

Shiloh Short Guide

Shiloh by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

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Overview

Shiloh is more than a story of an eleven-year-old boy and his dog. It is a book about ethical questions on right and wrong, asked by a child and unanswerable by adults, which lead Marty Preston to make decisions of his own.

Through the complex nature of moral action, Marty learns to accept responsibility to his family and the dog he has rescued from an abusive owner. He must learn to live with himself and his god by making difficult choices and standing by them. Naylor's suspenseful writing adds excitement to the book.

About the Author

Phyllis Reynolds Naylor was born January 4, 1933, in Anderson, Indiana, the daughter of Eugene S. and Laura Schield Reynolds. Her midwestern upbringing and summer visits to her grandparents in rural Maryland have provided colorful backdrops for many of her stories.

As a young girl during the depression years, this prolific writer wrote stories on the blank side of used paper she found in the trash can. At the age of sixteen, Naylor was asked by a former teacher to write a story for a Sunday school paper, and she discovered she could be paid for doing what she loved best. By the time she attended college, she earned a large part of her tuition money by selling her writing to magazines. To date she has written some two thousand magazine stories and articles.

Between graduating from Joliet Junior College in 1953 and obtaining a psychology degree from American University, Washington, D.C., in 1963, Naylor worked as an elementary school teacher, as an executive secretary for an educational association, and as an editorial assistant for the NEA Journal.

After graduation, she gave up thoughts of becoming a clinical psychologist to concentrate on writing. Three years later her first book was published.

The range of Naylor's seventy some books include fiction and nonfiction and are written for all levels from preschool to adult. She works on several projects at a time, perhaps working on a picture book in the morning and a young adult book in the afternoon.

Many of Naylor's books reflect her own life. The idea for *Shiloh* came when she and her husband were visiting friends in West Virginia. They took a walk one morning, and she saw a "hungry, trembling, and strangely silent dog that was eventually to become *Shiloh* in my book." She whistled and the dog ran to her, followed her to her friends' house, and sat in the rain all day. She agonized about the abused dog and found writing about it was a catharsis for her. It would not solve the problem of dogs being abandoned by their owners, but it was a story of a dog that touched her heart.

Shiloh won the 1992 Newbery Medal.

Night Cry won the 1984 Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America. Another young adult title, *A String of Chances* (1982), was awarded both a Young Adult Services Division Best Book for Young Adults citation and a Notable Children's Book citation by the American Library Association; it was named a Notable Children's Book in the Field of Social Studies citation; and received a South Carolina Young Adult Book Award in 1985-1986.

Setting

While walking in the tiny community of Shiloh, West Virginia, Naylor saw the dog she wrote about in this story.

Instead of inventing a setting for the book, she chose to use the exact location where she saw the abandoned animal. She incorporated in her novel the old grist mill, the river road, and the school house that she passed on her walk. She accurately described the town of Friendly, located near Sistersville and midway between Wheeling and Parkersburg. To make sure she correctly portrayed the area, Naylor carefully researched the location, writing to West Virginia agencies that could give her information on economic diversity and minute details of the area. She discovered the kind of vehicle a postman would drive and the length of his route in the West Virginia hills, so that she could accurately portray Marty's father.

In Shiloh, Marty, his parents, and two younger sisters, live in a four-room house surrounded on three sides by hills outside of Friendly in Tyler County, West Virginia. The rural setting allows Marty the opportunity to hide the mistreated dog. This contemporary story takes place in the heat of July and August while Marty is out of school for summer vacation.



Social Sensitivity

Class distinction is apparent in Naylor's novel in the contrast between Marty's four-room home and his friend David Howard's two-story house (fourstory if he counts the attic and basement) in *Friendly*. When Marty tells his mother that David's house has a room for books and a computer, a sun room for plants, and a room for company, she says that's three rooms too many.

That was the only time Marty ever heard envy in his mother's voice.

Christianity is a dominant part of Marty's life. When the lies get too heavy for him and he realizes he will go to hell for them, he remembers that his grandmother told him that animals do not go to heaven. If Shiloh cannot get into heaven, Marty figures he would run away from heaven himself.

He prays on several occasions, asking God's guidance and understanding for his dishonesty. He also struggles with what he believes God would do in a similar situation. He discovers that right and wrong are not black-and-white issues.

Literary Qualities

Shiloh is written in first-person present tense, with Marty as the narrator.

Although the unusual style takes a few pages to get used to, soon the reader skims over the "I say" and "Ma tells me" phrasings and gets into the story.

Naylor employs a mild dialect, dropping the final "g" on words such as "doin'," "lookin'," and "laughin'."

More effective in portraying the hill people of Friendly are the regional habits she highlights: Marty's sister dipping her bread in cold tea; eating fried rabbit; the neighbors' ritual of passing the time of day before getting down to the business at hand; and the postal customers leaving food in the mailboxes for Ray Preston. Naylor's use of colloquialisms also enhances the tone of the story. "Whopping" for "whipping" and Shiloh's "legs going lickety-split" add a Southern flavor to the story.

Complex characterization is a Naylor trademark. Through subtle hints the reader gets an overall picture of an individual character. Since Marty is the narrator, all characters are seen through his eyes. His love for his mother, his respect for his dad, his dislike for Judd, his relationship with his sisters, are all detailed in his expressions and how he treats these individuals.



Themes and Characters

Marty Preston is an eleven-year-old boy who's responsible enough to be trusted with a twenty-two caliber rifle for hunting. He takes care of his younger sisters as a matter of course.

Being a part of a family requires his devotion, obligations, and unselfish love. When he finds a dog that he knows has been mistreated, his sense of justice and loyalty to his family are challenged. Once he decides to keep the dog, the lies, which go against his upbringing and his conscience, begin.

He lies to his family, to his friend, to the grocery man, to the owner of the dog, and he pays the penalty for lying.

Shiloh is a two-year-old male beagle hound, white with brown and black spots, trained for hunting rabbits and small game. When Marty first spots him, Shiloh is rib-showing lean and strangely silent, as if he has had his bark beaten out of him. Although forced to take the dog back to his owner the first time he sees him, the second time Marty sees Shiloh, he decides to keep him for his own instead of returning him to a master who kicks him and starves him.

Judd Travers is a man of around thirty years who owns four hunting dogs, including Shiloh. He was abused as a child and has transferred that abuse to his animals. Marty does not like him because Judd once cheated the storekeeper out of money, he hunts deer out of season, and he mistreats his dogs. On the other hand, Ray Preston, Marty's father, is a man of principle and a good father and husband. He delivers mail out of the Friendly and Sistersville post offices and knows nearly everyone in the area. He abides by the unspoken rule that a neighbor does not get involved in another neighbor's business. Marty's mother, referred to as "Ma" throughout the story, is a smart, hardworking woman. When she discovers the dog in Marty's hideout, she talks to him about trust.

Through her, Marty sees the repercussions of his lies.

Marty is faced with a moral dilemma. He wants to protect the dog from Judd Travers's abuse. He also knows it is dishonest to lie about having a dog that does not belong to him.

He prays about it: "Jesus," I whisper finally, "which you want me to do? Be one hundred percent honest and carry that dog back to Judd so that one of your creatures can be kicked and starved all over again, or keep him here and fatten him up to glorify your creation?"

Naylor hopes her reader will think about justice as he reads her book. She says, If he sees the world as black and white, he may develop knee-jerk reactions to key words or slogans.



If he determines that the end justifies the means, his ethics may tend to slip and slide. But if he sees that much of life is more complex than he thought, that each problem must be approached in its unique situation, and that he must base his actions not only upon his family's values but also upon his own innate sense of what is true and good, then he will get a taste of what being an adult really means.

Marty makes a pact with Judd to work off the cost of the dog—twenty hours of work at two dollars an hour.

Marty hoes the garden, splits and stacks wood, washes down the trailer and the windows, cuts weeds, weeds the bean patch, and digs a ditch. After several days Judd taunts Marty and reneges on the deal. The bargain was not witnessed, he tells Marty. Marty is working for nothing. Although Marty understands that what Judd says is true, he returns to work out the full hours of his contract. He will fulfill his part of the deal, not giving Judd ammunition to say that Marty failed to uphold his end of the bargain. After all his lies, Marty is determined to teach Judd a lesson about honesty, fairness, and justice. By the end of the forty hours, the two enemies are not friends, but have achieved a bit of understanding and respect for each other.



Topics for Discussion

1. How do folks around Friendly get down to business when visiting with a neighbor?
2. What is Marty's first plan to get Shiloh? What is his second plan? What plan eventually works?
3. If Marty asked for baby-sitting money, what would his folks reply? Do you agree with the Preston's philosophy?
4. How does Marty keep Shiloh a secret?
5. Twice in this book, Marty feels sorry for Judd. Why?
6. How does Marty solve the problem of keeping Shiloh's food from spoiling?
7. What are the results of Marty buying old food and telling David about Ma's headaches?
8. What does Ma tell Marty about trust? How does Ray Preston feel when he finds out about Shiloh? What does he say about trust?
9. Ray Preston made his son face up to what he had done. Name the two times that Marty had to explain to adults about keeping Shiloh. What was Marty's reaction?
10. What were the chores that Marty does for Judd?
11. What was Judd's relationship to his father?
12. Marty's sister gives him a "butterfly kiss." How does Marty describe it?
13. Marty's father says "there's food for the body and food for the spirit."
What does he mean by this?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How does Phyllis Reynolds Naylor give *Shiloh* a Southern flavor? Cite examples from the book.

2. Marty dislikes Judd Travers long before he discovers that Judd owns *Shiloh*. Why?

3. Is Marty a very logical and systematic character? Give examples from the book to substantiate your answer.

4. When did Marty's lying begin?

Can a person lie by what he does not say? Recount the lies and their consequences.

5. Compare David Howard's home and lifestyle to Marty's.

6. Once *Shiloh* is recuperating from the attack at Marty's house, the family becomes attached to him. How does each family member show his or her affection for the dog?

7. Marty blackmails Judd for killing the deer. Explain the bargain made between them and the ambivalent feelings Marty experiences as he tries to figure out what is right and what is wrong.

8. As Marty is working for Judd he thinks, "But Judd's out to teach me a lesson, and I'm out to teach him one."

What lessons are being taught and learned?

For Further Reference

Chevalier, Tracy, ed. *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*. Chicago: St. James Press, 1989. John D. Stahl lists Naylor's books and provides an overview of her writing. He believes her characters have "depth, individuality, and complexity."

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*. Vol. 12. Detroit: Gale Research, 1977. This article presents a short autobiographical section.

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66. Detroit: Gale Research, 1991. This is a much longer and more detailed interview than in the earlier volume.

Evory, Ann, and Linda Metzger, eds.

Contemporary Authors. New Revision Series. Vol. 8. Detroit: Gale Research, 1983. This article contains a brief biography of Naylor and lists her works.

Frederick, Heather Vogel. "Shiloh."

Christian Science Monitor (November 1, 1991): 11. The reviewer believes this book "would be an excellent choice as a family read-aloud."

Hearne, Betsy. "Shiloh." *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* (October, 1991): 45. In this favorable review, Hearne states that "readers will be absorbed by the suspenseful plot, which will leave them with some memorable characterizations as well as several intriguing ethical questions."

Holtze, Sally Holmes, ed. *Fifth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. New York: H.W. Wilson, 1983. The volume presents an autobiographical sketch of Naylor and her philosophy on writing.

Mandel, Ellen. "Shiloh." *Booklist* (December 1, 1991): 695. "A moving and powerful look at the best and the worst of human nature," says this reviewer.

Naylor, Phyllis Reynolds. "Newbery Acceptance Speech." *Horn Book Magazine* (July/August 1992): 404-411.

Naylor won the 1992 Newbery Medal for *Shiloh*. She delivered her speech at the annual meeting of the American Library Association.

Naylor, Rex. "Phyllis Reynolds Naylor." *Horn Book Magazine* (July/August 1992): 412-415. The author's husband gives his view of his wife's work.

Straub, Deborah A., ed. *Contemporary Authors*. New Revision Series. Vol.

24. Detroit: Gale Research, 1988. This article lists Naylor's works and awards and includes an autobiographical sketch.

Related Titles

Naylor is very adept at using a Southern setting and capturing the colloquialism and speech patterns of the area. Although *Night Cry* is set in Mississippi and not West Virginia, it reflects the same rural Southern flavor.

Both *Night Cry* and *Shiloh* use animals as major characters. In *Night Cry* the horse is an animal to fear, but in *Shiloh* the dog is an animal to love.



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