced, is a fifteen year old Girl Guide at Camp Shelter. Since this year is probably her last as camper, she lives in one of the tents at the upper fringe of the camp. In this section of the camp, called Highest, the campers are given little direct supervision; so she and Cap have little difficulty sneaking away to go skinny-dipping in Turtle Hollow, the forbidden swimming hole.

Poised on the boundary between childhood and maturity, Lenny still retains some physical characteristics of a child. Her long, loose hair is "the color of bleached hay that has weathered in fields," and most of the time she wears it in "a silky, blunt cut ponytail that swings when she moves."

Again, however, appearances are deceptive; Lenny has reached the point of sexual awakening, although she still is somewhat confused by the emotions she is feeling. She now sleeps naked, her games with Cap have taken on a sexual quality, and she has begun to realize the true character of the "touching" incidents in her parents' bedroom.

Moreover, she has the most objective view of the sexual hostility between her parents, Wes and Audrey. In the course of the novel, Lenny matures most, as she comes to recognize sexual attraction and learns how to deal with it.

Lenny provides most of the information about her best friend, Catherine Briarley, known as Cap. Also fifteen, Cap is nonetheless several months older than Lenny and more advanced sexually, perhaps because she has witnessed the frequent verbal battles between her parents, Henry and Catherine. For Cap, it is essential that she maintain control of people and situations, and she knows precisely how to manipulate Lenny. After deliberately frightening Lenny by taking her to the bat cave, Cap agrees to a midnight swim only if Lenny will swim nude. It is she who draws Frank's attention to the naked Lenny, and it is she who orchestrates the sexual encounter between the two. When she attempts to repeat the incident with Alma and Delia as observers, Alma innocently foils her plan, and having lost control of the situation, Cap is unable to act decisively when Carmody appears. As Lenny assumes the position of authority, Cap's dominance appears to have ended.

Alma Swenson, Lenny's sister, was accepted in the Junior (twelve year old) Level of Camp Shelter only because the camp director was reluctant to separate her from Delia. Believing her friend is better off at camp and away from the gossip in Aunt Bird's beauty shop, Alma works hard to avoid anything that will call the counselors' attention to Delia;



thus she tries to prevent Delia's sleepwalking, and she completes all the chores and craft projects assigned to the two of them. In fact, still a week short of her twelfth birthday, Alma has already assumed a number of adult responsibilities. Throughout Audrey's two-year affair with Nickel, Alma has been her unwilling confidante, and although Audrey insists that Alma is the daughter who most resembles her, Alma seems actually more mature than her mother. It is Alma who worries that someone from Gaither will see Audrey and Nickel together during their rendezvous in Winfield, and Alma is also the only one who seems concerned about how Delia will be affected by knowledge of her father's infidelity and suicide. When she believes that Lenny has violated the camp rules by writing a letter to Frank, Alma quickly removes the letter from Frank's mailbox and destroys it.

After Nickel Campbell's death, Alma observes a dramatic change in his daughter and her best friend. Delia, who does not share Alma's enthusiasm for reading, seemed never to notice or reflect upon the meaning of anything taking place around her. Now, however, she seems "eminently puzzled, suspicious, distracted"; she cynically insists that Mrs. Thompson-Warner makes up all the material presented in Heritage Class. Obviously depressed, Delia has begun to sleepwalk, and during a recent episode, she fell and cut her lip badly. Furthermore, she refuses to participate in camp activities, preferring to wander in the woods, alone or with Alma, but when Parson extracts the snake's egg and shows it to the girls, for the first time Delia reacts with strong emotion, screaming hysterically and running deeper into the woods. Likewise, during the Carmody episode, Delia remains the most conventional of the girls, as she first suggests notifying the authorities and later says the prayer over Carmody's body. Sobbing, Delia acknowledges her fear, but overcomes it when she enters the hidden cave with Buddy and the other girls. Noting similarities between her father's death and Carmody's, she must accept the truth about Nickel's suicide before she can also comprehend their differences.

Until this summer, Buddy has always preferred the woods in winter, when he and his mother are the only residents on the Camp Shelter Road. To Hilda Carmody's young son, Camp Shelter then seems like his private realm, where he can find sanctuary among the trees. Now, though, he is beginning to admire the campers; in fact, he develops a crush on Lenny and steals one of Mrs. Thompson-Warner's rings, intending it as a present for Lenny. Buddy's plan fails, however, because for the first time in his memory, the man he calls Dad is home from prison. Carmody not only takes the ring but insists that Buddy steal the other rings as well. More than ever, Buddy is aware of the need to hide, whether alone in the woods, or with his mother at the local church. He fears his abusive stepfather, especially after Carmody threatens to force Buddy to accompany him when he leaves Shelter County for good. Despite his quickness and cunning, Buddy feels powerless to escape Carmody until he meets Parson, the one person Carmody seems to fear.

All of his life, Parson has been an outsider. As a child at the orphanage at Huntingdon, he was called a "guinea kid" because his complexion and hair were very dark and even at age sixteen he had a "swarth of beard." Selected as a foster son by Harkness, the alcoholic postal worker, Parson soon discovered that Harkness had taken two foster



sons into his home only in order to abuse them sexually. After setting the fire that killed Harkness and burned his house, Parson was sent to the Industrial School for Boys at Proudys town, even though he was beginning to gain the reputation of being crazy.

Before long, however, he became Preacher Summers's foster son and a young evangelist at Summers's Calvary Church. A gambler and womanizer, Summers was shot at a card game, and driving erratically as he raced to get Summers home, Parson struck and killed a young girl. Sentenced to prison for vehicular homicide, Parson believed he was always surrounded by the "legion of the vapor world," as he called the dead. His "legion" accompanies him as he simply walks away from prison in order to follow his cellmate, Carmody, whom he considers fallen and vicious, but also capable of leading him to grace. Living in an abandoned shack, Parson works on a construction crew during the day, but at night he hears the walking of the Devil, whom he thinks of as "a fallen child, lost, abandoned." Both Lenny and Buddy are drawn to Parson: For Lenny, he seems to represent entrance into the adult world, and he gives Buddy hope of escaping Carmody. Ultimately Parson intervenes not only to thwart Carmody's attacks upon Lenny and Buddy and to prevent similar attacks upon the other girls, but to take upon himself the responsibility for Carmody's death.

Carmody, whose first name is never mentioned, is described as "long and lank," with "faded, wheat-colored hair and squinty eyes." His face is "not young," but he has a "callow, unfinished look, showing always an edge of the rabby anger that caused him to hang back, scheming while his cohorts preened and strutted." Childhood abuse and his experiences as a prisoner of war have left him mentally unbalanced, and he has spent the past five years in prison, sometimes beating the walls. Hilda explains to Buddy that Carmody reacts violently because he is afraid of everything. When he is killed, Buddy assures the girls that no one will miss him.

Among the minor characters who figure prominently in the thoughts of the girls is Frank, the camp bugler.

Many of the junior and senior campers flirt with Frank, who habitually ignores them. As Lenny discovers during their midnight encounter at Turtle Hole, he is almost a man. Alma also devotes much time to considering the reactions of Mrs. Thompson-Warner, the widowed camp director, whose husband reportedly committed suicide. Likewise, concern for Delia leads Alma to reflect upon the affair between her mother, Audrey, and Delia's father, Nickel Thackery Campbell. In contrast, Lenny's memories involve her relationship to her father, Wes Swenson. The center of Buddy's universe is his mother, Hilda Carmody, described by the girls as "a big woman gone to fat."

When Buddy thinks of her, he recalls her lingering vanilla scent and the religious fervor which seems to cut her off from him.



Social Concerns

Phillips recreates the mood of America in late July through early November 1963, choosing to conclude her novel just before the assassination of John Kennedy. Nevertheless, there is an obvious parallel between the shattering events at Camp Shelter, West Virginia, in late July and those in Dallas in late November. Just as the death of President Kennedy ended the era of America's postwar innocence, the death of Carmody marks the end of childhood for four Girl Guides and the camp cook's young son.

In keeping with her emphasis upon portraying the attitudes of 1963, Phillips accurately portrays the Cold War mentality of the era. Mrs. Thompson Warner, the camp director, regularly teaches a Heritage Class where she lectures on the dangers of trusting Khrushchev, introduces former Russian political prisoners, and shows films of the atrocities inflicted upon Russian political dissidents. Each evening one of the campers is assigned to make a "supper speech" on the subject of freedom.

The novel also reflects the changes in American family life which were beginning to become obvious in the early 1960s, as the role of women slowly evolved. While women like Hilda Carmody had always been required to hold menial jobs in order to support their families, until the 1960s work outside the home was not considered a reasonable alternative to remaining in an unhappy marriage, as Shelter shows it to be for Audrey Swenson and Catherine Winthrop (Briarley). Thus, divorce became not only possible, but actually prevalent, as suburban housewives found means of escape other than Mina Campbell's alcoholism or Audrey Swenson's assignments. Babyboomers were impatient, unwilling to endure the misery of a failing relationship; thus, while single parenthood was still considered unfortunate, it did not carry the severe social stigma of earlier generations. This shift in attitudes is most obvious as Mina and Hilda build new lives when circumstances force them to be single parents, while Audrey and Catherine choose the role.

Among the current social issues raised is the failure of the criminal justice system, especially in dealing with the mentally ill. Both Carmody and Parson have spent much of their lives in reformatories and prisons, when they undoubtedly should have been in mental institutions. Childhood sexual abuse and mistreatment in a Manchurian prisoner of war camp have left Carmody paranoid and abusive, and his incarcerations at a youth farm and in prison have only made him more violent, then paroled him again into society. Considered retarded, Parson is, in fact, schizophrenic. Several times he used fire to combat manifestations of the Devil, whom he sees pursuing him, but no one believed his confessions, and he was not jailed until he killed a young girl in a traffic accident. Because he talks about the "legion" of the dead (at least two of whom he has killed), both the other convicts and the prison authorities leave him alone, and he is able to walk away from a prison work detail and follow Carmody to Shelter County.

Carmody also provides the most striking example of another contemporary social problem — domestic violence. As a teen-ager, after years of neglect and abuse, he



turned on his alcoholic mother and beat her until she was nearly dead. As an adult, he continues the pattern, subjecting Hilda to marital rape and abusing Buddy sexually and verbally. Carmody enjoys the power his brutality gives him; both Hilda and Buddy fear him and wish he would leave home forever.



Techniques

Phillips employs the Faulknerian technique of multiple narrative perspectives, allowing four different characters to convey their individual thoughts and actions in forty-three separate sections. By providing the reader with diverse interpretations, Phillips presents the most comprehensive and accurate account of the various incidents leading up to the climactic conclusion when all the characters converge at Turtle Hole, the swimming area off-limits to the campers. Since the horror of that experience is shared by characters of divergent personalities and backgrounds, the reader accepts their action as a valid response.

Perhaps even more than Phillips's earlier fiction, *Shelter* is a highly symbolic novel. For example, the snake captured by Parson serves as a multidimensional symbol associated with nature, atonement, and sexuality in addition to the traditional link with evil. Similar connections exist between Turtle Hole and the dangers of the adult world, and the various earlier secrets foreshadow the ultimate secret of what happened to Carmody.



Themes

Shelter develops Phillips's recurring theme of disintegrating families. Although clearly the most dysfunctional, the Carmody family differs only in degree from the Briarleys, the Campbells, and the Swensons. None of these families is stable, as the recollections of Alma and Lenny reveal. Long before the novel opens, reenacting the Briarleys' fights has become a game for Cap and Lenny. Catherine Winthrop has already left Henry Briarley, returned to her family home in Connecticut, and taken back her maiden name. Audrey Swenson and Nickel Campbell have come to believe their marriages are mistakes, and they have engaged in a two-year affair. Moreover, throughout the affair, Audrey has detailed all her feelings in conversations with her younger daughter, Alma. Meanwhile, Lenny has begun to remember incidents of sexual "touching," presumably by her drunken father. Trapped by Mina's psychological dependence, and tortured by guilt about what he is doing to his children, Nickel has killed himself. The epilogue to this novel reveals that finally the Swensons too have separated; Audrey and her daughters live in New York state, where Audrey works in the admissions department of the private school Lenny and Cap attend.

In keeping with the dysfunctional family theme is the family secrets motif. Each of the major characters is privy to a secret which must remain hidden, often even within the family.

Cap and Lenny cloak themselves in Catherine's discarded rabbit coats and make the telling of secrets a game, but Lenny quickly learns that truth can still be concealed if told in a way that defies belief. On the other hand, when secrets such as their smoking and drinking are revealed, Catherine will no longer allow Lenny to spend the night with Cap. Lenny also is careful to make certain that Audrey does not know about the incidents with Wes.

Alma feels compelled to conceal Audrey's affair with Nickel and to protect Delia from knowledge of the affair and of Nickel's apparent suicide. During each day's camp activities, Alma completes Delia's tasks as well as her own, so that the counselors will not realize how troubled Delia actually is. More dangerous, though, is Buddy's need to hide from Carmody. This man, whom he calls Dad, threatens to add beating and kidnapping to his usual sexual abuse. Finally, there is Parson, the escaped convict, who hides by living in an abandoned shack and joining an isolated work crew. At the climax of the novel, all of these characters are linked by the most sinister of secrets, one they vow never to disclose.

Involved in this secret is the theme of initiation, another important concern in Shelter. Initially the subject is maturation, as Lenny's naked, midnight swim becomes an introduction to sexuality and a step toward definition of her sexual identity. Later, however, Lenny and her friends become part of a more sinister initiation, as these five young people experience their first direct encounter with the corruption of the adult world and learn not only to recognize evil, but to deal with its consequences. Isolated physically and psychologically from home and parents, they can rely only on the



assistance of Parson, the mad prison escapee who already sees the Devil every night. Parson represents the contradictory nature of human personality.

Although he has killed two people, he becomes a kind of savior, first when he intervenes to save the youngsters from Carmody, and again when he assumes the guilt of their crime.

The motif of appearance and reality also figures prominently in this novel.

Initially these young people seem innocent, but through their thoughts and recollections, Phillips gradually reveals that each of them has experienced some prior brush with a powerful, corrupting force. As her mother's confidante, Alma considers herself almost a participant in Audrey's affair with Nickel Campbell; in fact, Alma recognizes a greater spiritual affinity with Nickel than with either of her own parents.

Her guilt causes her to be extremely protective of her surrogate step-siblings, Delia and John-John. In Delia's case, her psychological balance has been upset by a growing recognition of the circumstances surrounding her father's death. Her parents' bitter and prolonged fights have caused a similar dislocation for Cap, making her cynical and manipulative, especially sexually.

In contrast, Lenny has become passive.

She knows about her mother's affair, and she vaguely recalls childhood experiences of a clearly sexual nature.

Her response has been to share her father's beer and to participate in Cap's implicitly sexual games. Buddy, the youngest of the group, has been the most victimized, as Carmody has repeatedly abused him sexually.



Key Questions

1. The 1960s were a time of upheaval in American families; the divorce rate soared as people examined their relationships in terms of the happiness and fulfillment they provided. Why did this change take place? Was there a change in society's attitude toward concepts such as responsibility and commitment?
2. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, camps such as the Girl Guides' Camp Shelter were extremely popular with campers and parents alike. Why did these camps appeal to each group?
3. Observing that Shelter is set in the summer and fall immediately preceding the assassination of John F. Kennedy, reviewers immediately pointed out the parallel between the girls' initiation into adult evil and America's loss of innocence with the death of President Kennedy. Do you think Phillips intended the girls' experience to be interpreted in this way? Is the symbolism too subtle? Too obvious?
4. Mrs. Thompson-Warner presides over a daily Heritage Class in which she lectures and shows filmstrips about the dangers of "trusting the Russians."

During the Cold War years, did most Americans share her attitudes? How did Americans react when Nikita Krushchev visited the United States?
5. Mina and Nickel call their baby John-John in honor of President Kennedy's son. As this choice of names suggests, both John and Robert Kennedy were very popular in West Virginia. What was the reason for their popularity? Why do you think Phillips chose to emphasize this link to the Kennedy family?
6. The roots of the 1970s women's movement can be found in the growing discontent of women during the 1960s.

In what ways do Audrey Swenson and Catherine Briarley exemplify that discontent? How do they differ from Mina Campbell and Hilda Carmody?
7. The behavior of Shelter's characters — parents and their children — suggests that maturity is not a matter of age. What is the basis of genuine maturity? In what ways does the girls' experience hasten the growth of their maturity?
8. Phillips repeatedly demonstrates that people and situations are not always what they seem. Point out examples of this disparity? How does each contribute to the development of the novel's theme?
9. Clearly both Parson and Carmody are mentally ill. Has society helped them by incarcerating them? What purpose has been served by sentencing them to prison? Is this use of the penal system justified?



10. Implicit in *Shelter* are two traditional views of the wilderness: as a savage place and as the site of innocence and purity. How does Phillips use these two attitudes to develop her principal theme?
11. Why is Alma especially drawn to Delia and Johnny, with the urge to protect them?
12. What incidents reveal Lenny's awakening sexuality? What is Cap's role in this transformation?
13. Cite specific examples of irony in this novel — e.g., the fact that the girls have been sent to camp to keep them out of trouble.
14. Should the girls have told what happened to Carmody? What would have been the result? Why did they decide to keep the secret?
15. What are the various secrets in this novel? How do childhood secrets differ from those of adults? Are the girls to be considered adults simply because they keep adult secrets?
16. Is Alma a believable preadolescent? Why or why not?
17. Has Carmody been subjected to more brutalizing experiences than someone of his background is likely to have encountered? Why have his reactions differed so markedly from those of Parson?
18. Is Parson an instrument of cosmic justice? What probably would have happened if he had not been at Turtle Hole?
19. Discuss Alma's role as the central link, pulling together all of the novel's characters and incidents.
20. How might the Turtle Hole incident have been different if Alma had not intercepted Cap's note to Frank?

Literary Precedents

The development of a character whose limited mental capacity is at odds with his physical strength may be influenced by John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937). The crisis of a group of young people forced to confront evil without the support of civilized society is reminiscent of William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954), and the climactic scene in which a major character can save himself or herself only by killing a depraved oppressor may owe something to *Deliverance* (1970) by James Dickey. The sacramental tone may also reflect that of Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* (1952). Like William Faulkner, Phillips develops multiple perspectives by presenting different characters' viewpoints in separate sections. While Phillips's individual sections are less complex rhetorically, they also suffer from Faulkner's problem of too much similarity in voice.

Related Titles

Shelter explores many of the same family and social issues as other Phillips novels such as *Machine Dreams* (1984; see separate entry) and *Fast Lanes* (1987; see separate entry). For example, in personality Wes Swenson strongly resembles Mitch Hampson, and — though she is the product of a very different era — Lenny is somewhat like Danner Hampson, especially in her relationship with her younger sibling.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994