

The Summer of the Swans Study Guide

The Summer of the Swans by Betsy Byars

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Overview

The *Summer of the Swans* is unusual because the narrative provides an extremely perceptive look at the perspectives of two characters: Sara and her mentally retarded younger brother, Charlie. The opening chapters focus on Sara's typical adolescent problems, but when Charlie becomes lost her personal problems become secondary to her concern over her brother's whereabouts.

The narrative alternates its focus between Sara and Charlie, and as Charlie's story unfolds the reader sees his desperation in being cut off from those who care for him. Byars provides compassionate insight into Charlie's feelings of frustration and his sense that he is unloved and suspended in time.

The novel also adeptly explores the emotions of Sara, who feels awkward, confused, unwanted by her father, unattractive, and judgmental.

About the Author

Betsy Byars was born on August 7, 1928, in Charlotte, North Carolina, the daughter of George Guy and Nancy Rugheimer Cromer. She attended Furman University from 1946 to 1948, and received her bachelor's degree in English from Queens College, Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1950. She married Edward Ford Byars that year. The Byarses live in South Carolina and have four children.

When her husband was a graduate student at the University of Illinois, Byars began her writing career, publishing articles in the *Saturday Evening Post*, *T.V. Guide*, and *Look* magazines. As her family grew, she began writing books, and in 1962 her first book for young people, *Clementine*, was published. Nine years later she won the Newbery Medal for her novel *The Summer of the Swans*. Many of the ideas for her books spring from her children's personal experiences. Byars writes during the winter months and spends her summers pursuing an interest in gliders and antique airplanes with her husband.



Plot Summary

The Summer of the Swans by Betsy Cromer Byars is a sweet coming-of-age novel about a young girl who is struggling with the transition from childhood to adulthood, while carrying the added burden of having to care for her younger, mentally impaired brother. Young Sara's life is further complicated when her brother walks out of the house in the middle of the night and disappears. This novel won the John Newberry Medal in 1971 and still rings true for readers of all ages thirty years later.

Sara is an awkward fourteen, unhappy with every aspect of her body, especially her big feet, skinny legs and too-short hair. To make things worse, Sara's older sister, Wanda, is a very beautiful young woman. When Sara tries to talk to her sister about her worries, Wanda has little time to soothe her adolescent angst, unfamiliar, or so it seems, with this type of insecurity. To top off Sara's problems, her Aunt Willie is coarse woman who never wants the children in her care to have any fun. Then there's Charlie.

Charlie, due to two illnesses that afflicted him one right after the other, is mentally retarded. Every time Sara wants to go anywhere, Aunt Willie makes her take Charlie with her. Like today, Sara wants to walk down to the pond to see six swans that have for some reason taken up residence there. However, Aunt Willie insists that Sara take Charlie along. Once there, though, Charlie does not want to leave. Sara is annoyed by Charlie's stalling. She is upset because it is dark by the time they reach home and she wanted to dye her tennis shoes tonight.

Charlie has trouble sleeping, as he has always had since his illnesses. Charlie goes to the window and sees something white dart across the front yard. Convinced that it is one of the swans, Charlie goes to the front door to get a better look, but all he sees is a white neighborhood cat. Still Charlie is convinced one of the swans has come to see him, and he decides to walk down to the pond to visit them again. Normally, Charlie is not allowed to go out the front gate without Sara, Wanda or Aunt Willie with him, but he decides that is a rule reserved for daytime, not nighttime.

Charlie tries to follow the same path he and Sara followed that evening, but he quickly becomes lost when he tries to take Sara's shortcut through a field. Charlie wanders all night, finally wandering into a ravine in a morning fog and falling asleep. Sara is the first to discover his absence, and she runs to the pond to see if Charlie is there. When Charlie is not at the pond, Sara becomes frightened, sure something awful has happened to Charlie. There have been incidents in which Charlie was the victim of vicious children. Once, a neighbor girl called him a retard, and once his watch was stolen right off his arm. Sara has good reason to worry for his safety.

After Aunt Willie has called the police and Sara's father, Sara begins to search on her own again. On her way to the woods where she believes Charlie might have gotten lost, Sara runs into Joe Melby, the boy she believes stole her brother's watch several weeks before. Sara confronts him about the watch and is disconcerted when he continues to deny the theft. Only moments later when Joe has gone does Sara's best friend, Mary,



tell her the truth about the watch. Joe did not steal it. He recovered it from the boys who did.

Sara and Mary begin their search in a vacant field Sara used as a shortcut the day before and move into the woods, hoping to find some trace of Charlie. Mary quickly becomes tired and concerned that she will not make it back home in time to get ready for a party that night that she, and not Sara, has been invited to. When Joe catches up to them with proof that Charlie came this way, one of Charlie's house slippers, Mary jumps at the chance to head home while Joe continues the search with Sara.

Sara tells Joe that she knows the truth about the watch now, and Joe assures her that he has no bad feelings against her. Joe helps Sara climb a dirt hill created by strip mining so that they can see more of the valley. On the top of the hill, Sara screams for Charlie and has no success at first. Suddenly, Sara can hear Charlie screaming for her. Sara runs to the ravine and is very happy to find her little brother. Charlie, after greeting his sister with great enthusiasm, shows her his watch, which is now missing its stem. Sara tells Charlie it is broken, but the boy will not move until Joe gives him his own watch. Finally, Charlie agrees to leave, and Aunt Willie and half the neighborhood greet them at the edge of the woods.

Joe asks Sara to the party that night, and Sara is happy to accept. At home, Sara answers a phone call from her father and suddenly a metaphor for life springs into her head. She begins to understand her own unhappy emotions earlier in the summer and her complicated relationships with her brother and father. Sara has just taken a huge step in her own life and is ready to move forward.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The Summer of the Swans by Betsy Cromer Byars is a sweet, coming-of-age novel about a young girl who is struggling with the transition from childhood to adulthood, while carrying the added burden of having to care for her younger, mentally impaired brother. Young Sara's life is further complicated when her brother walks out of the house in the middle of the night and disappears. This novel won the John Newberry Medal in 1971 and still rings true for readers of all ages thirty years later.

Sara is lying on her bed tying a scarf on her dog, Boysie, too bored to find anything else to do. Wanda, her sister, is at the dressing table preparing for a date. Wanda tells her to leave the dog alone and then changes her mind when she sees how unhappy Sara is. However, Sara has already given up this game. Instead, Sara begins to complain about her body. Sara says her feet are too big. Some of the boys stole her shoes, and when one of the boys put them on, they fit. Wanda tells her not to worry because her feet are the same size as Jackie Kennedy Onassis, except Jackie O never wore orange tennis shoes.

Wanda leaves the room, and Sara begins to cry. Sara tries to get the dog to notice. When Boysie was a pup, he never liked it when someone cried. However, now Sara cannot get him to pay any attention to her. Sara leaves the room, and Boysie follows, a fact that irritates her. In the kitchen, Sara can hear Wanda arguing with Aunt Willie, so Sara bypasses the kitchen and goes out on the front porch. Charlie, her little brother, is on the porch steps trying to put the stick back into the candy of a sucker. Sara takes it and fixes it, complaining to Charlie about her shoes, about the boring summer and about how she does not feel like doing any of the things she normally does. Charlie breaks his sucker again, and Sara tells him if he does it one more time, she will throw it away.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Sara is a typical teenager, uncomfortable in her own body and unhappy with her life. There is foreshadowing in her discussion with Charlie about the summer, that it feels different than before. Many teenagers reach a point in their lives when the same old childish stuff is no longer fun and exciting like it was before. Not only is this foreshadowing of changes that are coming for Sara, but it also touches on the theme of coming of age. Charlie's broken sucker and his dependence on Sara to fix it also foreshadows future conflict between the siblings.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Charlie breaks his sucker a third time and is afraid to tell Sara because she threatened to throw it away if he broke it again. Charlie stands up and begins shuffling his feet on the steps, an act he has done many times before, as attested by the permanent grooves there. Charlie refuses to show Sara his sucker until she forces his hand open. Sara fixes it one more time and tells him to be really careful this time. Charlie goes across the yard to a tent Sara helped him make that morning out of an old blanket and hides inside, feeling safe there.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Charlie is not happy with the idea of upsetting Sara. He is afraid she will take his sucker and throw it away. The sucker is a symbol of Sara and Charlie's relationship. He is dependent on her to fix what he cannot, and Sara needs to take care of her little brother despite her own reluctance and perceived inability to do so.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Wanda and Aunt Willie are still arguing inside the house. Sara can hear Aunt Willie say "no motorcycle" before Wanda comes outside and sits beside her. Sara does not like how controlling Aunt Willie is. She is reluctant to let them do anything that might be fun. Wanda says the same thing, grousing that Aunt Willie will not let her ride with her boyfriend on his motor scooter to see the swans at the lake.

Wanda asks where Charlie is and then tells Sara about a boy in her psychology class who she told about Charlie. This boy wants to work with the mentally retarded and is going to help get Charlie into a camp next year. Sara is angry with Wanda for discussing Charlie with a stranger. Wanda does not understand Sara's anger. Then Frank, Wanda's boyfriend, drives up, and Wanda rushes away to greet him.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Sara and her sister agree on one thing, Aunt Willie, and quickly disagree on another, discussing Charlie outside the family. This disagreement exemplifies the sisters' vastly different approaches and sense of responsibility to Charlie. Wanda wants to do the mature thing by discussing his education and the possibility of sending him to a camp where he will be with other little boys like himself and councilors who are trained to deal with him. Sara, on the other hand, wants to take the approach of keeping Charlie safe at home where she and their family can control his everyday existence. Neither approach is wrong nor right, though the argument does highlight the sense of responsibility both girls feel toward their brother. Sara's reluctance to talk about Charlie with outsiders, though, indicates a sense of shame.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Aunt Willie comes out of the house, still unwilling to let Wanda go off on the motor scooter. Frank offers to take her on a ride to show her how safe it is. Aunt Willie is reluctant until Sara says that she is too old to ride on a motor scooter. Aunt Willie becomes upset with Sara's declaration and agrees to ride on the motor scooter. Frank takes Aunt Willie up and down the street. Aunt Willie screams the entire time. When the ride is over, however, Aunt Willie agrees to allow Wanda to ride on the bike.

Aunt Willie comments as Wanda and Frank leave that soon it will be Sara on the back of the motor scooter. Sara does not agree, still convinced she is much uglier than Wanda and will never attract a boy. Aunt Willie says she understands. She herself had a much prettier sister once. Sara disagrees with Aunt Willie's view, especially when Aunt Willie says that outer beauty does not matter as much as inner beauty.

Sara decides to walk to the lake to see the swans herself. Aunt Willie insists that Sara take Charlie. Sara is upset because she feels like she is never allowed to go anywhere alone. She always has to take Charlie. Aunt Willie is patient but continues to insist.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Aunt Willie, who up to now has been portrayed as a coarse, unfair woman, is suddenly acting like a woman half her age by riding on the back of the bike. Aunt Willie, it seems, is not as bitter as the girls think she is. This fact symbolizes the perception of a child as compared to reality. Sometimes things are not what they seem when you are young.

Aunt Willie's attempt to convince Sara she is beautiful and will one day soon have a boyfriend does not only touch on the theme of coming of age, but it foreshadows future events. When Aunt Willie forces Sara to take Charlie to the lake with her, this too foreshadows future events as well as underscoring events in an earlier chapter that revealed Sara's feelings toward Charlie. Sara may love Charlie, but she resents having to care for him. That is even more clearly shown in this chapter.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Sara complains to Charlie about Aunt Willie's comments comparing Sara to Wanda. Sara feels that beauty on the outside is the only important beauty, and she is so convinced that she once wrote a paper on it for English class and received a poor grade.

When Charlie and Sara reach Mary Weicek's house, Mary comes out to talk. Mary wants to know if Aunt Willie bought Sara the dress she saw downtown that she liked. Sara says no, since Aunt Willie decided she could make it cheaper. The stripes are not matching up, though, so Sara is very disappointed. Then Mary says that her cousin is about to cut her hair, so she cannot go to the lake with Sara and Charlie. She asks Sara to come in and see the pictures Mary's cousin uses to pick a hairstyle. Sara agrees, leaving Charlie on the front steps and discussing with Mary the possibility of dying her tennis shoes that night.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Sara is a typical teen, complaining constantly about the unfairness in life. Sara's willingness to talk to Charlie about it shows the reader that Sara is not angry with Charlie about any of these situations, even though having to take him everywhere she goes is one of her complaints. This foreshadows their complicated relationship and how it will affect later developments in the story.

Sara's complaint to Mary about the dress she wants, which Aunt Willie has insisted on making, develops Sara's teenage personality, and it also develops more deeply Aunt Willie's personality as well. This, too, foreshadows how their differing personalities will affect their reactions to future events in the book. This chapter also introduces Mary, Sara's friend, who from all outward appearances is a typical teenager, offering contrast to the maturity Sara has been forced to develop from an early age.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Charlie sits alone on the Weiceks' front steps, feeling shut off from the world around him without Sara there with him. Charlie lifts his watch to his ear and finds comfort in the sound of its ticking. Mrs. Weicek comes out of the house with a female friend who is curious about Charlie. Mrs. Weicek explains who Charlie is, telling her friend how he does not speak, but he knows all his numbers and letters. Mrs. Weicek says Charlie is very proud of his watch, though he cannot tell time yet. She tells her friend to ask Charlie about the time so she can see how proud Charlie is of his watch. When asked, Charlie holds out his arm so the ladies can see the time.

Mrs. Weicek and her friend sit on rocking chairs on the porch. The sound of the rocking upsets Charlie. Charlie stands and begins to walk toward home. Mrs. Weicek calls Sara to come down. Sara chases after Charlie and turns him around so that they can continue their walk to the lake, taking a shortcut through a field close to the Weicek home. She quietly chastises her brother for trying to leave without her.

Chapter 6 Analysis

In this chapter, the reader learns several important facts about Charlie that will affect later events in the story. The first is that he goes to school and knows all his letters and numbers. This is important because the idea of Charlie going to school foreshadows several flashbacks that will be revealed later in the text. The second is the introduction of the watch. This watch symbolizes safety and calm to Charlie. The watch is very important to Charlie and therefore important to Sara, a fact that the reader will see in later chapters. Finally, the reader sees Charlie get up and wander off on his own, foreshadowing later events.

Sara chastises Charlie for leaving the steps even though she told him to stay put. Sara feels great concern for her brother, but again Charlie's refusal to follow the rules Sara set out for him foreshadows later events in the story.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Sara and Charlie arrive at the lake, and the sight of the beautiful swans awes them both. Sara sees Wanda across the lake, and Wanda says to tell Aunt Willie that they will be late. They are going to see Frank's sister's new baby. When Wanda and Frank are gone, Sara and Charlie are completely alone at the lake. The swans, startled by Wanda's voice, have moved closer to Sara and Charlie. Sara pulls out a few rolls that Aunt Willie gave her before they left and begins to feed the swans.

Charlie wants to feed the swans too, but Sara has trouble convincing him to break the rolls up into small enough pieces for the swans to eat them. First, Charlie makes them too big, and then he makes them much too small. Finally, he takes the last roll and breaks it into four pieces and throws them at the swans. Charlie wants more, but Sara has no more.

Finally, Sara is ready to go home. She wants to get there early enough to have time to dye her shoes. Charlie does not want to go home. Charlie grabs hold of the grass and holds on tight, hoping his hold will keep him there. Sara finally tells him she will wait five more minutes and shows it to him on his watch. Before two minutes have passed, Charlie is already shaking his head and objecting to the idea of leaving.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The swans are lovely and graceful, an awe inspiring sight. This is in direct contrast with Charlie and with how Sara feels about herself. These birds are symbolically everything that both Sara and Charlie want to be and cannot. They bring to mind the story of the ugly duckling who turns into a swan, reminding the reader of Sara's thoughts on beauty.

Charlie enjoys the birds and enjoys feeding them even more. Charlie's reluctance to leave the lake foreshadows future events as well as underscoring his enjoyment in the birds. Sara is patient with Charlie up to a point, going so far as to give him five more minutes and explaining how long this is with his precious watch. This shows the depth of Sara's love for her brother despite her behavior in earlier chapters and provides the reader some foreshadowing of her reaction to events still yet to happen.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Sara is in bed when Wanda sneaks into the bedroom later that night. Sara asks her about her evening, and they begin to discuss Frank. Sara does not like Frank because he does not seem to appreciate Charlie very much. This leads to Sara confessing that she is unhappy with herself. Wanda tries to get Sara to talk about her feelings, but Sara is less than forthcoming because she herself does not truly understand why she feels the way she does. Aunt Willie begins yelling from her own bedroom for the girls to be quiet and go to sleep.

Wanda turns on the radio so she can hear a dedication Frank promised to make to her. Aunt Willie again yells for the girls to be quiet. Sara does not care. It seems to Sara that the noises coming from Charlie's bedroom are far louder than the radio or she and Wanda's discussions. Sara thinks about Charlie when he was a baby and became ill with high fevers, one illness right after another. Sara is saddened by the memory of Charlie's dull eyes after the illnesses finally passed and what a contrast they were to his fevered behavior. Charlie has not been a good sleeper since then, and Sara can often hear him through the wall although no one else ever seems to hear him. Right now, Wanda is blissfully listening to her dedication on the radio, oblivious to Charlie's restlessness. Sara asks if she can hear him, but Wanda does not know what she is talking about. Finally, Sara rolls over and tries to get some sleep.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The depth of the confusion Sara feels about her own emotions is revealed at the beginning of this chapter when Wanda tries to talk to her and Sara is unable to fully explain what it is she feels. Sara feels alienated by the entire world, like she is the only person to ever feel this way, as symbolized by her inability to accept that Wanda can relate to her feelings.

The reader finally learns how Charlie came to be the way he is. In her mind, Sara compares and contrasts the two Charlies she once knew, grieving in her own way for the person Charlie might have become if not for his illnesses. The fact that Sara is the only one who is aware of Charlie's inability to sleep at night emphasizes again her sense of isolation and her feeling that Charlie is somehow only hers to take care of and protect. These feelings foreshadow later events in the novel and Sara's reaction to these events, as does the facts that Charlie has trouble sleeping and that no one else is aware of it.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Charlie lays in bed thinking of the events of that evening. Charlie prepared for bed and discovered a button missing from his pajama shirt. Charlie wanted Aunt Willie to fix it, but Aunt Willie was too busy watching television. Charlie went to Sara to fix it, but Sara was dying her shoes with Mary, very unhappy that the baby blue she was hoping to make them had become a sick sort of puce because of the original orange color. Charlie finally gave up and went to bed, pulling at his pajama top until it tore and then pulling at it some more. Now Charlie is wide awake and too upset to sleep.

Charlie hears a noise outside and looks out the window to see what it is. Charlie sees a flash of white and becomes convinced it is a swan coming to visit him. Charlie goes to another window to get a better view of the yard. Charlie hears a cat and sees a neighbor's white cat, but he is convinced still that he saw a swan before. Charlie is sure the swan came to visit him and decides to go outside to meet it. Charlie puts on his house slippers and pushes through the screen door.

Charlie decides the swan went back to the lake, and Charlie wants to go there to find it. Charlie is not supposed to leave the gate, but that is during the day when there are people and cars around. Charlie decides that rule does not apply to this quiet time of the night. Charlie walks down the street to the vacant lot where he is sure Sara took her shortcut earlier in the day, and he follows it into the woods, determined to get to the lake and the swans all by himself.

Chapter 9 Analysis

The two most important people in Charlie's life have ignored him, a fact that deeply upsets him and makes it impossible for him to sleep. This satisfies several points of foreshadowing in previous chapters, including the last chapter when Sara mentions her awareness of his inability to sleep. Charlie is a creature of habit and uniformity, as symbolized by the lost button, and by straying from this uniformity Charlie has been put in a position to do something dangerous and out of character. Charlie rises from his bed and wanders out of the house to see the swans. Charlie's fascination with the swans in previous chapters forewarns the reader that this might happen.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Charlie grows tired as he looks for the lake, quickly realizing that something is wrong. The lake is gone. When dogs begin to bark behind him, Charlie becomes frightened and runs, scratching himself on brier bushes and then running into a wire fence that cuts his chest. When Charlie pulls himself together and begins to walk again, he realizes he has lost his shoe, and his foot is becoming sore from the rough terrain. Charlie walks into the woods and draws comfort from the trees for a while. Soon, however, Charlie becomes frightened again and unsure where he is or why. He is unable to draw any solace from the ticking of his watch, as he normally has before. Charlie begins to cry.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Charlie thinks he can find the way to the lake, but he gets lost. Charlie continues to walk although every step frightens him more, and he soon forgets why he is in the woods. Charlie's midnight adventure is foreshadowed in earlier chapters, though this is the first time the reader has gotten to see in this much depth how Charlie's mind works. Charlie's desire to draw comfort from the trees and his ticking watch are symbolic of a baby's desire to be held and comforted by his mother. Charlie is just a toddling boy at heart, and now he is a little boy lost.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

When Sara wakes the next morning, she pauses in front of the mirror and once again regrets a decision to get her hair cut very short. Aunt Willie calls Sara down for breakfast. Sara goes and is immediately sent back to find Charlie. Sara pauses to check her shoes, unhappy again with the color they have become. Sara goes to find Charlie. When she does not find him in his bedroom, Sara goes out into the front yard to look and again comes back empty-handed.

Aunt Willie is upset and says she is going to call the police. Sara asks her to wait until she has checked the neighborhood. Sara gets dressed, and then she runs out into the yard. Sara remembers the swans and is suddenly convinced that this is where Charlie has gone. Mary comes out of her house as Sara is running past, and she joins her. Mary is more concerned with the still wet shoes Sara is wearing than she is with rushing to get to the lake. Sara does not care about the shoes anymore. Mary and Sara push through the brush at the edge of the lake and find that Charlie is not there. Suddenly, Sara is very upset and scared. Sara calls for Charlie over and over. Mary comments that she sounds just like an unfriendly girl at their school.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Sara's primary concerns when she gets out of bed this morning are her hair and her shoes. However, as soon as she discovers Charlie missing, those things are not important anymore. This shows the depth of maturity that exists beneath Sara's superficial behavior. As the sister to someone like Charlie, she has developed a protective and caring nature, and this touches on the themes of special needs people and coming of age. Sara is the calm one in this matter. She is the sensible one who wants to search the neighborhood before jumping to any conclusions. Aunt Willie wants to call the police right away. This too underscores not only Sara's maturity but also Sara's desire to keep family business within the family, to protect Charlie from the outside world. Finally, Mary's concerns over Sara's shoes and the sound of Sara's voice in her panic again show the contrast between Mary, a typical teen, and Sara, who has an underlying maturity.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Back at the house, Sara finds Aunt Willie on the phone with a friend. Aunt Willie quickly hangs up the phone and insists that it is time to call the police. Sara relents. After speaking to the police, Aunt Willie begins to pace, lamenting the fact that she ignored Charlie's pleas for her to fix his pajama button the night before. Aunt Willie then begins to list all the possible things that could have happened to him, each worse than the one before. Sara tries to dismiss each tragedy, but it is difficult for her to do.

Sara sees a self-portrait Charlie drew the day before and did not finish. Sara thinks how much it is like Charlie, more like Charlie than the Polaroid picture Aunt Willie brings out for the police. The Polaroid, taken on Charlie's birthday, brings about a discussion of Charlie's watch, which Wanda gave him on his birthday. The watch was stolen several weeks before, and Sara says Joe Melby is the one who stole it. Mary tells Aunt Willie that Sara put a sign on Joe's back that said 'fink' in order to get back at him for stealing the watch. Aunt Willie is not pleased with this, chastising Sara for holding onto her anger. Aunt Willie also chastises her for another incident in which she turned the water hose on a local girl who was wearing a new silk dress her brother sent her from Taiwan. Sara defends herself by saying the girl called Charlie a retard in a very rude way. A moment later, the police arrive.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Aunt Willie is very worried about Charlie, and Sara is forced into the position of reassuring her in a way most children should not have to do, again underscoring the differences in Sara's life as compared to her friend Mary. Sara feels connected to Charlie and is still convinced he went to see the swans, foreshadowing later events in the novel. The reader knows that Sara's conviction is true and that Charlie did set out to see the swans. This shows how strong and true Sara's connection to her brother really is. Sara is going to go look for Charlie, and she will know where to look because of this feeling of connection she has with Charlie.

Several past events in this chapter are presented to the reader in dialogue. The importance of the watch to Charlie is underscored by the story of the watch being stolen. This story also introduces a new character and shows the depths Sara will go to in order to protect her brother, as does the second story about the girl who called Charlie a derogatory name. Sara is fiercely protective of Charlie, part of the theme of special needs people and how they affect the family dynamic.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Sara listens to Aunt Willie attempt to call her father, who works in Ohio, warning Aunt Willie that he will not come. Aunt Willie calls anyway, announcing to her brother that his child is missing without any preamble. Sara thinks about her father and about the distance with which he has treated his children ever since Charlie's illnesses. Sara can remember pictures in the family album of a happy man, but her only memories of him now are of an absentee dad who comes to visit rare weekends only to spend the entire time in front of the television.

Sara fixes herself toast and Kool-Aid and goes out into the yard to eat it. Sara thinks of Charlie playing in this yard. Sara climbs onto the swing and teases the dog, waiting for Aunt Willie to get off the phone. When she does, Sara wants to know if her father is coming. He will call back later, Aunt Willie says, just as Sara suspected she would. Aunt Willie warns Sara not to be disrespectful to her father and says that she will be sorry when he dies. Sara says that he is already gone. Sara then climbs off the swing and goes to look for Charlie.

Chapter 13 Analysis

The introduction of Sara's father explains a few things the reader might have been wondering about in regards to Sara's parents. The fact that her father is not a part of the family by choice explains more about Sara and her attitude of total protection for Charlie. Her father's absence is not only symbolic of the losses Sara has been dealing with her entire life and losses in the future she may sense and not want to experience. It also touches on the theme of loss. Sara knows her father is lost to her, and she knows it better than even her Aunt Willie is willing to acknowledge. This is surely why Sara is determined to find Charlie herself.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Sara is walking to Mary's house in order to begin their search when she runs into Joe Melby. Sara confronts Joe about her brother's watch and suddenly finds she is full of doubt when Joe calmly denies taking the watch. Joe insists on going with her and Mary to search for Charlie, but a very confused and upset Sara blows him off and continues walking. Joe chases after her and insists that he and some of the other boys really want to help. Sara relents and tells him she thinks Charlie might have gotten lost in the woods trying to take her shortcut to the lake to see the swans. Joe tries to reassure her that everything will be all right when Mary joins them.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Sara is uncomfortable with the possibility that she might have been wrong about someone, and she is even more uncomfortable with the idea that a boy wants to help her do anything, as might be typical of a teenager. This touches on the theme of coming of age, as the reader sees Sara growing enough to actually consider the idea that she might have been wrong about something. The theme of special needs people and how they affect the family dynamic is also addressed, since the pressure of finding Charlie lies on Sara's shoulders and takes away the time she might have had under other circumstances to consider Joe's desire to help her. Sara has been unwilling to reach out to other people and talk about Charlie with outsiders. Circumstances are forcing her to reach out for help in finding Charlie, though, and she may be surprised at the results.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Alone with Mary a few minutes later, Sara learns the truth about the stolen watch. Apparently Mary's mother told her in confidence that she was at Mrs. Melby's house a few weeks ago when Aunt Willie came over to confront Joe herself. Joe then insisted he did not take the watch. Joe told Aunt Willie, his mother and Mrs. Weicek that one morning while waiting for the school bus while Sara and Mary were in the drug store, some boys began to tease Charlie with some candy they had. One of the boys snuck the watch off of Charlie's wrist, thinking it would be funny to ask Charlie the time and see how upset he got to find the watch missing. However, Sara and Mary came out of the store before they could, and Sara chastised them for teasing Charlie.

Joe walked up to the bus stop about the time Sara ushered Charlie onto the bus. One of the boys eventually told Joe what had happened and that they were afraid to return the watch. Joe took the watch and gave it back, saying that he found it on the bus. Hearing the story, Sara feels sorry for what she did to Joe, embarrassed for accusing him to his face and angry at the boys who really did steal the watch. Sara is still pondering this when a bulletin is broadcast on Mary's radio announcing Charlie's disappearance.

Chapter 15 Analysis

The true story of the stolen watch portrays Joe as a kind person who is as concerned with justice for Charlie as Sara is. To see Joe in this new light continues the confusion Sara feels about Joe. It also begins to break down Sarah's barriers against asking for help outside the family. Again Sara realizes she has done something wrong, and she is full of regret, another mature emotion that touches on the theme of coming of age. However, Charlie's disappearance once more interferes with her ability to ponder the whole situation as the bulletin comes on the radio. Sara continues on to look for Charlie, touching on the theme of loss.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Sara and Mary follow the field by the woods searching for Charlie. Mary begins to complain about the heat and the curlers in her hair. She worries about getting home in time to get ready for a party at Bennie Hoffman's that night. Sara does not care about any of these things, especially the party, which Mary mentions over and over again.

Mary says that Aunt Willie thinks Charlie is in the old coal mine, so they are probably looking in the wrong place. Sara says there is no way Charlie would go into the coal mine because he is afraid of dark places. She cites the example of the time they went into an old, empty house, when Charlie refused to follow because of the dark. Mary also remembers that she sprained her ankle going in, and Sara stopped to look at some magazines before she went for help.

Mary has grown tired and no longer wants to look, until they hear a call for volunteers over the radio. Again Mary questions Sara's choice of locations for the search. Sara tells her she has a connection with Charlie, and she knows he has come this way. Then, Mary sees Joe Melby coming their way. The girls pretend they do not see him and keep walking, but Joe soon catches up with them. In Joe's hand is Charlie's lost slipper.

Joe says someone should go tell the volunteers that Joe found the slipper because they are preparing to search an entirely different area. Mary asks about the party and if Joe is going to go. Sara becomes irritated by the turn in conversation and begins walking again. A moment later Mary decides she will be the one to tell everyone they found the slipper and leaves Joe to search with Sara. Sara apologizes to Joe for thinking he stole the watch, and Joe tells her not to worry about it. Joe tells her he is indestructible, illustrating it with a story about how in second grade he got not one check in the discipline boxes on his report card but two. Sara then leads the way into the woods.

Chapter 16 Analysis

The writer once more takes an opportunity to show the differences between Mary and Sara. The party that Mary was invited to and Sara was not is symbolic of these differences. It not only shows how important it is to Mary that she has gotten invited when not everyone has, but it also shows how untouched by the whole situation Sara is as she searches for her brother. All the things that seemed so important to Sara before have now diminished in importance in the wake of Charlie's disappearance. This, too, touches on the theme of coming of age, as it shows the maturity that Sara has gained in a very short time.

As foreshadowed in a previous chapter, Joe has joined the search. Not only has he joined the search, but he has even found Charlie's slipper, much like he found Charlie's watch weeks before. The slipper symbolizes to Sara concrete proof that her connection

with Charlie is true and that she is on the right path here. It is ironic that Joe finds it since Joe is the last person Sara wants to see again today. She is then left alone with him in her search, and there is foreshadowing in the apology she offers him and his nonchalant response. Perhaps there is more to this relationship than even Sara knew.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Charlie is in a ravine he wandered into in the morning fog. Charlie wanders around the ravine for a while, trying to find a way out. Finally, Charlie gives up and sits on a log. Charlie is not afraid. He is simply dulled by the circumstances he finds himself in. Charlie has been lost before, once in the hallway of his school and once at the county fair, but he has never been lost like this.

Charlie lifts his watch to his ear, hoping to hear the calming tick, but the watch has stopped. Charlie does not understand why the watch does not work. Aunt Willie normally winds the watch for him every morning. Charlie attempts to copy what he has seen Aunt Willie do with the watch, but he accidentally pulls the stem out of the watch. Charlie tries to find the stem and is surprised by a chipmunk. Charlie begins to cry, indulging in a loud tantrum. Eventually, Charlie falls asleep.

Chapter 17 Analysis

There is a small amount of flashback in this chapter when Charlie remembers that he has been lost before and everything turned out all right. However, Charlie was not this lost those times. Any other child would be very frightened, but Charlie is confident someone will find him, which touches on early foreshadowing in which Charlie was calmed by past experiences and routine. Charlie knows he is lost and attempts to comfort himself with the familiarity of his watch. Charlie imitates his aunt and ends up breaking the watch, a fact that foreshadows events later in the novel.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Joe and Sara walk for more than an hour, calling for Charlie, who may not be able to hear them. Joe offers to stop and rest for a while, but Sara wants to continue. Sara realizes what time it is and thinks about how she and Charlie should be at that moment watching game shows or an old movie on the television. Sara feels as though she is moving slower and slower, like a slow race she once won.

Joe and Sara reach a dirt hill created by strip mining. Joe says they should climb to the top so they can see the entire valley down below. Sara is concerned that she will not make it, but Joe encourages and helps her. Sara compares his words of encouragement to those of the dentist, telling her they are almost there when in reality there is a long way to go. Joe makes jokes and continues to encourage her until they do reach the top.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Sara thinks of calmer times with Charlie, times they spend together in a routine sort of way that is now filled with longing. This longing for normalcy symbolizes Sara's love for her brother and deep desire to find him herself. Joe helps Sara by trying to keep her focused on the search and by making jokes with her. The quips about the dentist are full of metaphor and simile, comparing the pain of the loss of Sara's brother to the pain of having a tooth drilled. These quips also help keep Sara from realizing completely how exhausted she is.



Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Sara is overwhelmed by how large the valley is and how dense the woods are. Charlie could be out there anywhere, and the thought is too much for her to handle for a moment. Sara screams Charlie's name over and over, and Joe joins her. The longer Sara looks out over the vast valley, the more emotional she becomes, but she cannot cry. All summer she cried over her feet and her looks, and now when there is really something to cry over she cannot. Sara does not understand this. Sara believes for a moment she can hear Charlie crying, but it is not him. Sara waits while Joe continues to call Charlie's name.

Chapter 19 Analysis

The theme of coming of age is clearer than ever in this chapter. Sara feels true fear and sorrow here, but she cannot cry unlike all the times this summer she has cried over trivial things. This fact shows how mature Sara has become in such a short time and shows her just how trivial all those other things truly were.



Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

Charlie wakes but does not open his eyes. Charlie is not sure where he is or how he got there and dreads finding out. Charlie remembers other times in his life when he lost whole sections of time, like when Sara got hit with a baseball and broke her nose. Charlie became frightened and ran away only to wake hours later in the safety of his own bed with an ice cream cone smashed in his hand.

Charlie is a creature of routine and is in constant fear of a change that could disrupt everything in his life. Charlie tries to picture where he might be, thinking of a treasure box his aunt has. Instead he opens his eyes and finds himself in the woods. Charlie inspects his hands and finds them very dirty. Charlie does not inspect them any closer. Suddenly, Charlie stands and begins to scream. Charlie has heard someone calling his name.

Chapter 20 Analysis

There is flashback in this chapter when Charlie remembers the day Sara broke his nose, and he is unable to remember how he ended up in bed. This illustrates how different Charlie's life is and how precarious his emotional state is. It also shows how deeply Charlie loves his sister. Charlie hears someone call his name, and this foreshadows his possible rescue. Charlie has been brave and only has to wait a few more minutes until this whole ordeal is over.



Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

Sara stands again to look over the valley and hears something. Sara grabs Joe's arm to keep him from speaking and listens closer. Sara is filled with joy as she pinpoints where the sound is coming from and begins to rush in that direction. Sara feels weak as she runs toward a ravine, pausing to search the shadowed depths. Sara sees Charlie.

Charlie looks at Sara in a way that she knows she will never see anyone look at her ever again. Sara pulls him into her arms and hugs him very tight, and Charlie returns the hug with ferocity. Eventually Sara is able to speak to him, to reassure him and to give him back his slipper. Sara encourages Charlie to follow her out of the ravine down a path Joe has found, but Charlie is not ready to go. Charlie shows Sara his watch and wants her to fix it. The stem is missing, so Sara cannot fix it. Eventually Joe gives Charlie his watch, and Charlie agrees to go home with them.

Chapter 21 Analysis

Much foreshadowing has been satisfied in this chapter. Charlie is found, satisfying foreshadowing that goes back many chapters. Charlie wants his watch fixed, which was also foreshadowed in previous chapters. This chapter also touches on the theme of coming of age once more when Sara sees the look in Charlie's eyes and knows that no one will ever look at her that way again. This is an incredibly adult thought. The theme of loss is also touched on here again when Sara finds Charlie and is so relieved that she almost faints. Sara has had so much loss in her life that finding Charlie is one of the most important things she will ever do in her life. Finally, the theme of special needs people is also touched on here when Charlie wants Sara to fix his watch. This points out to the reader that this is not a normal situation, but Sara is okay with that fact now, illustrated by the fact that she does not become angry like she did in earlier chapters.



Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

Sara and Joe walk Charlie out of the woods and are met in the vacant field by the other searchers. Someone gets Aunt Willie. The swans begin to fly away from the lake while they wait, and Sara tries to get Charlie to look at them. Charlie, though, is not interested. Charlie runs to Aunt Willie when she arrives, and the two embrace before leaving without a word to Sara.

Sara feels happy and light. Sara thinks she is alone at first, but Joe stands behind her. Joe asks Sara if she wants to go to the party that night. Sara hesitates, unsure he is really asking her. Joe explains that it will be a lame party with Bennie and his band playing a bunch of songs. Sara agrees to go and runs home to change.

Chapter 22 Analysis

Sara feels wonderful now, and she does not know why. This again touches on the theme of coming of age. Sara has matured and has come to realize that not everything is about her or about what is wrong with her. Sara is content to bring Charlie home and know he is safe.

The swans flying overhead, now heavy and awkward where they were graceful in the water, is a metaphor for Sara. Sara wanted to be like the swans, to move to a new place and to be beautiful and graceful. Now Sara sees that, like the swans, going home is not such a bad thing and that even swans can be awkward and unattractive sometimes.



Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

At home Wanda is on the porch. Wanda is upset that no one bothered to tell her Charlie was missing. She had to learn about it on the radio. Sara tells her everything that happened and points to where Aunt Willie and Charlie are on a neighbor's porch eating watermelon. Wanda goes over to check on them, and Sara goes into the house to have a sandwich.

The phone rings, and it is Sara's father calling to see if Charlie has been found. When he learns he has, Sara's father decides he will not come home as Sara had thought he would. While talking to him, Sara has an epiphany about life as a set of stairs that are different for everyone. Sara sees herself as having just taken a big step out of the dark and her father as standing still. Sara says goodbye to her father and slips off her shoes. Sara's feet are blue, but she does not care.

Chapter 23 Analysis

Wanda's anger is ironic. Normally, Sara feels left out and ignored, but this time Sara is the center of events, while Wanda does not know what is going on. Not only this, but Wanda's reaction to Charlie's disappearance and Sara coming home to prepare for a date is a reversal of the beginning chapter, when Wanda is preparing for a date while Sara is upset. This flipping of the situation shows how quickly life can change.

Sara's father calls, and she experiences an epiphany. This is the ultimate illustration of how much Sara has grown and of the theme of coming of age. Sara has finally realized that everyone lives life in their own way and by their own choices. It is up to her to make those choices. Sara has blossomed into a mature young lady in the stretch of one day, illustrated a second time by her reaction to her blue feet. The Sara of that morning would have been horrified, but this Sara is not bothered by it at all.



Characters

Sara Godfrey

Sara is a young girl who is at that point in childhood where she is stuck between feeling and acting like a child and becoming a young woman. Sara is unhappy with everything about herself, from her huge feet to the much too short cut of her hair. Normally a bit of a tomboy, Sara does not feel inclined to participate in activities that will result in skinned knees anymore. Sara feels like a stranger in her own body.

Sara is angry with the people in her life. Sara's mother died and left her with Aunt Willie, a straight-laced old maid who never lets anyone have any fun. Sara's father is no longer the fun-loving man of her childhood. Now, he is a stranger who works in another state and sits in front of the television constantly on the rare occasions when he comes to visit. Wanda is too beautiful, making Sara feel even more like the ugly duckling. Sara does not understand the complexities of the adult world she is beginning to enter and resents the responsibilities it asks of her.

Most of all, Sara resents Charlie. Sara loves Charlie more than anything, and Sara will do whatever it takes to make sure he is protected from the unkind people of the world. However, Sara just once wants to go off and do something on her own without having to worry about dragging Charlie along. Sara also wants to be able to go to school or go shopping with her friends without running into someone whose idea of fun is to torment her little brother. Sara wants to grow up. She simply does not want to have to grow up so fast.

Wanda Godfrey

Wanda is five years older than Sara, and therefore she is more removed from the situations that revolve around Charlie. Wanda is in college, a beautiful nineteen-year-old who is dating and ready to meet adulthood head on. Sara does not like how openly Wanda talks about Charlie with her friends from school, and she really does not like how Wanda treats her like she is a child. Wanda tells Sara that she should stop worrying about how she looks, and Sara assumes it is because Wanda is so beautiful that she never had the same worries that Sara has. Wanda is deeply concerned about Sara, however, and is always asking Sara what she is feeling and trying to help her analyze why Sara feels the way she does.

Charlie Godfrey

Charlie is ten years old, four years younger than Sara. When Charlie was three years old, he suffered two illnesses one right after the other that left him with brain damage. Charlie has not spoken a word since. Charlie knows his letters and can write his name,



and he even attends school like other little boys. However, Charlie tends to live in his own little world, completely dependent on his routines and his family.

Charlie has a watch that he loves to listen to. Whenever he goes for walks in town or around the neighborhood with his aunt or one of his sisters, everyone asks Charlie what time it is so that he can show off his watch. Charlie does not know how the watch works, so when he becomes lost and it stops working, Charlie is very upset and does not know what to do. Charlie is a stubborn young man, always refusing to do things Sara wants him to do. When his watch stops working and Sara finds him in the ravine, Charlie wants Sara to fix the watch before Charlie will leave. This is one of the many things that Sara does not like about Charlie and one of the many things Sara loves about Charlie.

Aunt Willie

Willamina Godfrey, or Aunt Willie, has been Sara, Wanda and Charlie's guardian since their mother died eight years ago. Aunt Willie is a conservative woman who is unwilling to let the children do anything that she perceives as dangerous, going so far as to ride a motor scooter with Wanda's boyfriend to make sure it is safe. Aunt Willie has a lot of respect and concern for her brother, the children's father, defending him to Sara even when Aunt Willie knows Sara's perception of the situation is correct.

Aunt Willie made a promise to Sara's mother that she would take care of Charlie no matter what, and she is very upset when the boy goes missing. Although a stiff, conservative woman, Aunt Willie will do anything for Charlie, including going to Joe Melby's mother to find out if Joe really did steal Charlie's watch. Sara is surprised to find out about this side of her aunt, and she is perhaps more surprised not by her aunt's actions but that she stood up for Charlie the same way Sara herself does.

Joe Melby

Joe Melby is a boy who attends the same school with Sara. Sara becomes convinced that Joe stole Charlie's watch when she asks Charlie to point to the person who did it and he points at Joe. Sara, who holds onto her anger, targets Joe for revenge. Sara tapes a sign to Joe's back that calls him a fink. Later, when Joe offers to help find Charlie, Sara accuses him to his face of stealing the watch and suddenly doubts her own convictions when Joe swears once again that he did not do it. Later, Sara learns that Joe not only did not steal the watch, but that he actually rescued the watch from the boys who stole it. When Joe helps Sara find Charlie, then asks her to a party that evening, Sara suddenly realizes how much she has always liked Joe.

Mary Weicek

Mary Weicek is a neighbor of Sara's and one of her closest friends. Mary helps Sara dye her shoes when Sara decides that orange draws too much attention to her large feet. Mary is also the one who breaks her mother's confidence and tells Sara the truth



about Joe and Charlie's watch. Mary helps Sara search for Charlie until she becomes too tired and needs to go home and get ready for a party that Sara was not invited to.

Sam Godfrey

Sam Godfrey is Wanda, Sara and Charlie's father. Sam has had a difficult life, having to care for his own brothers and sisters after their parents' deaths. Then, Sam marries, and his wife dies shortly after his son suffers brain damage. Sam is no longer able to care for his children, though the explanation for this is not entirely clear. Sam works in Ohio while his family lives in West Virginia. Sam often comes home on the weekends to visits, though he often spends the entire visit watching the television. Sara does not like her father's attitude, assuming he does not love his family. However, at the end of the novel, Sara comes to terms with her father's inertia.

Gretchen Wyant

Gretchen Wyant is a neighborhood girl who walked past the house one day as Sara was working at the water spigot and asked Charlie how the 'retard' was doing that day. Sara turned on the water and sprayed her with the water hose. Gretchen happened to be wearing a silk dress her brother had sent her from Taiwan that day. Sara is not sorry for what she has done. Sara hates it when people make fun of Charlie.

Bennie Hoffman

Bennie Hoffman is a local boy who is throwing a party the night of the day Charlie disappears. Mary has been invited, and she continuously talks to Sara about it, rubbing in the fact that Mary was invited and Sara was not. However, Joe tells Sara that the party is just so Bennie and his band can play some music for an audience. Joe says that Bennie told him to bring someone, and Joe wants to bring Sara. Sara agrees, despite the fact that her newly dyed shoes have turned her feet blue, and she rushes home to prepare for the party.

Neighborhood Boys

One day while Sara and Mary slipped into the drugstore while they were waiting for the bus with Charlie, some neighborhood boys came up and began teasing Charlie with some candy. One of the boys got the bright idea to slip Charlie's watch from his wrist and then ask him what time it was, to watch him freak out when he discovered his watch missing. Sara and Mary came out of the drugstore, though, and Sara yelled at the boys for teasing Charlie, not aware that Charlie's watch was gone. Only later, when Joe Melby asked the boys what was going on, did the boys remember they had the watch. By then they were too afraid to return it. Joe took the watch and told Charlie he found it on the bus.



Objects/Places

Porch Steps

The front steps of the house where Charlie lives with his sisters and aunt has footsteps worn into the third step from Charlie shuffling his feet when he is upset.

The Lake

Not far from the Godfreys' home is a large lake the children can walk to by themselves.

The Swans

In the nearby lake, some swans have come to stay for the summer that Wanda believes came from the local university. Sara believes that Charlie has gotten lost on his way to see the swans.

The Vacant Field

Several houses down from the Godfrey home, there is a vacant field that Sara often uses as a shortcut to the lake. While crossing this field, Charlie becomes lost.

The Woods

Woods surround the valley where the Godfreys live, and Sara believes they look as though they might swallow up the whole valley.

The Ravine

When Sara and Joe find Charlie, he is in a ravine that runs just below a dirt hill created by strip mining procedures.

The Drawing

After Charlie's disappearance, Sara finds a drawing Charlie made of himself that consists of two large circles for the head and body and two smaller circles denoting the ears. Sara feels this picture is more like Charlie than the Polaroid picture Aunt Willie gets out for the police.



Orange Tennis Shoes

Sara has a pair of orange tennis shoes, and Wanda says the shoes draw attention to the fact that Sara has large feet. Sara attempts to dye the shoes baby blue, but the shoes turn a sickly shade of puce instead. When Sara wears the shoes before they are dry in order to search for Charlie, her feet are dyed blue.

Charlie's Watch

Wanda gave Charlie a watch for his tenth birthday. When this watch is lost and later returned by Joe Melby, Sara believes that Joe stole the watch.

'Fink' Sign

Sara tapes a sign that says 'fink' on Joe Melby's back before school dismisses for the summer because she believes he stole Charlie's watch.

West Virginia

West Virginia is where Sara and her family live.

Ohio

Ohio is where Sam, Sara's father, lives in order to work.

Setting

Byars chose her home of twenty years, West Virginia, as the setting for *The Summer of the Swans*. Her abiding appreciation of the locale's natural beauty permeates her descriptions, making them authentic. She says that she set the novel in West Virginia "to give the reader the feeling of the power of the land over the individual." The idea for the swans in the story came from a newspaper article in her college alumni magazine that told about the swans at Furman University that left their own beautiful lake each year and flew to less desirable ponds. The setting in time is not particularly important to the story, but the action probably takes place around the time the novel was published, 1970.

Social Sensitivity

Byars's compassionate approach to mental disability in *The Summer of the Swans* results from her work with learning disabled children at West Virginia University in 1968. While there, she researched histories of children with brain damage caused by highfevered illnesses. This subject so fascinated her that she enrolled at West Virginia University to obtain her mas.

ter's degree in special education. At the time that Byars's novel was published, mental disabilities were a particularly sensitive subject that few books examined. Byars's treatment of the mentally handicapped is very touching, though not overly sentimental.

The novel emphasizes adolescents' great, though often untapped, capacity for maturity. Over the course of one summer, Sara convincingly grows from a self-absorbed, judgmental teen-ager to a capable, independent young adult.

Most parents and teachers will find her to be an appropriate role model for adolescents, and Sara's actions may inspire adolescents to have more confidence in their abilities.

Literary Qualities

Byars's style is simple, straightforward, and easy to read. She uses very short chapters and successfully builds suspense until the climax. She develops each character subtly through dialogue, everyday circumstances, or conflict.

Byars generally omits adults from the plots of her works so that she can explore how her adolescent characters make decisions and act on their own, away from adult influences.

In *The Summer of the Swans* many characters interact to reveal a change in the life of Sara. The book's third-person omniscient narrator focuses on Sara's thoughts and feelings through most of the novel. Byars increases the novel's suspense by shifting to the distraught Charlie's point of view when he becomes lost.

Byars's use of symbolism adds depth to the story. Sara feels gawky and insecure at the beginning: her big orange sneakers symbolize her assessment of herself as unattractive and odd. But by the end of the book, Sara feels more confident and is ready to discard the sneakers. Once she realizes she is not an "ugly duckling," she conducts herself with the gracefulness of the swans she and Charlie watch at the lake.

Sara also learns to accept her father's inability to deal with Charlie's disability, and Byars explains Sara's new understanding in metaphorical terms: [Sara] suddenly saw life as a series of huge, uneven steps, ... and she had just taken an enormous step up out of the shadows, and she was standing, waiting, and there were other steps in front of her ... and she saw Charlie on a flight of small difficult steps, and her father down at the bottom of some steps, just sitting and not trying to go further.

Sara's newfound ability to put her life in perspective and to view her future with hope and determination signal her maturation. Byars convincingly captures this change in her character.



Themes

Coming of Age

The Summer of the Swans contains the theme of growing up or coming of age in regards to the main character, Sara. Sara is at a rough age, caught halfway between childhood and adulthood. The whole world seems to be against Sara. Sara's body betrays her with its big feet, her ridiculously height and her poor, tortured hair. Sara's aunt oppresses her by forcing her to take her little brother everywhere she goes. Sara's own sister is another difficult matter because she is so beautiful it seems her mere presence makes a joke of Sara's own looks. Then there are the other children in town, the cruel ones who constantly make fun of Charlie and play cruel jokes on him, forcing Sara to come to his rescue time and time again. It seems nothing ever goes Sara's way.

However, Sara learns that the boy she thought stole her brother's watch, a boy she wanted more than anything to torture the way he did her brother, is innocent. With this new information and Joe's insistence on helping her find her brother, Sara discovers that not everyone is as evil as she originally thought. Sara is also forced to face her own emotions toward her brother when he disappears, and she must admit to herself that she resents his special needs. However, Sara also realizes she would not want Charlie to be any other way because he would not be her Charlie if he were any different.

Sara grows not physically but emotionally during her search for her brother. While her best friend is more concerned about parties and boys, Sara is focused on the safety and well being of her little brother. Sara has always been forced to be more mature than other girls because of her brother's special needs, and she has always resented the difference between herself and her friends. However, when faced with the possibility of never seeing her brother again, Sara realizes that she has a connection with her brother that she would never want to break. Sara comes to terms with her role in Charlie's life, aware that she would not be who she is if not for Charlie. In the course of only a few hours, Sara has gained an adult's insight into her life and is content with what she has found there.

Special Needs and the Family Dynamic

Another theme of the novel is the manner in which a special needs person affects the family dynamic. Charlie is a boy who is growing like any other ten-year-old, except that because of two illnesses when he was three, he is not maturing like an average ten-year-old. Charlie does not speak or communicate in a way that someone who does not know him can understand. All these things make it so that Charlie's family, especially his sister Sara, must keep a diligent eye on him.

A family that has a special needs person as a member is different from other families. This undeniable fact is difficult for some people to live with, especially young children



such as Sara. Sara relates to people differently than other girls her own age. Sara's main concern is Charlie, not boys, parties, makeup and dresses. Sara would like for these things to be her main concern, but because she is closest in age to Charlie, she is the one who is with him the majority of the time. She is assigned to watching over him when the adults in her life cannot. Sara resents this darker part of having a special needs person in her life.

However, as Sara learns through the course of the novel, there are good things about having a special needs person in your family. The most important advantage of having Charlie in her family, as Sara learns, is Charlie himself. Sara cannot imagine her life without Charlie, and this is the root of her fear when Charlie goes missing. Although tired of always having to take Charlie with her wherever she goes and of Charlie refusing to obey her when it is time to leave, Sara knows she has a special connection with Charlie. She would not be happy if Charlie were not a part of her life. Not only this, but when Sara makes a connection with Joe Melby that is not related to Charlie, Sara finally discovers that Charlie does not define her life and that there is more to life beyond Charlie.

Loss

Loss and the possibility of loss is also a theme of *The Summer of the Swans*. Sara's mother dies when she is only eight, leaving her, her sister and Charlie in the care of Aunt Willie. This loss is tough on Sara, but she rarely talks about her mother and the loss. The reader is left with the impression that Sara has come to terms with the loss. However, Sara's father is no longer a part of her life, and Sara, who has vague memories of a happy, laughing man who loved his daughter's very much, feels a profound loss for this man. The father she knows now is not the same man from Sara's memories. Sara's father now is an infrequent visitor who spends the majority of his time watching television rather than spending any time with her or her siblings. This loss is an intense one in Sara's mind, even as she grows to understand her father's inertia.

Another loss Sara feels deeply is Charlie. Sara can remember when Charlie was a happy baby, a baby who could speak and who was active even when burning up from fever. Every night as Sara listens to Charlie toss and turn in bed, Sara remembers the little baby who stopped moving and stopped making noises or eye contact, and she feels a profound sense of loss for what might have been if there had not been the illness. She also experiences the physical loss of Charlie when he disappears in the night and Sara cannot find him. Sara, who spends the majority of the day before wishing she did not have to take care of her brother all the time, becomes deeply afraid that Charlie will never come home again and that life will never be the same. This loss, though much more immediate than the previous few, is just as deep and personality shaping as the others.

The final loss that is not actually spoken about in this novel, though it is implied, is the loss of Sara's childhood. Sara is at an age where she is ready to grow up, but her childhood has been seriously stunted because of her brother's special needs. Most



children's deepest concerns normally include who has a crush on whom, what she will wear to a party, whether or not she will be invited to a party and whether or not she will pass her math class. Sara's biggest concerns, however, are whether or not her brother is safe on the school bus, if the local boys are teasing him or not and if he is lost or injured. These concerns are adult concerns that have taken more and more of Sara's childhood away from her. However, at the end of the novel, like all the other losses she has suffered, Sara will come to terms with this loss as well.



Themes/Characters

Sara Godfrey is a fourteen-year-old who feels awkward, ugly, and unattractive because she has large feet, skinny legs, and a crooked nose. Her moods shift unpredictably: one minute she is "up" about something, the next she is "down" about the same situation. Her ten-year-old brother, Charlie, who has been brain-damaged and mute since the age of three, is loved by everyone in the community. Wanda, their older sister, spends much of her time with her boyfriend, Frank. Sara idolizes, but does not envy, her beautiful older sister.

The children's mother is dead, and their father stays away as much as possible— even when he knows Charlie is lost— possibly because he cannot accept the reality of a mentally retarded child.

Sara learns much about herself, her friends, and her acquaintances when Charlie becomes lost while searching for swans. Her friend Mary turns out to be loyal only to the extent that it does not interfere with her own fun. Joe Melby, on the other hand, proves how wrong Sara has been about him. Believing that he took Charlie's watch, Sara has hated him for several months. Actually, Joe returned the watch to Charlie after some other boys took it. After learning of Joe's good deed, Sara reluctantly accepts his offer to help look for Charlie.

Joe and Sara find that they like one another, and once the crisis is resolved, they attend a party together.

Sara's sister Wanda and her Aunt Willie play minor roles but add humor and drama to the story. Wanda, nineteen years old, is a pretty, social girl. She exhibits some exasperation with Sara when Sara complains about being awkward and undesirable, but she tries to be a supportive sister. Sensible, goodnatured Aunt Willie takes care of Wanda, Sara, and Charlie in their father's absence. She worries about the children but knows when to relax her overprotective tendencies toward them.

The novel has dual themes. The first is the teen-ager's capacity for maturity as exemplified by Sara's growth of character when she becomes personally responsible for finding Charlie, an experience that changes her outlook on life. The second theme is the need for compassion and understanding for the mentally retarded, as evidenced in the guilt, remorse, frustration, and discomfort that the other characters feel when it seems that Charlie may be lost forever.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of *The Summer of the Swans* is third person semi-omniscient, with the point of view alternating between Sara Godfrey and occasionally Charlie Godfrey. This point of view tells the story through Sara's eyes, with all her emotions and experiences coloring every event in the novel. In this way, the writer gives wonderful insight into the experiences of a teenage girl who has the special circumstance of dealing with a mentally impaired brother.

The third person semi-omniscient point of view is one that allows the reader into the mind of a main character, providing more than just a report on actions in which the narrator participates. By using the semi-omniscient point of view, the reader is allowed not only to see how characters react to a certain situation, but also to feel the way they react and experience their emotions as if they were the reader's own. This point of view as it is used from Sara's vantage point shows the reader how her brother makes her feel. Readers do not just see how she reacts to his needs and his attitudes. This point of view tells in fewer pages how confused Sara is, rather than filling pages with scene after scene that may never truly explain how deep this confusion goes in Sara's mind. When the focus shifts to Charlie, the reader gets a better feel of the confusion in his head as well. Charlie does not understand the world the way other people do, and this point of view allows the reader a peek into the way his mind works.

Setting

The setting of *The Summer of the Swans* is summertime in a small West Virginia community sometime in the early seventies. Summertime is supposed to be a time of freedom and fun for most children. However, for Sara, this summer is boring and rife with responsibilities she does not want. Sara finds herself unwilling to do the things she might have done in previous years, such as rough play, trips to the Dairy Queen and babysitting jobs. Sara is at an age when she feels awkward in her own body, and the things that filled her days before no longer excite her. Suddenly, this awkwardness and sense of restlessness is making her summer one moment after another of utter boredom.

The decade that the novel is set in is one of unlocked doors and fearlessly wandering children. No one in this novel is afraid of crime or concerned with locking doors, and therefore Charlie is able to walk out of his own house in the middle of the night without having to deal with a lock on the front door. Sara is allowed to wander free, and she is free to walk to the lake as long as she takes Charlie with her and free to search for her brother without an adult escorting her. This decade gives the novel a feel of carefree days filled with nothing worse than a broken sucker or a fallen blanket/tent. This



carefree attitude also underlines the difficulties Sara has begun to face in her transformation from childhood to adulthood.

Language and Meaning

The language in this novel is simple, yet proper, English without the distraction of slang or regional dialect. The novel is told through the point of view of a teenager, but this does not include language that an adult would not understand or enjoy. Ms. Byars choice of language has created a novel that can be understood quite easily by anyone who chooses to read it, child or adult.

Ms. Byars uses a combination of exposition and dialogue to tell her story. The dialogue flows easily, and the words spoken are simple phrases that anyone might use. Yet, there are not lines of small talk one might hear in the real world that might cause a novel to lose its continuity. The exposition gives the reader deeper insight into the characters of the novel, often clearly depicting the past events that have placed these characters in this place and time. Ms. Byars also uses metaphor quite skillfully in her novel, sprinkling the text with imagery that a reader might pick up subconsciously and gain even more insight into the main character of the novel, Sara.

Structure

The novel is written in multiple chapters that are not denoted by chapter headings, creating a flow that moves from scene to scene without a clear interruption. Each chapter jumps right back into the narration, whether it is a continuation of a scene from a previous chapter or movement into another scene. This flow makes the novel difficult to put down. There are also illustrations throughout the novel that show important sections of the chapters in which they appear, giving the reader a visual description as well as the written one of the action in a particular scene.

The novel has only one primary plot line. However, there are several points of back story that are skillfully presented to the reader in exposition that explains a moment in Sara's life or a situation that has placed her in this place at this time in her life. The writer also uses the season the novel is set in, summer, almost as another character, shaping the behaviors and attitudes of the main characters. This other 'character' creates an atmosphere that allows the swans to travel to their local lake and makes it possible for Charlie to remain warm and safe during his adventure. The swans are a minor point but a large metaphor for the overall themes of the novel, and they provide the situation that makes it possible for Charlie to want to leave the safety of his home.



Quotes

"'You wear the same size shoe as Jackie Kennedy Onassis if that makes you feel any better.'

"'How do you know?'

"'Because one time when she was going into an Indian temple she had to leave her shoes outside and some reporter looked in them to see what size they were.' She leaned close to the mirror and looked at her teeth.

"'Her feet look littler.'

"'That's because she doesn't wear orange sneakers.'" Chapter 1, pg. 11

"It was as if her life was a huge kaleidoscope, and the kaleidoscope had been turned and now everything was changed. The same stones, shaken, no longer made the same design."

Chapter 1, pg. 13

"Most of the houses were set close together as if huddled for safety, and on either side of the houses the West Virginia hills rose, black now in the early evening shadows."
Chapter 5, pg. 32

"Charlie sat in the sudden stillness, hunched over his knees, on the bottom step. The whole world seemed to have been turned off when Sara went into the Weiceks' house, and he did not move for a long time." Chapter 6, pg. 35

"Up until this year, it seemed, her life had flowed along with rhythmic evenness. The first fourteen years of her life all seemed the same. She had loved her sister without envy, her aunt without finding her coarse, her brother without pity. Now all that was changed. She was filled with a discontent, an anger about herself, her life, her family, that made her think she would never be content again." Chapter 7, pg. 46

"Still looking for the swans, he pressed his face against the screen. The beauty of them, the whiteness, the softness, the silent splendor had impressed him greatly, and he felt a longing to be once again by the lake, sitting in the deep grass, throwing bread to the waiting swans." Chapter 9, pg. 57

"It gave Sara a sick feeling to see it because something about the picture, the smallness, the unfinished quality, made it look somehow very much like Charlie."
Chapter 12, pg. 77

"Sara had a strange feeling when she thought of her father. It was the way she felt about people she didn't know well, like the time Miss Marshall, her English teacher, had



given her a ride home from school, and Sara had felt uneasy the whole way home, even though she saw Miss Marshall every day." Chapter 13, pg. 82

"I know what it is to lose a father, let me tell you, and so will you when all you have left of him is an envelope.'

"Aunt Willie, Sara knew, was speaking of the envelope in her dresser drawer containing all the things her father had had in his pockets when he died. Sara knew them all - the watch, the twenty-seven cents in change, the folded dollar bill, the brown plaid handkerchief, the three-cent stamp, the two bent pipe cleaners, the half pack of stomach mints." Chapter 13, pg. 85

"For months, ever since the incident of the stolen watch, she had waited for this moment, had planned exactly what she would say. Now that it was said, she did not feel the triumph she had imagined at all." Chapter 14, pg. 89

"The black treetops seemed to crowd against the yards, the houses, the roads, giving the impression that at any moment the trees would close over the houses like waves and leave nothing but an unbroken line of black-green leaves waving in the sunlight." Chapter 19, pg. 117

"Sara could not understand why she suddenly felt so good. It was a puzzle. The day before she had been miserable. She had wanted to fly away from everything, like the swans to a new lake, and now she didn't want that any more." Chapter 22, pg. 130

"A picture came into her mind of the laughing, curly-headed man with the broken tooth in the photograph album, and she suddenly saw life as a series of huge, uneven steps, and she saw herself on the steps, standing motionless in her prison shirt, and she had just taken an enormous step up out of the shadows, and she was standing, waiting, and there were other steps in front of her, so that she could go as high as the sky, and she saw Charlie on a flight of small difficult steps, and her father down at the bottom of some steps, just sitting and not trying to go further. She saw everyone she knew on those blinding white steps and for a moment everything was clearer than it had ever been." Chapter 23, pg. 140

Adaptations

Several of Byars's novels have been adapted to television as ABC "Afterschool Specials." Based on *The Summer of the Swans*, "Sara's Summer of the Swans" is a particularly fine production. Produced by Martin Tahse Productions and first broadcast in 1974, it stars Heather Totten as Sara, Reed Diamond as Charlie, and Christopher Knight as Joe. This production is available on videocassette.



Topics for Discussion

1. What are Sara's memories of her father? Where does he live? Why do you think Sara's father does not come to rescue Charlie?
2. Why does Sara hold a grudge against Joe Melby? Is she justified in doing this?
3. Does Sara apologize to Joe? How does she convey her forgiveness?
4. Do you like Aunt Willie? Why does Aunt Willie regret not sewing on Charlie's button? Why does she call the television "a devil"?
5. Can you cite uses of imagery that intensify the story?
6. Why does Charlie's watch play such an, important part in the story? Why is Charlie so attracted to the swans?



Essay Topics

Consider the time period in which this novel is set. How is this time different from modern times? Would the novel be any different if it were written in modern times? Which parts would be different? Which would be the same? Is there any part of this novel that would be impossible had it been written in modern times?

Discuss the point of view of the novel. How would the novel be different if it had been written in the first person? What if it had been told from someone else's point of view? Would this change the entire story?

Research and discuss brain damage and mental impairment. How does Charlie's affliction affect the rest of his family? Is the strain his affliction caused Sara fair?

Is *Summer of the Swans* a typical coming of age story? Would Sara have come to the same conclusions if her brother were not lost in the woods? Did Charlie's disappearance have the largest affect on Sara or was it the truth about Joe and his friendship?

Discuss loss. How does loss affect a teenager's life? Did losing her mother early in life put Sara at an unfair disadvantage as far as being forced to grow up faster? How does Sara's father's abandonment affect her? How does the loss Sara has experienced affect her growth and maturity? Do these losses affect her more profoundly than Charlie's affliction?

Discuss the structure of the novel. Does the lack of chapter headings help or impede the flow of the novel? How do the illustrations affect the story? Do the illustrations distract from the flow of the novel or enhance the scene descriptions?

Discuss the setting of the novel. Summer is almost another character in this novel, affecting many facets of the story. Can a part of the setting be another character? How would it affect the novel if it were winter or spring instead?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Discuss the devices the author uses to heighten the conflict in the story.
2. Two of the novel's important themes are the teen-ager's ability to act maturely and the need to treat the mentally disabled with compassion and respect.

Choose one of these themes and discuss how Byars develops it.

3. Cite sections of the novel that are humorous. Why do you think the author introduces humor in so serious a plot?

Do you think that this is an effective device?

4. What incidents cause Sara to grow up this particular summer? Has any specific incident in your life caused you to change? Write about one incident that changed your life.

5. Do you like the way the author shifts the point of view from Sara's to Charlie's? What effect does relating the thoughts and feelings of both characters have on the story?



Further Study

Cullinan, Bernice E. *A Study Guide to the Novels of Betsy Byars*. New York: Viking Penguin, n.d. Provides literary analysis of several of Byars's novels, including *The Summer of the Swans*.

De Montreville, Doris, and Donna Hill, eds. *Third Book of Junior Authors*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1972. The editors provide an autobiographical sketch by Byars and a bibliography of her works and related articles.

Glazer, Joan, and Gurney Williams III.

Introduction to Children's Literature.

New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979. Discusses the book with insight into Sara's sensitive feelings about Charlie.

Kingman, Lee, ed. *Newbery and Caldecott Medal Books, 1966-1975*. Boston: Horn Book, 1975. Offers a glimpse of the author through her Newbery Award acceptance speech and through her husband's comments.

Morowski, Daniel G., ed. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 35. Detroit: Gale Research, 1985. Excerpts criticism of Byars's novels.

Norton, Donna E. *Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Children's Literature*. Columbus: Charles Merrill, 1983. Contains a brief analysis of *The Summer of the Swans*.

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6th ed. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1981. Discusses family life as portrayed in several books, including *The Summer of the Swans*.



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