

Winds of Blame Short Guide

Winds of Blame by Jane Gilmore Rushing

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Overview

Harvey Doane physically and mentally abuses his wife and children. The first half of *Winds of Blame* deals with the family's endurance of his cruelty and their methods of coping. When Doane is murdered, the entire community covers up the murder of this man who "needed killing." Although their life is free of Harvey Doane's abuse after his death, the family must cope with the manner of his death and the fear that a newspaper reporter from a nearby town will discover the truth.

Two romances are complicated by the murder and its aftermath. Isabel Doane must choose between her love of the newspaper reporter and betrayal of her family if she helps the outsider find out how her father died. The engagement of Ray Doane and Isabel's best friend, Joanna, is at risk because of Isabel's fear that Ray might become like his father and because of what it will be like to be a member of his much-gossiped-about family.

This book is a sensitive study of the effects of abuse and coping mechanisms used by members of dysfunctional families. It also invites the reader to examine the philosophical question of the meaning of truth.

About the Author

Jane Gilmore Rushing was born November 15, 1925 in Pyron, Texas and raised in rural west Texas, the setting for most of her books. This intimate knowledge of life in a small, rural community is evident as she weaves the social structure, customs, mores, distrust of outsiders, and closeness of a small town into her books. Rushing incorporates stories told by older members of her family and community into her fiction. In addition to being an author, Jane Rushing has been a journalist and a teacher.

Setting

Winds of Blame is set in a small rural community in west Texas in 1916.

Greenfields is an imaginary place and could be any community of farms connected by a small country store and a schoolhouse. There are accurate descriptions of lives of Texas farmers at that time, a rabbit drive, the transition from horses to automobiles, a oneroom school that doubles as a nondenominational church on Sundays.

There are descriptions of traveling ministers, quilting bees and hope chests. The only teacher boards in the home of someone in the community.

The portrayal of women as traditional homemakers is consistent with the setting of the book. Although both female main characters have aspirations of going to college to become teachers, one of their mothers informs her daughter that "girls don't leave home except to get married." That women ought to have the right to vote is called a "queer notion."



Social Sensitivity

Violence in the form of physical and sexual abuse and murder is alluded to, but not graphically described. The effect of abuse on families is a major theme of the book. Each member of the Doane family suffers horrible abuse from Harvey Doane, but each deals with it in a different way. Mrs. Doane withdraws into herself, rather than face reality. Sophie is passive. Isabel tries to avoid trouble and uses her imagination as a method of escape. Ray stands up to his father, and Bernie chooses a more desperate method. Discussion of the book could lead to discussion of how victims of abuse typically react and where they can go or what they can do to get relief.

Rather than deny that abuse and adultery exist, Rushing has chosen to examine it's impact on a family. She has done so in a tasteful, yet powerful manner. Adultery in its cruelest form is flaunted by Harvey Doane when he brings his mistress to live in the old dug-out on the family farm and expects his wife and children to accept her at meals in their house. The book does not focus on the sexual impropriety, but on the shame felt by the children and wife as a result of Harvey's selfish insensitivity. On the other hand, the young lovers in the book do no more than hold hands and steal an occasional kiss, as might be expected in a closely chaperoned, strict, small community in 1916.



Literary Qualities

A disclaimer at the beginning of the book states that the story is pure fiction; however, the prologue and epilogue are convincingly real. In them Rushing refers to discussions with her grandmother (Joanna) and to a diary and letters of Isabel's. Rushing uses the diary as a device to reveal Isabel's thoughts and feelings. Asides to the reader in several places in the book add to the realism. These devices make the story believable and the reader begins to wonder if those were really Jane Rushing's relatives with the names and places changed to protect their identities.

Rushing is capable of using words to paint vivid pictures of the landscape of her native Texas. She describes a hillside of wild flowers as "a long slope thickly spread with yellow butter."

Mesquite is described as gnarled "with its spreading, twisting black branches and on sunshiny morning in May its drooping lace leaves of soft gold." In addition, some west Texas dialect, usually "translated" for the reader, and figures of speech add authenticity to the time and place of the novel.

Rushing makes references, both direct and indirect, to important literary works. Without mentioning Plato, she in *Winds of Blame* refers to his cave analogy when Isabel wonders if she has come to the point of "preferring shadow to reality." There are several references to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, which anticipates her consequences of infidelity, a disregard of socially acceptable behavior, and commentary on family bonding.



Themes and Characters

Winds of Blame is told from the perspective of eighteen-year-old Isabel Doane, the oldest daughter of Harvey Doane. Acts of mental and physical abuse by Isabel's father toward her mother and her siblings are seen through her eyes, and the family's reactions to these are rationalized from her point of view. Isabel is a strong character and her independence sometimes creates problems for her. She is frequently caught between her wishes and strict community codes or family obligations. She risks her father's wrath to attend the wedding of her mentor and teacher, but obediently returns home when he catches her. She risks community criticism by riding unchaperoned in a car with a man, but gives in to pressure from family and friends to break off the relationship. She wants to attend college, but feels that her mother and younger siblings need her at home. She tends to make decisions that benefit others rather than herself; however, these decisions are made after careful consideration of the consequences.

Joanna Waters, seventeen, is the other fully-developed character in the book. She and Isabel have been close friends all their lives. Joanna becomes engaged to Ray Doane, Isabel's brother.

Joanna's father is the storekeeper and postmaster of Greenfields and he and his wife are influential in this small community. Joanna is a strong-willed character who knows what she wants and usually gets it. Joanna, like her mother, is concerned about appearances. She wonders if she can hold up her head in the community where everyone knows the awful things happening in Ray's family. Her solution to this dilemma is that she and Ray will leave Greenfields.

Twenty-year-old Ray, the oldest of the Doane children, assumes responsibility for protecting the family from his father's abuse and for providing relief from that abuse. After his father's death he becomes head of the household and runs the family farm. Although a key figure in the book, his thoughts and feelings are not revealed to the same extent as are those of Isabel and Joanna. Rushing does not fully develop Ray as a character, but leaves him somewhat mysterious. This invites the reader to picture himself or herself in the role of responsibility for younger brothers and sisters and a mother who is mentally ill. The reader must evaluate the circumstances and consequences of Ray's actions, and must almost become Ray in order to understand the book.

Harvey and Lizzie Doane, the parents, are one-dimensional characters.

Harvey is cruel and hateful, and Lizzie's method of coping with her husband's abuse is to lose touch with reality. Except for a few rare moments of lucidity, Lizzie withdraws and is unable to perform even simple chores, forcing her children to take care of her.

The other Doane children, including Bernie who was born deformed and crippled because of Harvey Doane's cruelty, are one-dimensional characters.



An examination of the philosophical question of what is truth dominates the last half of the book. In the community of Greenfields truth is determined by the way things look. If a young lady is alone with a young man, they must be doing something they should not be doing. If Harvey Doane goes to church on Sunday, he must be a good man.

Denying the truth and concealing the truth are also a part of this theme. The community all knows of Harvey Doane's treatment of his family, but do nothing about it and in a sense deny it, until his adultery becomes an embarrassment to the community. Then, their solution is to tell Doane and his mistress that they are no longer welcome in church; this solution does nothing to help the family, but it looks better if Alma and Harvey are not seen together since appearances are equated to truth.

Isabel is the only person strong enough to stand before the community and tell the truth about her father's death—a truth they all know and discuss, but through their own code of morals have chosen to replace with a lie. In their minds the murder was justified; death was the only way to stop Harvey Doane's cruel actions.

The community of Greenfields seems to have its own unwritten moral code, which can bend to fit circumstances.

The law can be broken to protect someone, even to protect a murderer. Isabel, more than other characters, struggles with this ambiguity.



Topics for Discussion

1. Isabel uses her imagination to escape from the harsh realities of her life.

To protect herself against dreams that could never come true, she daydreams about a man she is sure she will never meet again. Was this a healthy way to cope with her problems? Why did she choose this fantasy?

2. Isabel and Ray agree that it is best not to discuss with their mother the way their father treats the family, and they guide their brothers and sisters into that same policy. Why did they do this and was it foolish to go on pretending that nothing was wrong?

3. Isabel told her mother that she felt bruised when her father verbally assaulted her and tore the sash from her dress and stomped it in the dirt. Her mother replied that she understood, that "there's all kinds of bruises." Discuss the potential longlasting effects of physical abuse that causes real bruises and mental abuse such as cruel acts or verbal thrashings that cause no physical harm.

4. Speculate on what Isabel's life might have been like had she actually eloped with Norman Nix.

5. Was it right for Mr. Waters to intercept letters Isabel wrote or should have received? Defend your answer.

6. Why does Isabel feel a sense of freedom when she visits the rigidly structured Waters home?

7. Why was the rabbit drive held?

Would there have been a better way to reduce the rabbit population?

8. Isabel refers several times to a quotation from Russian author Tolstoy, "All happy families are alike but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Do you agree with this statement?

9. Discuss the various ways that each of the Doanes dealt with the abuse of Harvey Doane. Speculate on why each reacted in that way and evaluate the effectiveness of each approach.

10. The first reaction of the Doanes to Harvey's death was relief from the terror of his treatment of them. What were the costs of that freedom? Who paid the biggest price for freedom?

11. Under what circumstances can taking the life of a human being be justified?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The title of the book comes from a line in Shakespeare's Hamlet. "And for his death no wind of blame shall breathe, but even his mother shall uncharge the practice and call it accident." Compare the circumstances in Shakespeare's play with those in Winds of Blame.
2. Find out what resources are available in your community for victims of abuse.
3. Interview a counselor who works with victims of child abuse. Prior to the interview, determine what you would like to find out and prepare a list of questions to ask.
4. Isabel uses her diary as a way to make sense of her life and to examine important issues related to decisions she must make. Compare your own diary with Isabel's.
5. Try solving a difficult problem through writing. Describe each circumstance or fact that is related to the problem. List possible solutions and the consequences that might result.

Determine the best course of action for solving the problem.

6. Stage a mock trial to try Ray for the murder of his father. Select jurors who have not read the book. Persons who have read the book should play the parts of Greenfields community residents and members of the Doane family who will be called as witnesses.

For Further Reference

"Rushing, Jane Gilmore." In *Contemporary Authors*. Edited by Clare D. Kinsman. Detroit: Gale Research, 1975: 471. Brief listing of publications and career highlights.

Related Titles

Four of Rushing's other books are set in west Texas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: *Against the Moon*, *Walnut Grove*, *Tamzen*, and *Mary Dove*. *Tamzen*, a romantic novel, takes place in the 1890s. The historical basis for the novel is the dispute over Block 97 among homesteading farmers who built lean-tos and dug-outs on this land, cattle ranchers who wanted grazing land, and the railroad. This dispute is mentioned in *Winds of Blame* which is set in the same area some twenty years later. *Against the Moon* and *Walnut Grove* also have an historical basis and come from stories told about the early residents of Rushing's home. *Mary Dove*, a Love Story is about a young girl who must learn to survive alone on the prairie after her mother dies and her father fails to return from hunting wolves that were threatening their sheep. When a stranger arrives, Mary shoots him, but instantly regrets it and nurses him back to health. These books were written for adults, but are told from the perspective of youthful main characters whose problems, joys, and sorrows are those of older adolescents.



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