

Whistle Me Home Short Guide

Whistle Me Home by Barbara Wersba

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Overview

Whistle Me Home is an intense, personal story charting the relationship between Noli Brown and TJ Baker. Their high school romance falls apart due to deception and betrayal, yet it ultimately serves as a catalyst for individual growth and change. The nature of love and friendship is explored in this often dark novel that asks how well we can ever know and accept anyone if we do not know and accept ourselves.



About the Author

Barbara Wersba became a writer after an earlier career on the stage. Born August 19, 1932, in Chicago, to Robert and Lucy Jo Wersba, she was an only child who escaped loneliness by writing stories and dreaming about working in the theatre. The family was living in San Mateo, California, when eleven-year-old Barbara Wersba joined a community theatre group. She began with backstage tasks, such as fetching coffee and running errands, but soon rose through the ranks and made her stage debut. After her parents divorced, Wersba and her mother moved to New York, where she immersed herself in Broadway theatre, and spent time visiting the city's museums, bookstores, and many arts venues. While still a teenager she studied acting at the Neighborhood Playhouse and dance with Martha Graham.

After graduating with a degree in drama from Bard College, Wersba moved back to New York and into the usual lifestyle of an aspiring actress: sharing a Greenwich village flat with other young entertainers, making the rounds to casting agents and auditions, and picking up outside work to pay the bills, including waitressing, typing, and department store clerking. She experienced some success on the stage, acting in summer stock and touring companies, but paralyzing stage fright was a constant companion. Wersba soon reached a turning point in both her acting career and her life. With a group of friends, she started an acting company; one of their first projects was a production entitled *When I Was a Child*, comprising short stories about childhood adapted for the stage. Although Wersba had been writing for years, she never considered her work publishable, but adapting these stories satisfied a creative need and paved the way for her career as an author. Although the production toured for three months and there were even plans to take the show to Broadway, in many ways the tour was disastrous. Wersba ended up seriously ill with hepatitis, and spent her recuperation at a friend's house in Martha's Vineyard. The friend suggested that she bide her time by writing a story. Through a series of events that Wersba credits to "beginner's luck," this first story, *The Boy Who Loved the Sea*, was published in 1961.

Over the next several years she wrote a number of brief, fanciful volumes for children. While working on a historical story, the contemporary voice of a teenage male began to echo in her mind, and she put the historical manuscript away while she captured the first-person narrative of a lonely fourteen-year-old boy named Albert Scully and his relationship with an eccentric elderly woman in *The Dream Watcher*. This groundbreaking novel changed the course of Wersba's writing career. Although she continued to write an occasional volume for young readers—usually stories of dark-toned whimsy—her focus has been on young adult novels about sensitive loners searching for self-awareness and love in an often uncaring world.

Wersba considers herself a loner and spends much of her time exploring nature and caring for stray animals. Yet she also spent seven years running a country store with a partner and has experienced the artistic collaboration of adapting *The Dream Watcher* for the stage (two early productions starred one of Wersba's childhood idols, Eva LeGallienne), and running her own school, *The Women's Writing Workshop*.

Throughout, she has continued to publish young adult novels to generally positive critical response. During a lengthy professional relationship with the legendary writer and editor Charlotte Zolotow, Wersba produced *Tunes for a Small Harmonica*, which was nominated for the National Book Award in 1977, and two trilogies.

Overweight, lovestruck Rita Formica is the protagonist of *Fat: A Love Story* and its sequels, *Beautiful Losers* and *Love Is the Crooked Thing*. A teenage dogwalker from New York City is featured in *Just Be Gorgeous*, *Wonderful Me*, and *The Farewell Kid*.

Whistle Me Home, written some years after Zolotow's retirement and published by a different company, is something of a departure for Wersba. Although it deals with similar themes as her earlier books, this contemporary novel abandons her usual first-person style and employs a distinct third-person perspective in relating the story of a troubled teenager and her first love. It is one of Wersba's most honored titles, having been selected by the American Library Association as a "Best Book for Young Adults" and a "Quick Pick for Reluctant Young Adult Readers." It was also named an "Editor's Choice" for 1997 by *Booklist* magazine.

Setting

Whistle Me Home begins—and ends—with chapters set on an early August afternoon, as Noli Brown sees her former boyfriend, TJ Baker, walking down the street in Sag Harbor, New York. The time is specifically noted; it has been five months and two days since their relationship ended. The fact that Noli is aware of the exact time that has passed, right down to the day, shows the importance of the event and lets the reader know how it continues to haunt Noli. The book then flashes back to the previous September, when Noli first met TJ at Peterson High School. Considering that the story is mostly set during the school year, Peterson High seems to play a fairly small role in the lives of these characters.

This is generally true of most of Wersba's books; the school milieu does not seem to hold much interest for the author, and a number of her young adult books concern characters who are just past high school age. Even when characters attend school, they are usually more interested in life beyond the classroom doors. This is true for Noli and TJ.

In this novel, the world outside the classroom is Sag Harbor, New York, which is described in well-chosen detail. This small town, located on the east end of Long Island, is part of the Hamptons, an upscale summer retreat for wealthy New Yorkers. Yet Sag Harbor itself is "not fashionable or chic enough for the summer people." Although the town is crowded with summer visitors each year, they do not belong to the classy set that frequent the rest of the Hamptons.

In many ways, the lower social status of Sag Harbor mirrors Noli's low self-esteem. During the winter months, when the vacationers return home, the isolation and ennui of small town life reflect the isolation that Noli seems to prefer for herself.

Noli's and TJ's homes represent the lifestyles and personalities of their parents.

Noli's house, in a middle-class development named Baywoods "seems like a bad imitation of pictures in those magazines women are always subscribing to. House Beautiful. Architectural Digest." Her mother spends her time cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the house, with no outside career or interests. It is a lifestyle that Noli chafes against. In contrast, TJ's family lives in "a gorgeous old Victorian on upper Main Street" filled with books and antiques. TJ's parents, a writer and an artist, have created a comfortable, inviting home well-suited for their interesting lives. However, in this novel people are not always what they seem—and neither are their homes. Despite the antiseptic, cold appearance of Noli's parents' homes, the reader gradually comes to see that her parents do care for her. And while the Baker residence may seem warm and cozy, TJ's parents are anything but comfortable with their son's sexual identity. In fact, one of the reasons they moved from New York to Sag Harbor was to remove TJ from the influence of the big city.



Though three hours away from Long Island by bus, New York City is another important place in the novel. It represents TJ's past—and his past problems—and it is also a source of nightmares for Noli. In a recurrent dream, Noli finds herself alone on the busy streets of Manhattan, without her wallet or keys, and without any memory of her home phone number. She begs passersby for assistance, but no one will help her find her way back home. Noli's dream gives the reader a sense of foreboding about the city, so it is not surprising that a later scene in the novel, in which the two lead characters visit New York on New Year's Day, builds on that sense of inevitable danger. The fun of seeing the Christmas tree and ice skaters at Rockefeller Center and visiting a movie revival house in Greenwich Village soon turns into an uncomfortable situation and a quiet return home from the city.

Although *Whistle Me Home* has a contemporary setting, the story of Noli and TJ seems to have a universal quality. Small town life is well-depicted, with specific details setting the stage: the 7-Eleven, the post office, a copy shop, a cemetery, the local hotel. The characters go to an R. E. M. concert and rent videos. Yet they have interests which range beyond typical teenage concerns. TJ quotes nineteenth-century poet Gerard Manley Hopkins; both he and Noli like old books and movies. When they visit a hotel restaurant, a pianist plays old songs like "My Funny Valentine." Wersba seems to be striving to take the story beyond the everyday and show that its themes rise above any specific time or place. Noli feels that TJ "has come into her life like one of those comets she sometimes sees—streaking fire across the sky." Although the metaphor is effective on a grander, romantic scale, in reality the few visible comets in Noli's lifetime have been far less magnificent. When TJ tells Noli that Manley's poems are "universal" and "cosmic," the reader will ponder whether the emotional terrain that Noli and TJ cross in this novel also has universal qualities.



Social Sensitivity

Whistle Me Home touches on many "hot button" issues of the day. Most important to the plot is the issue of sexual orientation.

The novel offers no judgment or condemnation of this lifestyle, except in terms of Noli's highly personal response to TJ's revelation. Her angry response—hurling sexual epithets—is probably best seen as a reaction to his betrayal and her own feelings of loss, rather than her opinion on the topic of homosexuality in general. It is interesting to note that Wersba takes a fairly adult and hard-edged approach to TJ's sexuality.

Unlike other teenage books which depict young gays as inexperienced and questioning, the implication here is that TJ had an active, possibly promiscuous, past in New York City. This creates a wide schism between his background and Noli's sexual inexperience.

Another social issue of significance is Noli's alcoholism. At first downplayed, the problem becomes more pronounced after Noli and TJ break up. Noli comes to school drunk, is forced to take drug tests, and is sent to the school psychologist. Ultimately, she joins Alcoholics Anonymous and, mentored by a new friend named Melissa, is able to take control of her life. Perhaps Noli's biggest triumph in the novel is that she stops drinking and, following an A. A. program step, begins to make amends with her mother. There is honesty in the way Noli's recovery is depicted. It is not sugarcoated; at the end of the novel she is able to say, "I stopped drinking.... I did it and I'm proud of myself." Alcohol use is shown as a way for the characters to deal with hardships and, in some cases, to be what they are not. TJ is a nondrinker, but during the scene in which he and Noli plan to consummate their relationship, he asks for a drink. Noli's drinking deadens the pain of her daily life—and her drinking increases after her relationship with TJ ends.

Having Noli conquer her drinking problem indicates that she is learning how to accept her life.

Although other topical concerns are briefly introduced—including Noli's shoplifting and her past sexual abuse by an older boy—the story seems too focused and streamlined to support these additional issues. The abuse may be seen as a cause for Noli's choice of dressing in androgynous clothes and keeping an emotional distance between herself and others; it may also be one of the causes of her drinking. The shoplifting may be seen as a response—or cry for help—to the abuse as well. Yet the issues are only hinted at, and are not really addressed fully in the text.

Literary Qualities

Whistle Me Home employs an omniscient, present tense narrative voice, providing an edgy, yet casual tone to a novel that deals with intense emotions and issues. The incident in which Noli and TJ watch an elderly woman visit a grave on Christmas morning is described as "like a scene from a movie"—and this is a good description of the novel's narrative flow. The reader is not always privy to all the events in Noli's life; the style is more cinematic, with attention focused on brief moments in time—mostly those times that Noli and TJ interact—before quickly moving on to the next scene.

This approach goes hand-in-hand with another literary technique used throughout the novel: understatement. Early in the book the reader is told, "Noli had a little problem with alcohol" which downplays the severity of her condition. Other topics, including shoplifting, are mentioned but minimally addressed. It is left to the reader to realize that understatement frequently implies a more serious, even towering issue; readers must "fill in the blanks" to get the bigger picture. Together the cinematic style of the narrative and its frequent understatement seem the right choice for telling this story: there is much going on beneath the surface of both characters which is mirrored by the writing style.

Wersba uses both foreshadowing and flashbacks to tell her tale. Beginning and ending with a chapter set in early August, the intervening chapters are presented as an extended flashback. The opening scene effectively sets up the novel's conflict, explaining that Noli and TJ have been separated for five months and two days; the reader continues, knowing that these two will break up in the course of the story, but not knowing the circumstances. Other examples of foreshadowing in the novel include moments in which TJ's past is hinted at, but not revealed. The best example is the New Year's Day scene in New York City.

Noli and TJ's happy day trip into the city sours when TJ runs into an old acquaintance on the street who confronts the teenager about his past. The reader probably catches on sooner than Noli, adding to the book's tension in the ensuing chapters. Perhaps the most blatant example of foreshadowing occurs just before TJ reveals his secret to Noli. The first paragraph of the chapter begins with the sentence "In the weeks to come, Noli will look back on this evening with a combination of feelings—rage, grief, confusion, despair," indicating the denouement is close at hand and adding another layer of tension to the story.

Cultural motifs are used throughout the novel, not only as contemporary touchstones that help establish setting, but also as a way of revealing the characters' interests, emotions, and personalities. Chief among these is the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, which TJ quotes several times.

The poetry reflects TJ's internal landscape, and also showcases the divide between him and Noli; her reaction to the poetry is respectful and even emotional—but she does not really understand the meaning of the poems. The classic movies cited in the text often

reflect TJ's emotional dilemmas: Notorious, Beat the Devil, The Garden of Allah, and The Blue Angel, while songs such as "My Funny Valentine" are symbolic of the mismatched romance between the two teenagers.

Symbolism plays a role in the book as well, including such images as the cemetery and its attendant meanings, Noli's antiseptic home, and the physical journey to Florida that Alice makes (while Noli and TJ make equally momentous emotional journeys.) Foremost may be the use of "home" as a symbol for safety (though, to Noli's shock, when she looks it up in a dictionary she discovers the word can also mean "one's abode after death.") Wersba uses a dream motif featuring Noli lost in New York and trying to find her way home. Noli believes she has found her spiritual home in TJ, but this is not permanent. At the end of the book, her dream comes to a different conclusion. Her nightmare-feelings of loss and frustration are replaced by "a feeling of joy" as she finds herself on a bus traveling home "cleaving the wind like the geese do when they fly in formation." The last line of the book, "She—Noli Brown—is coming home" seems to symbolize that Noli has achieved the kind of self-awareness she will need to accept herself and others. She is becoming comfortable with who Noli Brown is.

Themes and Characters

Noli (short for Noelle; she was born on Christmas) Brown and TJ (Thomas Jerome) Baker are both high school juniors. Their unlikely romance furnishes the plot of this brief novel and sets into place most of its themes: love in many of its permutations (romance, familial love, the love between friends, and unrequited longing); deception, including self-deception; loneliness and isolation; loss and death; and self-acceptance and growth.

Although the story is related from the omniscient perspective, Noli is the main protagonist whose thoughts and opinions are shared directly with the reader. Her appearance is described as "pure tomboy," as she wears her hair short and prefers jeans and baseball caps instead of the dresses her mother favors. TJ Baker refers to Noli as a "gamin" or "beautiful tomboy." Conversely, TJ is described as "not handsome, but beautiful" and his appearance is related in terms which are traditionally feminine. He is said to resemble an angel with "rich brown curls" and a "single earring."

Noli and TJ may feel like misfits, but the reader is shown that these well-drawn characters have intellectual interests that make them special and distinct individuals. Both enjoy poetry, classic cinema, and old books.

What may initially seem like a match between soul mates is ultimately doomed by deception. Wersba skillfully weaves the theme of deception throughout the book.

Noli was deceived by her mother, who took Noli's dog to the veterinarian and had it put to sleep while Noli was at school. TJ deceives Noli when he denies knowing a "drag queen" on the streets of New York. Noli deceives nearly everyone—including herself—about her drinking problem. The core deception in the novel, of course, is TJ's homosexuality. Deceiving Noli, and possibly himself as well, TJ continues to date Noli. The reader may figure out TJ's deception long before Noli does. It is evident in his choice of an androgynous girlfriend, his secretive past, and the gulf between his words and actions—telling Noli he loves her, but not physically expressing it.

Because their feelings for each other are not equivalent, the characters experience different aspects of love—and represent variations on the novel's theme of love.

Noli's passionate love turns to unrequited love when she realizes TJ is not physically attracted to her. The theme of love between friends is explored through TJ's feelings for Noli, which remain constant—even after the two break up. Another kind of love is portrayed in the relationship between Noli and her mother. At the beginning of the story, Noli sees Sally Brown as an enemy, but by the end of the book she is able to write a letter to her mother saying, "I do love you." When first introduced, the reader sees Sally through her daughter's eyes: hypercritical, domineering, and disapproving.

Though the character is only lightly sketched, she is ultimately seen as a caring parent who may have trouble expressing her feelings.



One of the central themes of the novel is isolation and loneliness. Even minor characters seem alone and unhappy. A high school English teacher is "shy" and "washedout"; Noli's parents are estranged and uncommunicative; an "anonymous old lady" comes to a cemetery on Christmas to leave flowers for her husband. Certainly TJ and Noli exemplify this theme as well. Though a star athlete and student, TJ is isolated because he chooses to keep his sexual orientation a secret; he is also removed from his original home in New York City. Noli, who does not fit the persona of typical feminine girl, also feels isolated, and though she may give the appearance of confidence to others, inside she is a "frightened person" and is "swimming with fear."

Loss and death may be surprising themes to discover in a novel in which no one dies.

But a relationship does die in these pages, and intimations of death haunt the prose.

Both Noli and TJ have lost someone close before the book begins. For Noli it is Alice, her dog. TJ replaces the dog as a Christmas present, and Noli names her Alice the Second. TJ grieves for his grandmother who "had complete acceptance of people just as they were" (suggesting that she, unlike his parents, would not have been bothered by his homosexuality.) One of the places that TJ and Noli like to hang out is the town cemetery, and when they first enter the grounds Noli feels a cool breeze blowing in from the harbor. "Autumn in Sag Harbor passes quickly, she thinks. Then the gray days begin." The romance between the two teenagers follows this gray season, beginning with the first cold breezes of September and falling apart on a February night.

The rebirth that might be symbolized by spring is instead symbolized by another loss, as Alice the Second runs away on Easter.

Spring and summer are growing times, and both Noli and TJ experience maturation in the final chapters of the book. *Whistle Me Home* is too realistic and hard-edged to come to a completely happy ending, though at least one happy event occurs—Alice the Second returns home after traveling all the way to Florida with a pair of vacationers. Both Noli and TJ have taken journeys as well; she has begun attending Alcoholics Anonymous, and he has found another partner named Walker. In ways that they themselves may not yet realize, their relationship has helped them accept their own personal issues and take charge of their own lives. The realistic conclusion, in which TJ pleads for Noli's friendship and she sadly rebuffs him—telling him that it is possible for the future "but not now"—shows that she has matured, but will continue to grow as a human being even after the last page of the book is read.



Topics for Discussion

1. This novel is unusual among Wersba's young adult works in that it utilizes the omniscient perspective. Why do you think Wersba made the decision to use that perspective? Would the book have been substantially different if the story had been related in the first person by Noli? What if it were narrated by TJ?
2. Barbara Wersba has stated that book titles are important to her—often selected before she even knows the story she is about to tell. What do the words "whistle me home" mean in the context of the story? Is it a good title?
3. No one dies during the course of the story, yet the novel includes numerous references to death. Can you cite examples and explain why they were used?
4. Is Noli a sympathetic character? Is TJ? Is it important to a novel to feature sympathetic characters?
5. Noli and TJ each hide aspects of their personality from the other. List examples of the secrets that each character holds and discuss the reasons they maybe open about some things and deceptive about others.
6. How important is the letter that Noli writes to her mother? Will she ever send it to her mother, and what effect will it have if she does?
7. Dreams are usually open to a wide range of interpretation. How do you interpret Noli's recurring nightmare?
8. There are two dogs named Alice in the novel. Do they serve different purposes within the context of the story? In what ways are they the same or different?
9. Noli looks up the word "home" in an unabridged dictionary and is surprised by one of the definitions. Check the same word in an unabridged dictionary and discuss how many of the other definitions also apply to this story.
10. TJ encourages Noli to dress in a style similar to his own. Later Walker adopts this style. What could be TJ's motivation in having a partner who looks to be his twin? What are the advantages and disadvantages to this type of relationship?
11. The first chapter begins in the present and the last chapter returns to that time and place; everything in between is an extended flashback. Is this an effective way to tell the story? How would the book read if the first and last chapters were eliminated?
13. At the end of the book, Noli tells TJ: "There are different kinds of love." How many kinds of love are represented in this book and how are they different? Is TJ's response that "Love is love" accurate?



14. At the conclusion of the book Noli also ponders a future in which she can be friends with TJ—writing letters, going out for coffee, seeing a movie. Is this a realistic hope? Imagine a meeting between the two a year from now, five years from now, and ten years from now.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Noli's drinking causes her to join Alcoholics Anonymous. What are the early signs of problem drinking and what forms of assistance are available for young alcoholics?
2. TJ recites the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins on several occasions. Who is Hopkins and what are some of his works? What other poets and poems would TJ and Noli like?
3. The book includes letters written by both TJ and Noli. Explore how personal letter writing has changed over the years—especially since the advent of e-mail.
4. Both the Hamptons and New York City play roles in this book. How does life differ between the two areas? Compare population, economy, geography.
5. Noli and TJ enjoy old movies; most of those cited in the novel are available on home video. What does watching these movies reveal about the personalities of these two teenagers? Are there significant differences between classic films of the past and today's movies?
6. In this novel Wersba uses understatement to reveal some details of her characters' lives; a few of her other novels, such as *The Best Place to Live Is the Ceiling*, are much more broad in tone.

Which is more effective? What motivates an author to change styles in writing different books?

7. When TJ reveals his secret to Noli, she responds with a string of epithets.

Would her actions be considered hate speech? Why or why not? What are the rules governing hate speech in your locality?



For Further Reference

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1026. A brief critical survey of Wersba's books, focusing on her young adult titles.

Janeczko, Paul. "An Interview with Barbara Wersba." *English Journal* (November 1976): 20-21. Provides Wersba's perspective on life and her "tendency to see sadness in the world," as well as her feelings about the young adult genre of literature.

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New York: Twayne, 1998. The only book-length study of Wersba's work includes biographical information, a critical evaluation of her literary output and a chapter entitled "Seeking Solace" which focuses entirely on *Whistle Me Home*.

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Vandergrift, Kay E. "Barbara Wersba." In *American Writers for Children since 1960: Fiction*. Detroit: Gale, 1986, pp. 374-380. Scholarly examination of Wersba's body of work.

"Wersba, Barbara." In *Something About the Author, Volume 103*. Detroit: Gale, 1999, pp. 186-196. An essay with information on Wersba's life and career.

Related Titles

Wersba has written several other novels that explore similar themes as *Whistle Me Home*. Rita Formica, another Sag Harbor outsider, suffers a case of unrequited love in *Fat: A Love Story*. Two later books about Rita, *Love Is the Crooked Thing* and *Beautiful Losers* follow her through a later, more successful relationship. Like Noli Brown, Heidi Rosenbloom in *Just Be Gorgeous* gains self-awareness through her relationship with a gay male friend.

There are a number of books that address the issue of a heterosexual teenager falling in love with someone of a different orientation. In one of her few contemporary stories, historical novelist Ann Rinaldi tells of sixteen-year-old Brie's crush on a gay boy in *The Good Side of My Heart*. John finds himself infatuated with Marisol, a self-identified lesbian in Ellen Wittlinger's *Hard Love*, an Honor Book for the Printz Award, first presented in 2000. Sandra Scoppettone's *Trying Hard to Hear You* is a classic of the genre; it features an extraordinarily likable narrator who describes her feelings when she discovers the boy she likes is gay—and how this revelation impacts their circle of friends. Scoppettone also wrote *The Late Great Me*, the story of a teenage alcoholic who, like Noli, seeks help for her problem drinking. M. E. Kerr has written an intriguing story of the sometimes shifting borders of sexual orientation in "Hello," *I Lied*; this book has the added interest of also being set in the Hamptons.



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