

War Comes to Willy Freeman Study Guide

War Comes to Willy Freeman by James Collier

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Plot Summary

Willy Freeman is thirteen on the day she watches British soldiers pass by her house. She recalls the flash of sun on the metal of their bayonets and dreads the fact that her father will now be called on to fight. Willy's parents, Jordan and Lucy, are free. Her father was freed in order to allow him to fight for the Americans against the British and the slave owner freed both Lucy and Willy in order to be fair to Jordan. The family lives in a tiny cabin and her father often fishes in the nearby bay.

As the British are passing by, Lucy tells Willy to put on her "milking britches" and milk the cow. Willy almost objects because she knows that she'll have to put her dress back on later, but gives in without much of a fuss. She finishes milking the cow and returns to the house. A short time later, Jordan announces that he's headed to Fort Griswold to join the fighting. He tells Willy to go along in order to bring the family's horse back to the cabin. Lucy pleads with him to leave Willy at home but Jordan insists. When they get near the fort, they discover that the fighting is already intense. Jordan makes a run for the wall and is hauled over. As Willy turns to leave, she's suddenly caught up in the battle and forced toward the wall. She's pulled up to safety but the British soon force their way in and kill all the Americans inside, including Jordan. When they discover Willy is a girl, she's released.

At home she finds that her mother is missing, apparently taken captive by the British. Not knowing what else to do, she makes her way to the home of her Aunt Betsy. There, she discovers a slave owner named Captain Ivers, who is intent on returning Willy to slavery. Willy heads to New York, hoping to find her mother there. Through a series of adventures and some sheer luck, she is taken in by a tavern owner, Black Sam Fraunces, as she continues to search for Lucy. When the war draws to a close, Lucy is released and Willy learns that her mother is very sick. She's then faced with a difficult decision. If she goes to her mother's side, she'll have to face Captain Ivers again. She knows she can't let her mother die without seeing her and arrives to find that Captain Ivers has refused to allow a doctor. Willy tries to get a doctor but is unable to. Her mother dies.

In her grief, Willy attacks Captain Ivers, and Jack has to step in to prevent Captain Ivers from whipping Willy. Jack winds up in jail and Willy almost runs away but realizes she has to return to face the situation. She goes to court and helps assure Jack's release. After resolving the issues at hand, Willy decides she will return to New York where she believes she can eventually make her dreams come true.



Chapters 1 through 3

Chapters 1 through 3 Summary

Willy Freeman says her most vivid memories of that day are of the sun flashing on the bayonets carried by the British soldiers as they passed the Freeman house. Willy is really Wilhemina, but everyone calls her Willy. Her parents are Jordan and Lucy Freeman. They are black but are free because Jordan has agreed to fight with the Americans against the British during the American Revolution. The former owner, Colonel Ledyard, had freed Jordan, as was the habit of the day. While he wasn't obligated to free Jordan's family, he did, meaning the entire family is free.

On this particular day, Willy says that she wishes her father was home but her mother Lucy counters, saying that Jordan is safer out on the bay fishing than he would be if he were involved in the fighting. Willy, at thirteen, continues to watch the British soldiers pass by until her mother interrupts her thoughts, telling her to go milk the cow. Willy doesn't want to and almost argues when Lucy says she also has to change out of her dress and into her "milking britches." The cow is important to Lucy because it represents freedom and ownership. Mrs. Ledyard had given Lucy the cow after Lucy nursed one of the Ledyard children through a dangerous illness.

Fort Griswold is near Willy's house. It's located in the village of Groton and it's there that the upcoming battle between the British and Americans will likely take place. The cow is nearer the house, in an area Willy calls a "salt marsh." She's there when the sudden scream of a cannon ball frightens her badly. Willy knows the shots are being fired toward the bay where Jordan is fishing and fears for her father's life. When she finishes milking, she returns to the house but faces a new problem. One of Willy's jobs is to take the milk to the Ledyard's each day, but the fighting prompts her mother to say that Willy will have to skip delivering the milk on this particular day.

Just then Willy and Lucy hear a terrible shrieking noise and rush toward the salt marsh just in time to see two black soldiers killing the cow. They are members of the British troops, the Third New Jersey Volunteers. They say that they've been ordered not to damage property owned by blacks, but hadn't realized that the cow belonged to a black family. They offer to leave the meat but Lucy is furious and tells them to take it. When they are about to leave, Willy blurts out that she hadn't known any blacks were in the British Army. The two men say that the Americans only want to keep blacks as slaves, which prompted their decision to fight for the British. The two soldiers tell Lucy and Willy that there will be little left in the area after the fight and urge that they leave with the British Army. One of the men leans close and asks if Willy is a boy. She blushes and the soldier grabs her breasts. In chapter two, Jordan arrives holding a stick of wood and tells the soldier to let go of Willy.

After the soldiers are gone, Lucy tells Jordan that the cow is dead. He is pleased to hear that they didn't find the horse. Jordan instructs Lucy to get him something to eat as they



hear shooting from the direction of Fort Griswold. While he eats what Lucy prepared, he says that he'd seen the ships arrive in the bay that morning and had gone back to raise the alarm, dodging first musket fire and then cannon balls to reach safety. Jordan finishes eating and says that he has to go before the British reach the fort. Lucy pleads with him to stay out of the fighting. Jordan says that Willy will go with him to the woods near the fort, and then she'll bring the horse back. Lucy begs him not to take Willy so near the fighting, but he promises she'll be alright and they leave.

They reach the general area and circle around to come near the fort. Willy considers that they might not be able to get close enough to enter, but Jordan presses onward. When they are within sight, Jordan says he plans to run through the woods to wall of the fort with the expectation that someone will pull him to safety. He makes it to the wall as Willy watches. She sees his legs disappearing over the top and takes time to wonder if she'll ever again see him. Willy slips as quietly as possible back through to woods to where the horse is tied to a tree. Just as she reaches the animal, she hears a British voice calling out the word, "spy." Willy realizes that they're talking about her and she mounts quickly, headed for the fort. As she urges the horse to a faster pace, she wonders if she'll make it to the fort before she's shot.

In chapter three, Willy is frightened as she crosses the open area around the fort but sees no other option. As she hits the wall, she feels a rope and grabs onto it so that Jordan can pull her over. A short time later, the British send a message in to the fort ordering the Americans to surrender. Jordan says they won't do that but will continue to fight. He wishes for a way to get Willy out of the fort but says she couldn't possibly make it through the shooting. She assures him that she'll be fine inside. He sends her to a low point to help a young boy make cartridges for the muskets.

The boy is William Latham, who lives in Groton, and he knows Willy but is mistakes her for a boy because she's wearing britches and her father's hat. He shows her how to roll the paper, add the powder and then the shot. The men use the cartridges to speed up the loading process. William is about to question Willy further about her identity when the men call for cartridges. He rushes out with a basketful. When they call out for cartridges again, Willy takes a turn delivering them. While she's out in the open, she sees British soldiers climbing over a broken section of the wall. Her father is there to meet them and kills the first who climbs over. At that moment, the door of the fort crashes in under the weight of more soldiers. The British rush in, led by an officer who demands to know who is in charge. When Colonel Ledyard hands the officer his sword as a sign of surrender, the officer grabs the weapon and stabs the Colonel, who slumps to the ground, dying. Jordan and several other American soldiers rush forward and Willy can only watch as Jordan is surrounded by British soldiers. He's stabbed in the back, his arms flail out wide, and he falls to the ground. Willy begins to scream and slumps onto the platform where she's standing. She knows that death is certain and she simply sits and waits for it, crying.



Chapters 1 through 3 Analysis

Jordan is a free man and usually works for Colonel Ledyard. Willy says that he does jobs such as hoeing for the Colonel but doesn't say whether he's paid for those tasks. He does, however, fish in the bay and the money he earns from that enterprise is used to "better himself." It seems possible that Jordan continues to work for the Ledyards for at least a little pay, but those details are not revealed. What's interesting is that the Freeman's sell their extra milk each day to the Ledyards. The reader should remember that Mrs. Ledyard gave Lucy the cow and now buys milk from that same cow from Lucy. This is an indication of the generous nature of the Ledyards and shows that they were truly grateful for Lucy's efforts to save their child's life.

The soldiers who kill the cow are black and they apologize, saying they had orders not to destroy or take property belonging to other blacks. The purpose seems to be an effort on the part of the British to encourage the blacks to fight against the Americans. The attitude makes Willy think about her own stand on the issue. She eventually comes to the conclusion that almost everyone is seeking more freedom. She believes that the Americans are seeking freedom from the British just as a youngster would seek freedom from his parents, and that the parents would fight that, just as Britain was doing.

One of the earliest signs of Willy's sense of injustice is seen as she's in the fort helping the young boy make cartridges. He thinks she's a boy and she encourages the misunderstanding. When it's time for them to take cartridges out to the soldiers, the boy says that he'll take the first basketful and that Willy can take the next. She knows that if he'd known she was a girl, he'd have refused to allow her into the compound where the fighting was going on. Over time, Willy's thoughts on this will be made clearer.



Chapters 4 through 7

Chapters 4 through 7 Summary

In chapter four, Willy eventually opens her eyes to see a British soldier standing in front of her. Her first words are to say that she's a girl and to plead for her life. The soldier asks what she's doing there, and she says that she came in with her father, who is already dead. The soldier shoves her and tells her to get out of the fort. Willy sees that British soldiers are still advancing with cannons, though there's no longer anyone for them to kill. Willy focuses on the smells around her - including that of burning molasses - in order to stop thinking about her father's death. She longs for the comfort of her mother's arms and determines to that she'll get home, regardless of the British who are between her and home. There are other people on the road, mostly women, obviously running away from Groton, and Willy joins them. She makes it home without incident and without being able to think coherently about anything other than reaching her destination. She rushes into the cabin, yelling for her mother, but there's no answer.

Willy believes that her mother has probably gone to look for Willy, so she sits down beside the cabin to wait. She hasn't been there long with a neighbor, Granny Hyde, arrives. Granny is an older woman and is known to be somewhat crazy. She tells Willy that "we" had expected Willy to be dead, caught up in the fighting as it appeared she had been. Willy asks for her mother and Granny says that the British soldiers "took her". She doesn't know where but predicts that Lucy will never again be seen and that her fate will never be known. Willy begins crying again and Granny says that Willy should gather a few of her possessions and come to Granny's house. She says that Willy is welcome to stay with her. Granny leaves, telling Willy to "come soon". Willy goes inside the cabin, lies down on the bed and begins to cry.

When Willy wakes, it's daylight. She calls out for her mother but then remembers what happened. She begins to cry again, but soon realizes that she has to take action. She goes outside to see where the British soldiers are, and discovers that the bay is filled with British ships. Willy knows that she's going to have to make decisions about her life. She considers going to Mrs. Ledyard, but knows that would be almost the same as going into slavery. She knows she could marry but notes there are no men she would want to marry. She decides she has to go to the only relatives she has, Aunt Betsy and Uncle Jack Arabus. She's never met them but knows from her mother's stories that they live in Stratford and have a son named Dan. She decides to take her father's boat and go there.

She knows from her father's story about sighting the British ships in the bay that the boat is moored at Baker's Cove. Willy takes what she can find to eat and heads to the boat. She has to wait for the British to leave the bay before setting out. If the British have her aboard one of their boats, it means Lucy is being taken to New York. Willy remained close to the shoreline and travels until she finds the place she recognizes



from her mother's stories. As she gets out of the boat, it suddenly occurs to her that Aunt Betsy might not be willing to take her in.

When Aunt Betsy recognizes Willy, she says that Willy looks just like Lucy. Lucy tells Aunt Betsy the events that led her to arrive in Stratford, and Aunt Betsy begins to cry for her sister. Aunt Betsy holds Willy as if she was a child and Willy is comforted. Then Aunt Betsy asks what Willy plans to do next. Willy says she wants to stay with Aunt Betsy and promises that she'll work hard to earn her keep. Aunt Betsy says she doesn't know what her owner, Captain Ivers, will say and adds that she doesn't trust the Captain. Just then a man enters the kitchen and Willy meets her Uncle Jack. Aunt Betsy tells Jack what happened to Lucy and Jordan and Willy is glad she'd made the trip.

In chapter five, Willy knows that it's just luck that allowed her to show up at Captain Ivers at the time when Uncle Jack is at home. Uncle Jack is serving in the Connecticut Line and has already been involved in several battles. He's home that night on furlough with the expectations that there will be other battles in the near future. Willy and the Arabus family are sitting down to eat when a woman arrives in the kitchen. It's Mrs. Ivers, and she demands to know who Willy is and why she's there. Mrs. Ivers immediately says that Willy can't stay and refuses to give in even when Uncle Jack says that Willy has nowhere else to go. Captain Ivers arrives in the kitchen just then and mistakes Willy for a boy. He then asks if she's a runaway and she says that she's a free woman. Under the Captain's questions, Willy says that she'd been freed by Colonel Ledyard but that he'd been killed in the fighting. The Captain tells Mrs. Ivers to be quiet and says that Willy can stay. He says that Willy has to wear a dress because being dressed in pants is "unnatural". He then leaves the room and Willy is worried, fearing that Captain Ivers is going to be looking for a way to put her back in slavery.

Willy says that staying probably isn't a good idea and that she's going to go to New York in search of her mother. Aunt Betsy says it isn't a good idea, that the city is huge and the chances of finding Lucy are slim. She also points out that the conditions are poor, with little to eat because of the British in the town. Aunt Betsy says they know about the conditions in New York because of Uncle Jack's friend, Sam Fraunces.

The following day, Willy is put to work scrubbing floors. She is angry about it but performs the task assigned. She is still wearing her pants because there isn't a dress available. Later that day, Captain Ivers questions Willy again, asking where her papers of freedom were. Upon hearing that she hadn't taken them from her cabin, he simply nods and leaves the room. Willy is certain she has to leave soon, though Betsy and Jack continue to try to dissuade her. She begins to look for a way to slip away, and it happens one day when Captain Ivers says he needs Dan to deliver a message to a man who lives near the beach. Willy says Dan is busy with his chores in the barn and offers to take it in his place. Captain Ivers agrees. Willy wants to tell Aunt Betsy good-bye but doesn't dare. She does take her aunt's coat, though she feels bad about it, and heads to where she'd left the boat, dropping the message on the beach undelivered. She heads toward New York and soon encounters an American raiding party sailing her way.



In chapter six, Willy is captured and has to convince the raiders that she's not a British spy. She knows that they will return her to the Stratford area and fears that she'll be forced to Ivers' house where he'll manage to make her into a slave. She is told to wait by the boats with several men who are guarding the boats while the larger body of the raiding party goes inland. She casually wanders around on the beach and picks up several pebbles without attracting attention. She then throws them into the woods, making enough noise to capture the interest of the guards. While they are distracted, she slips away. Once she is some distance from the beach, she begins to run.

She encounters road signs but can't read them, so she doesn't know where she is. She imagines that she'll reach New York if she continues in the same general direction. She passes through several small villages and ambles along, acting as if someone had sent her on an errand and she was in no hurry to get there or to get back. No one questions her. At one point, she gets a ride with an old black man who is hauling a load of potatoes. He gives her several and she slips off into the woods where she builds a fire and roasts them, eating a couple and carrying the rest with her for later. She arrives rather suddenly at a huge bluff and can see New York City on the other side of the bay. She takes time to look around the area from that vantage point. She notes the British ships moored to one side and knows that they hold American prisoners. Willy doesn't know where she might find her mother but knows she has to start the search somewhere. With that thought in mind, she heads out.

In chapter seven, Willy continues walking, looking for things to think about on the way. Willy debates whether it's in her best interests to be an American or a British. She says that America is a land in which slavery exists. She counters that with the thought that Colonel Ledyard had freed Jordan but that Jordan had essentially died for that freedom. The next thought is that Colonel Ledyard didn't have to free Willy and Lucy, but he had in an effort to be fair. The British had taken Lucy, a free woman, to a prison ship. Willy says that she can't see a great deal of difference between the Americans and British when it comes to slavery and rights, but that she "felt like an American".

Willy arrives at the shoreline and asks a British officer if he's seen her mother. He tells her that women aren't kept on the prison ships and orders that she go away. She tries to argue but gives up. Then the officer begins to question Willy and she reveals that she's a girl. She tries to hide where she's come from and finally the officer leaves, dismissing her as well. She turns to go, but a soldier grabs her. She pleads with him to let her go and he grabs at her shirt, intending to pull it over her head to see if she's a girl. She scuffles with him and drops out a potato as she insists that she's not a girl. Seeing the potato, the other soldiers begin to laugh, thinking that Willy had hidden the potatoes in her shirt in an effort to gain the appearance of a girl. She hurries away.

Chapters 4 through 7 Analysis

Jack Arabus is a free man, gaining his freedom in the same way Jordan had. The difference is that Jack's owner is Captain Ivers and he's a cruel and greedy man. Captain Ivers doesn't free Jack's wife and child as Jordan's former owner had. In fact,



Captain Ivers will later try to force Jack back into slavery. Aunt Betsy says that she doesn't know that Captain Ivers can be trusted but doesn't elaborate at that moment. It's only later that her prediction comes true. When Captain Ivers sees Willy for the first time, he begins to plot a way to force her into slavery.

Willy is completely uneducated. She doesn't read or write and has never been to school. She later says that her father knew how to read and that he'd always meant to teach Willy, but never had. Her inability to read becomes a huge handicap as she's running away from the raiders. She encounters road signs but can't read them. This attitude about education seems to fit in with the times. Many people were completely illiterate and thought nothing of it. It seems likely that Willy and her parents were so busy putting food on the table and tending daily necessities that they had no time for education, even if a legitimate teacher had been available. What seems almost unbelievable is that Jordan knew how to read. That, however, can probably be attributed to the fact that Colonel Ledyard was a generous, kind owner.

Willy notes that her family has heard stories about the British ships that serve as prisons for Americans during the war. She says that the stories are horrible and include details such as prisoners being crammed in so tightly that disease became rampant. The bodies of those who die are simply disposed of in the most efficient manner available - unmarked graves along the river bank. Willy has also heard that there is little food and what is provided is virtually inedible though the hungry prisoners eat it anyway. These details are historically accurate. While it seems questionable that Willy and her family would have known about these prison ships, it is possible that the stories had circulated to them and that the details were reasonably accurate.



Chapters 8 through 10

Chapters 8 through 10 Summary

In chapter eight, Willy realizes that she's safer if she pretends to be a boy. She wants to cross into New York but sees the ferry and knows she won't have the money to pay for the crossing. She's offered a ride by a young boy driving a wagon loaded with wood. The boy is about Willy's age and introduces himself as Horace. He begins to question Willy and she knows that he doesn't really believe the story she tells. She says that she works in New York for Sam Fraunces, that her money has been stolen and that she hasn't the money for the ferry. Horace says that Willy has to become a better liar. He says the first problem is that he works for Sam Fraunces and so he knows that she doesn't. He then begins to tell Willy the key to telling lies well. He says that her lies have to make her appear lower in the eyes of the listener. Toward that end, he suggests that she should say that she got drunk and fell asleep on the side of the road, and that's when her money was stolen. Ironically, Horace doesn't realize that Willy is a girl and fully believes that she is a boy.

Horace suggests that Willy burrow out a spot in the load of wood and hide there for the ferry ride. She does so and stays hidden until they disembark in New York. They soon arrive at Mr. Fraunces's tavern, called the "Queen's Head" during the time the British occupy the city. Willy notes that the building has multiple chimneys and that it's very large. Willy admits that she's hungry and Horace says they can get something to eat in the kitchen. As Horace is about to dip up stew for them both, Mr. Fraunces enters the kitchen. Horace is obviously uncomfortable and Mr. Fraunces lets him remain so for several minutes before allowing both to go ahead and eat. Mr. Fraunces asks Willy for her name, still believing her to be a boy, and she tells him that her uncle is Jack Arabus. Mr. Fraunces knows Jack and tells Willy to go to his office as soon as she's finished eating.

Horace directs Willy to Mr. Fraunces's office and she tries to tell him half-truths. She fears that his loyalties lie with the British and that her father's service with the Americans will prompt Mr. Fraunces to turn her over to the British. She becomes so tangled in the lies that she eventually gives up and tells him the entire story. She even tells him that she's a girl. Mr. Fraunces says that Willy can remain at the tavern and work for him while she searches for her mother. He says that it will probably be safer for her if she keeps on pretending she's a girl.

In chapter nine, Willy learns that there's a section of New York known as Canvas Town. The buildings in the area burned but there are some walls and chimneys remaining standing. People have stretched sailcloth to create make-shift houses. The very poor live here and there are many drunks, fights and deaths made worse by the poor conditions. Willy learns that some women wind up there and she sets out to see if she can locate her mother. She convinces Horace to come along by pretending that she thinks he's scared, though she's grateful that she doesn't have to go there alone. She



soon encounters a woman who has obviously been brutally beaten by a man who is drinking heavily. The woman says she knows Lucy and tells Willy to return that night with some money for "medicine" in return for directions to find Lucy. The woman says the drunk will be gone then and it will be safe for them to talk. Willy doesn't know what to do. She wants to return because it's the only hope she's had so far of finding her mother, but she fears it's a trick. In the end, she borrows some money from Willy and returns to Canvas Town. They find the correct tent and Willy goes inside where the woman appears to be sleeping, but finds that she's actually dead. Willy and Horace run away.

In chapter ten, Willy is left with the problem of trying to decide whether to return to Canvas Town to search more for Lucy. She doesn't know whether the woman was lying in order to get some money or if the woman had really seen Lucy. Willy knows that she needs to write a letter to Aunt Betsy to say that she's alright so that her aunt won't continue to worry. Horace says that Mr. Fraunces had sent him to school until the teachers declared that there was nothing more Horace could learn from them. He says that's why he was no longer attending school. Willy tells Mr. Fraunces that she wants to send a letter to Aunt Betsy and assures him that she'll ask Horace to write it for her. Mr. Fraunces is amused but provides the necessary pen, paper and envelope. He then tells Willy to see a young lawyer named Elizur Goodrich who is currently in Greenwich, making an exchange with the British for some prisoners. Mr. Fraunces says Mr. Goodrich is from Connecticut, will be returning there soon, and will probably agree to deliver the letter.

Willy tells Horace that she needs him to write the letter and he immediately begins to complain that he'd hurt his wrist earlier in the afternoon. He writes very slowly and it takes a half hour to write a very brief note. Willy wants to say more but gives in to Horace's complaining and stops. He addresses the envelope and Willy makes plans to drop it off with Mr. Goodrich when the two are running an errand the following day. They find the house where Mr. Goodrich is staying - Richmond Hill- with no problem. Mr. Goodrich knows Uncle Jack and promises to deliver the letter.

Willy and Horace load the hay they'd been sent to get and are headed back to the tavern. When they cross a creek, Horace suggests a swim and Willy objects. Finally, Willy says that she'll go look for grapes while Horace swims. Horace returns, naked, and when Willy says he should get dressed, Horace says that he isn't dry yet. Willy, unable to stand the situation any longer, tells Horace that she's a girl. He's angry and rushes to get his clothes on. Horace says that it was a surprise to him and that it will "take some getting used to."

Chapters 8 through 10 Analysis

Willy more or less tricks Horace into going to Canvas Town with her in search of her mother. She knows that Horace won't be left out of an adventure and plays to that weakness of his character. She's correct in that assumption. When Willy is trying to decide whether to return to Canvas Town with the money the woman requested,



Horace's character is shown more clearly. Willy asks Horace if he thinks she should go, apparently willing to listen to any advice he might offer. His advice, however, is convoluted and doesn't clear up anything at all for Willy. When Willy says she's decided to go, he tells her that he'd been allowing her to work it out for herself in hopes that she would come to the correct decision to stay away from Canvas Town. He says that he'd thought she would have the sense to know that the woman was a liar. Horace seems to realize that Willy is holding to the hope that she'll find her mother, even when there seems to be little reason to keep on hoping. Willy seems to realize that there's no reason to believe the woman in Canvas Town has seen Lucy but she holds to the hope that the woman isn't lying.

It seems pretty obvious that Horace habitually stretches the truth. When he and Willy first meet, he tells her that she has to lie so that the story always lowers herself in the eye of the listener. He says that by doing so, the listener believes it must be true because a person would never tell a lie that degrades himself. But Horace never follows his own advice. When Willy is hungry, Horace says that he can go to the kitchen and get whatever he wants to eat. He says that he and Mr. Fraunces are very close and that Mr. Fraunces trusts Horace completely, allowing him to do anything he believes to be right. When Mr. Fraunces hears Horace brag, he makes his presence known but doesn't call Horace a liar. It seems that he does trust Horace but doesn't give Horace quite the freedom Horace claims. A similar untruth is seen when Horace tells Willy that he can write well. When Willy tells Mr. Fraunces this piece of information, he smiles but says nothing. Willy realizes the truth at that point but still returns to Horace to have him write the letter.



Chapters 11 through 14

Chapters 11 through 14 Summary

In chapter eleven, Willy continues to search wherever the British are holding American prisoners for her mother. She says that churches and sugar houses - which are empty because of the war - are being used to house prisoners. Willy always asks if Lucy is inside and is always told that there are no women being held. Willy and Horace have been sharing the loft since Willy's arrival at the tavern. After Horace learns that Willy is a girl, he insists that she sleep somewhere else. She refuses and invites him to find another place to sleep. They work it out and both stay, but when Willy sees Horace peeking as she dresses one morning, she hangs a horse blanket across the rafters to provide a small amount of privacy. There's no longer the need to hide her gender so Willy begins wearing normal clothes again.

The winter rocks on and the year 1872 begins. By April, there are rumors of peace talks and everyone begins to hope that the war is coming to a close. The months drag by, though the coming of spring cheers everyone. It's not until fall that any more progress toward peace is announced, and even then the British remain entrenched in New York City and show no real signs of clearing out. Soon Willy marks the second anniversary of the battle that cost her both her parents. While she misses them terribly and continues to hope that she'll encounter her mother by chance on the street somewhere, she has adapted to her new life and is content in her home at the tavern.

Mr. Fraunces pays both Willy and Horace for their work. He says that as free people, they deserve to be paid. Willy promises herself that she'll follow Horace's example by saving everything she earns but she has a sweet tooth. When the cooks send her to Mr. Joseph Corre's shop to pick up tarts or some other delicacy for the tavern, Willy can never resist the temptation and always buys herself something. She says that later, when she feels guilty for having spent her money so foolishly, she gives Horace half.

The next March, there's the news that the British have officially lost the war. The British officers who frequent the tavern are unhappy and there's no celebrating at the tavern. In April, there's word that the prisoners are being freed. Mr. Fraunces sends Willy to the dock to see if she can find her mother among those disembarking. Willy rushes there, hoping she hasn't already missed Lucy, and watches the faces of those being released. The prisoners are in horrible shape and the British are interested only in getting them off the ships. They are literally pushed out of the way in order to drop off more prisoners, regardless of their physical condition. Many have suffered such severe frostbite that they can't walk. Willy keeps hearing that no one has seen women on the prison ships. By nightfall it's apparent that she isn't going to find Lucy. She returns to the tavern, sick at heart, and everyone gives her room to grieve her loss.

The summer arrives before the British finally pack up, board their boats and leave New York City. One day Willy is working in the tavern when a man asks for Willy. Willy



realizes he is Mr. Goodrich, the attorney who had delivered her letter to Aunt Betsy those years before, and that he'd thought she was a boy then. She explains briefly and he tells her that he's found her mother. He then says that Lucy is very ill but that she's with Aunt Betsy.

In chapter twelve, Willy knows that Mr. Goodrich is telling her that her mother isn't likely to survive. She feels that she was given back her mother and lost her again, all in one breath. Willy then has to decide whether she'll go to her mother's side. She knows that being in the house of Captain Ivers is dangerous because he's determined that Willy will be returned to slavery. However, she knows that she has no choice but to go to her mother immediately. Under Mr. Goodrich's questions, Willy says that she's free but that she didn't think to pick up her papers from the cabin after her father's death and her mother's disappearance. He tells her that he can help arrange it so that she can work for her passage partway to Stratford and urges that she contact him if she should find herself in trouble.

It's three days before the ship leaves and Willy can hardly wait. Mr. Fraunces says he wishes she would stay and says she's welcome to return anytime. Willy says that it will depend on what her mother wants to do after she's recovered from her illness. When she says goodbye to Horace, he says that that he'd gotten accustomed to the fact that she is a girl and that he was even glad of it. Willy says that Horace will marry someday and he says that he's in hurry. He then says that he hopes she'll come back and she says that she might.

Willy polishes railings on the ship on the way along the coast. She's left a short distance from Stratford and begins the walk. She stops several times to ask if she's headed the right direction. Willy encounters Uncle Jack in the barn and he tells her that she's in danger by being there. Willy learns that Captain Ivers has spread the rumor that he'd bought Willy from Colonel Ledyard and that Willy is now a runaway. While Jack might have sent Willy away, Aunt Betsy realizes that Willy has to see her mother. Willy is taken to the cellar where the Arabus family sleeps. Willy is horrified by the sight of her mother. She's aged tremendously and Willy says she wouldn't have recognized her mother if she hadn't know it was Lucy.

Willy learns the story of her mother's captivity. She'd worked aboard a ship and the British, being forbidden to take any of the prisoners with them, put her ashore as they were preparing to leave America. She'd been left in Long Island and Jack had gone to get her. Jack says he wasn't certain she would survive the trip to Straton.

Willy spends the night in the barn and returns to the house when she has the chance the next morning. She says that she's going to get the doctor but Aunt Betsy and Uncle Jack says that Captain Ivers has forbidden the doctor to visit. Willy goes to the doctor's office anyway and he says that he can't come because the Captain forbade it. Willy pleads and the doctor gives her some medicine. She rushes back but it's obvious that her mother is unable to take any of the medication, and that she's going to die. When Willy goes back to the kitchen, she finds Captain Ivers there and screams that he allowed her mother to die. Willy goes back to the cellar and watches as her mother dies.



She then rushes on Captain Ivers, hitting him, but he hits Willy with a whip. Jack intervenes when he's about to hit Willy again, hitting Captain Ivers. Jack knows that he's in trouble for striking a white man and runs. Willy runs away as well but outside she hesitates. She can't decide what she should do. Her instinct is to run away to safety in New York City but she knows that her mother's body is awaiting burial and that her aunt and uncle are in trouble because of Willy. She returns and helps Aunt Betsy dig a grave. It's too shallow but the ground is frozen and they pile rocks over the top of the grave to mark it and to keep animals out. As they are finishing, Dan comes with the news that Jack has been caught.

Willy makes her way to town and finds Mr. Goodrich. She tells him the entire story and he wants her to go with him to see about getting Jack out of jail but she is afraid Ivers will force her back into slavery and remains at the boarding house where Mr. Goodrich is staying.

In chapter thirteen, Mr. Goodrich tells Willy that she has to accompany him and she agrees. They pass Yale College to reach the courthouse. Inside the courtroom, the judge hears the story from Willy and is angry that Ivers struck Willy while her mother was dying. He is also angry that Ivers is trying to refuse Jack his freedom and orders that Jack be released. He also orders that new papers granting Willy's freedom so that she doesn't have to be afraid anymore. In chapter fourteen, Jack is released and both Jack and Willy go to Mr. Goodrich's. Later, Jack returns to Straton and Willy heads back to New York City and the tavern.

Chapters 11 through 14 Analysis

The relationship between Willy and Horace changes once Horace knows that Willy is a girl. It's inevitable that it would, but Willy notes that there's a change that she'd fully expected in the way Horace acts and treats her. He tries not to curse, which he did freely when he thought Willy was a boy. But when he slips up and does curse, he apologizes - a fact that amuses Willy, who always reminds him that he's been cursing in front of her for months. Another point is that Horace calls on Willy to do things that he would never have expected when he thought Willy was a boy. Willy says that Horace might have asked her to feed the chickens for him one day but that he would offer to do something in return - an effort to keep it fair. But once Horace knows that Willy is a girl, he seems more willing to call on her to do chores for him when he claims not to have the time, and he seems to feel no obligation to make a fair offer in return. This goes back to Willy's thoughts on inequality.

When Willy fails to find Lucy among the passengers disembarking from the prison boats, she forces herself to give up hope. She grieves all over again, this time because she's giving up the hope that she'll find her mother or that she'll ever even know what happened to her. But Willy is also grieving because she suddenly realizes that she has to be an adult, even though she's still a teenager. She has been living as an adult for some time but now admits that it's a permanent situation that won't ever be resolved.



Willy considers the issue of freedom as she makes the decision to return to New York City. She says that some people have more freedom than others. This is evidence of Willy's emerging maturity. A person in her situation might have held to the idea that some people are above everything and would have no one to answer to. But Willy realizes this is not the case. She says that Mrs. Ivers has to answer to her husband and that he and the lawyers have to answer to the judge. Willy says she doesn't know who the judge answers to, but knows there is someone.

The story ends without resolving the situation with Aunt Betsy and Dan and their freedom. There's an indication from the authors that there's a sequel that will address that aspect of the story.



Characters

Wilhelmina Freeman

Known as "Willy" to her family and friends, she is thirteen on the day she sees the British arriving in the town near her home. Willy is a self-confident girl and is the daughter of a free couple. Her parents, Jordan and Lucy, have taught her to think for herself but she knows that a black woman is never truly free. Willy is present at the fort the day her father is killed and returns home to discover that her mother is missing. She's immediately cast into a pit of despair and cries herself to sleep. But once she's over that initial bout of crying, she knows that she has to take control of her situation. She travels to her aunt's home but finds herself in danger of being returned to slavery. She then goes to New York City, believing that she can find her mother there. Willy stumbles on a kind business owner who gives her a job and a place to stay while she searches. When Willy discovers that her mother is ill and that a slave owner has refused to allow a doctor's care, she's furious. She sometimes acts without thinking about the consequences, and that's what happens as she's listening to her mother's final breath. Willy immediately runs away, but realizing her actions have caused problems for her aunt and uncle, she returns to face the situation and do what she can to help. Though afraid for herself, she goes before a judge and is granted papers declaring that she's free. Willy's desire for freedom drives her throughout the story and she continually exhibits a naturally kind nature coupled with the strength of someone much older.

Horace

A young black boy who is about the same age as Willy and who works for Sam Fraunces, Horace is overly self-confident. When Horace and Willy meet for the first time, Horace is driving a wagon filled with wood and he offers to help Willy get into New York without paying for her ferry ride by allowing her to hide among the wood. It's also on their first meeting that Horace advises Willy about the best way to tell believable lies. He says that lies should always "lower" oneself in the eyes of the listener. But Horace tells incredible lies that do just the opposite. At one point, he tells Willy that Sam sent him to school until the teachers determined that there was nothing else he could learn from them. When Willy needs Horace to write a letter for her, Horace pleads a sprained wrist. He does write the letter but is incredibly slow and has a great deal of trouble spelling. Horace believes Willy to be a boy for the first weeks of their friendship and is very surprised to discover that she's a girl. He is also angry at being fooled. He initially tries to insist that Willy move out of the barn but she refuses, telling him to find some other place to sleep if he isn't comfortable sleeping in the loft near her. Horace has obviously come to count on Willy's friendship by the time she leaves to see her mother and asks that she not go though he seems to understand why she feels she has to. Horace says he plans to own a tavern someday. Though it may be just more of his bragging, he saves everything he earns from Sam and has a small nest egg toward making his dream a reality.



Jordan Freeman

Father of Willy and husband of Lucy, Jordan is a free black man who works hard for his family and risks his life for that freedom. Jordan is the master of his household and allows no one to take that power from him. When he knows he has to go to the fort to fight the invading British, he has Willy go along in order to bring the horse back to the house. When Lucy pleads with him to leave Willy at home, Jordan refuses to listen. Jordan fights with the Americans against the British and is killed in the fighting.

Lucy Freeman

Willy's mother and Jordan's wife Lucy instills in Lucy that freedom is an important aspect of their lives. Lucy has a house and a few possessions but prizes a cow given to her by their former owners above anything else because that cow belongs to Lucy alone. When the cow is killed, Lucy is very sad. When Willy and her father leave the house headed for the nearby fort, Lucy pleads with her husband but he refuses to give in. Lucy is taken captive by the British and works on a ship for the duration of the war. She is released as the British soldiers withdraw but is ill from the poor conditions she's endured and dies a short time after her release.

Jack Arabus

Willy's uncle by marriage, he's in the military fighting for the Americans. Jack is willing to fight in order to secure his freedom and he hopes that he can earn enough money to buy the freedom of his wife, Betsy, and his son, Dan. Jack stands up for Willy when a white man is about to use a whip on her though it means he is soon in jail for assault.

Betsy Arabus

Lucy's sister, Betsy Arabus is the only family member Willy can turn to after losing her parents on the day of the British invasion. Betsy is still a slave though her husband, Jack, is free and is working to save enough money to buy Betsy's freedom. Betsy realizes the value of freedom and urges Willy to stay out of sight for fear she'll be forced back into slavery.

Black Sam Fraunces

A tavern owner in New York, Sam is a kind-hearted man who has been successful throughout the war by serving British though it seems he is in favor of the Americans winning the war. Sam takes Willy in, providing her meals and a place to stay as well as paying her a little for her work. He understands her desire to find her mother and on the day the prisoners from the British ships are unloaded, Sam sends Willy to the dock to search for Lucy.



Captain Ivers

The man who owns Betsy and Dan, he set Jack free to fight in the war but tries to revoke the freedom as the war comes to a close. When he discovers that Willy doesn't have the papers declaring that she's free, he begins to pay close attention to her, obviously considering a way to return her to slavery as his own property. Captain Ivers eventually winds up in court where a judge rules that he can't keep Jack in slavery and Willy gets new papers of freedom.

Mr. Goodrich

A lawyer, he meets Willy when she asks that he deliver a letter to her Aunt Betsy. Mr. Goodrich believes in fair play and when he discovers that Captain Ivers is trying to return Willy and Jack to slavery, he intervenes. He takes Captain Ivers to court and successfully puts a stop to the plan.

Dan Arabus

Son of Jack and Betsy, he's Willy's cousin. Dan, unlike Willy, is a slave and is the property of Captain Ivers. Dan stands watch the night Willy's mother dies. It's Dan who brings the news that Jack has been captured.



Objects/Places

Groton

The town in Connecticut near Willy's home.

The Third New Jersey Volunteers

The regiment to which the two men who kill the cow belong.

The Salt Marsh

Where the cow is kept until the soldiers kill her.

Stratford

Where Aunt Betsy and Uncle Jack live.

Baker's Cove

Where Willy's father moored the boat after spotting the British in the bay.

Canvas Town

The section of New York City where people live in tents made of sailcloth stretched between chimneys and the walls of burned out buildings.

Richmond Hill

Where Mr. Goodrich is staying when he first meets Willy.

Yale College

The school located near the courthouse where Jack is being tried.

The Courthouse

Where Willy faces Captain Ivers and receives papers declaring that she's free.

The Queen's Head

The name of the tavern where Willy works and lives.



Themes

A Desire for Freedom

Willy has known freedom but she has also known slavery. She admits that she's upset at the idea of performing tasks for others when it's a form of slavery. She isn't happy with the chores her mother assigns. For example, she doesn't like milking the cow and says that she doesn't like having to scrub the floors in their cabin. But when she's forced to scrub in the home of Mrs. Ivers, she's angry. She compares the two tasks, saying that scrubbing a floor in your own cabin hardly seems like work at all compared to scrubbing a floor for someone else just because you're ordered to do so. It's the desire for freedom that makes Willy decide that she has to take an incredible chance after being taken captive by the raiders. She knows that she'll be dealt with harshly if she tries to run away and is caught, but runs the risk anyway. When her Uncle Jack is jailed for having hit Captain Ivers, Willy's first impulse is to run away for fear that she'll wind up back in slavery. But she eventually accepts the responsibility for having caused the problem and goes to court in order to try to help make it right. Willy's desires with regard to freedom are not focused solely on slavery. She notes that everyone has limits on freedom but believes that black women have less freedom than anyone else. She cites the fact that a woman answers to a man and the blacks answer to whites as the foundation for this argument.

Coming of Age

Willy grows up very quickly in the hours after her father is killed and her mother disappears. Her initial reaction is to give in to her grief and she goes to bed where she cries herself to sleep. But when she wakes, she realizes that she has to get past that and take control of her life. She is only thirteen but undertakes a long, dangerous journey to find an aunt she's never met. She then runs away from a man who wants to make her a slave and makes her way to the huge city of New York, despite being a stranger with no money and no friends. Her drive through these early travels is to find her mother because she hopes that her mother can provide the comfort she desires. But when she is finally reunited with Lucy, Willy has only a few hours before her mother dies. Willy takes command of the situation, insisting that she call for the doctor though the master of the house has forbidden it. After her mother's death, Willy wants to run away again, seeing that as the only option available. But she comes to realize that she has to stand up for what's right and to face the situation, even though she's afraid. This emerging maturity comes at a high cost and it seems for a short time that she might be returned to slavery. As the story comes to a close, Willy makes the decision to leave the only family she has remaining to return to New York City.



National Pride

Willy spends some time examining her loyalties and trying to decide whether she personally supports the British or the American efforts. She evaluates the situation and equates it to the relationship between a parent and child. She says that America is like a child who is ready to be more independent and Britain is like the parent who is struggling to keep the child under control. Willy considers various aspects of the two nation's attitudes. She says that Americans will keep blacks as slaves regardless of the outcome of the war. The British are encouraging that blacks join the fighting for the British. They are trying to be very nice to the blacks in an effort to gain more support. The Americans are offering freedom to any blacks who will join the fighting on the American side against the British. Meanwhile, Willy has seen the British kill her father and take her mother away. But if the British are beaten and leave, the American's will continue the practice of slavery. When Willy goes through all these facts, she comes to the conclusion that there isn't a great deal of difference between the British and the Americans. However, she knows that she feels American, just the same. Her support is with the Americans and she is among those who cheer when the British leave New York City.



Style

Point of View

The story is written in first person from the limited perspective of Willy Freeman. Willy is telling the story and the reader knows only what Willy knows. This limitation is not a problem for the reader because Willy shares information. For example, early in the story, Willy reveals the names of her parents and says that they have a last name - Freeman. She says that for nine years of her life, she was known only as Willy, then suddenly had a last name. Willy then says that at thirteen, she's become accustomed to having a last name. Information such as this is presented as a matter of fact by Willy. While she doesn't directly address the reader, she does so indirectly, as if she's providing the details of her life specifically for the reader. Sections of the story that provide background, such as the information about her last name and her parents' background, are examples of this. The first person account means that the reader is limited to what Willy knows at any given time. For example, the reader doesn't know Lucy's fate until Willy learns that her mother was held on a prison ship until the British left America.

Setting

There are several distinct settings in the story and most are historically accurate. The authors note at the end of the book that the setting and some of the people are historically correct. This is obviously designed to make the story more believable. The first setting is Willy's family home and the area around the cabin. This includes Fort Griswold where Willy sees her father killed. The next setting is the home of Captain and Mrs. Ivers where Aunt Betsy and Uncle Jack live. That home is elaborate as would be expected of the home of a wealthy businessman such as Ivers. The next setting is the tavern owned by Sam Fraunces. That tavern property includes a barn where Willy sleeps during her years working there. Each of the specific settings is accurately described and is believable considering the time and historical setting. Another aspect of the settings is seen as Willy travels. She goes from one place to another, sometimes by boat and sometimes by foot. On a couple of occasions, she travels by wagon with Horace. These trips are described but the authors do not become overly bogged down by descriptions. The settings are all believable and acceptable, and each plays a role in the story. While the authors do describe them to some degree, the reader must use his imagination if he is to fully "see" the various settings.

Language and Meaning

The story is easy to read and the action moves along quickly, holding the interest of the reader throughout the book. From the first moments, Willy is caught up in the war that is nearing her home and threatening her family. The language is also easy to understand



with few difficult words, but the delivery could be difficult for some readers. For example, Willy is uneducated and her dialogue is written to exemplify that. Her grammar is often incorrect. For example, Willy says that the "troops was" making a lot of noise. To be correct, she should have said the "troops were," but Willy doesn't realize that her speech is incorrect. She frequently uses double negatives and words that don't really exist. While it's not improper, she refers to her mother as "ma" and her father "pa". These are all meant to give the reader an accurate picture of a young, uneducated black girl, but some readers may find the incorrect grammar distracting. The authors note that they included the word "nigger" throughout the book because they felt it would be true to the time, setting and situation. They make the point that it is meant only to be historically correct rather than offensive. Despite that, some readers may find it offensive.

Structure

The book is divided into fourteen chapters. Each is numbered and there are no chapter titles. The numbers appear at the top of the first page of each chapter. Chapters begin on the right-hand page, meaning there are several blank pages throughout the book. The lack of titles means the reader has no clue about upcoming events. The chapters vary greatly in length. Chapter nine is about fifteen pages in length and chapter eight is fourteen. By contrast, chapter seven is only six pages and chapter twelve is twenty-seven pages. The book is presented generally in chronological order with only a few exceptions. In the first chapter, Willy recounts the history of her family's freedom in order to explain her name. In chapter twelve, Willy learns that her mother was taken aboard a British ship and held there until the end of the war. While Willy had believed this to be the case, she wasn't certain until the story is recounted to her. The first chapter is basically an introduction. Chapters two and three cover the battle at the nearby fort. Chapters four through seven cover Willy's trip to her Aunt Betsy's and the decision to leave. Chapters eight through eleven cover Willy's continuing search for her mother and the news of Lucy's whereabouts. The final three chapters are an account of Willy's reunion with her family and her battle for freedom for herself and her Uncle Jack.

The story is divided between dialogue and narrative. The narrative is used generally to move the action of the story along. The dialogue is believable, considering the education of the speakers and the timeframe of the story, though the authors point out that there's no way to be certain how the people actually talked during that time.



Quotes

"It was kind of a funny feeling having a last name all of a sudden after nine years of not having one. But now I was thirteen and I'd gotten used to it."

Chap. 1, p. 3

"The British generals figure if they don't treat us too hard we'll come onto their side. Some black folks say there ain't much sense in fighting for the Americans when most likely they'll keep black folks slaves if they win."

Chap. 1, p. 9

"I wondered if those legs disappearing over the wall was the last I'd ever see of him."

Chap. 2, p. 21

"The shouting and the killing went on and on, and I crouched there on the platform with my eyes closed, crying and moaning and waiting to be killed."

Chap. 3, p. 31

"Finally I realized that I couldn't go on crying forever, I had to do something, so I wiped my face on my sleeve, got up off the bed, and ate the rest of the biscuits that were there."

Chap. 4, p. 49

"Suppose Aunt Betsy didn't love Ma and as much as Ma thought? Besides, she'd never met me and didn't know me from a goat."

Chap. 4, p. 44

"Mrs. Ivers went on staring at me as if I was lower than dirt and she was afraid she'd soil herself just by looking at me."

Chap. 5, p. 48

"Although when I came to think about it, when you was a woman you was half slave, anyway. You had to get married, otherwise you couldn't hardly support yourself, and after that your husband, he was the boss and you had to do what he said."

Chap. 6, p. 63

"Now, the first thing about a lie is, it's got to be ordinary."

Chap. 8, p. 81

"I was on my own now. It didn't matter how old I was - I was grown up now, and had to look out for myself."

Chap. 11, p. 130

"If I hadn't have known who it was, I would never have recognized her. It hurt awful for me to see her look like that."

Chap. 12, p. 140



"She's paid a heavy price for her freedom. Let's see that she doesn't lose it again."
Chap. 13, p. 167

"Slaves wasn't going to be no freer under the Americans than they was under the British, and women was still going to have to keep their place. I was black, and I was a woman, and I knew there was limits."
Chap. 14, p. 172



Topics for Discussion

Who is Willy Freeman? What are her strengths? Her weaknesses? Her dreams? Her fears? How does she deal with these?

Describe the situation that occurs that leaves Willy at home alone as the story begins? How does Willy react to the various aspects of the situation? Why are her reactions important?

The desire for freedom is an important theme of this story. Give at least three examples of this theme. Which character do you believe most strongly exhibits this desire? Support your answer.

Who is Lucy Freeman? Jordan Freeman? Jack Arabus? Betsy Arabus? Dan Arabus? Horace? Sam Fraunces? Captain Ivers? Mr. Goodrich? How is each involved with Willy?

Why does Lucy go to New York City? Why does Willy go? How does each get there? How does Willy wind up working at the tavern? Is this a positive move for her? Do you believe she returns there at the end of the story? Why?

How does Willy become mistaken for a boy? Why does she continue the charade? When does she tell Mr. Fraunces that she's really a girl? When does she tell Horace? What is the reaction of each?

Willy spends time searching for her mother in New York City. Describe the search? What is Willy's reaction when she finally accepts that she has to give up on finding Lucy?