

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Good Night, Mr. Tom

by

Michelle Magorian

Book Information

Michelle Magorian, Good Night, Mr. Tom
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Book Level: 4.8
Interest Level: MG

A young boy is sent to the English countryside during World War II to avoid the horrors of war and a disturbed mother.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books

Topics: Community Life, Child Abuse;
Countries/Regions, England; Places,
Countryside/Rural; READNOW -
Renaissance Learning, RLI - High School
(Theme: Tough Decisions); Recommended
Reading, California Recommended Lit.,
English, 6-8; Wars, World War II

Main Characters

Dr. and Mrs. Little the couple who take in Zach
Mrs. Hartridge one of the schoolteachers, who is
expecting a child, and whose husband is in the war
Tom Oakley the church caretaker and widower
who takes William into his home
William Beech the main character; an abused boy
who is evacuated from London to the country in
anticipation of England declaring war on Germany
Zacharias (Zach) Wrench another evacuee from
London, whose parents are theater people; an
outgoing, gregarious boy who becomes William's
best friend

Vocabulary

estuary the tidal mouth of a river
hermitage the place someone inhabits when he or
she withdraws from society to live in solitude
malice spite
pannier a large wicker basket
piebald spotted or patched

recluse one who lives alone and avoids contact
with others

Synopsis

William Beech is an abused eight-year-old boy who is sent by his mother to the countryside because England is about to enter into a war with Nazi Germany. Thousands of children are evacuated from London because of possible bombing. The children are taken in by country folks who see it as a duty to their country. William is taken in by a recluse named Tom Oakley. He is the church and cemetery caretaker. His young wife and son had died forty years earlier, and he had lived alone since that time. William is afraid of everything, since his mother used to beat him and tell him he was bad. He cannot read or write, run or play.

Mr. Tom, as William calls Mr. Oakley, is gentle with the boy without coddling him. He lets him learn things for himself, while encouraging him with his personal philosophy: "Everythin' 'as its own time." The boy thrives in the small village. He makes friends for the first time in his life and works hard at school to catch up to the children his own age. Mr. Tom works with the boy every night and discovers the boy has a real talent for drawing. After seven months, William's mother sends a letter asking that he be sent home because she is ill.

William's mother is not happy with the changes in her son, and soon is beating him again. She locks him in a small space under the stairs. Mr. Tom becomes worried when he does not hear from the boy, so he travels to London to check on him. He discovers the boy semi-conscious, malnourished, and imprisoned under the stairs. The boy is holding a dead infant girl. William is taken to the hospital, but since Mr. Tom is not a relative, plans are made to put William in a children's home. The nurses at the hospital keep William heavily sedated because he screams when he wakes up. Mr. Tom believes that all the boy needs is to return with him to the country, so he takes the boy from the hospital and back to his home.

William makes a slow recovery from the horrors that

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happened to him in London. He blames himself for his infant sister's death, but with the help of his friends and Mr. Tom, he returns to his life in the country. Months later, the authorities come to tell William that his mother is dead. Mr. Tom makes arrangements to adopt William. Both are very happy.

During the summer, Mr. Tom, William, and Zach spend two weeks at the seaside. In that time the bombing in London escalates. Zach is worried about his parents. After they return to school, Zach learns that his father has been injured in the bombing, and he travels to London for a visit. Unfortunately, Zach is killed in a bombing raid. William is devastated by the loss of his best friend. It takes several months for him to come to terms with the loss.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

What were some positive changes in Mr. Tom after William came to live with him?

He was happier. He had been a recluse since the deaths of his wife and son. He avoided contact with anyone or anything that would remind him of his wife. By reaching out to the boy, and being both a friend and parent to him, he overcame his grief. He became active in the community and reached out to his neighbors.

Literary Analysis

Why would Willie's mother be the antagonist in this story even though the story is primarily about Willie living with Mr. Tom?

William spent most of the story recovering from the damage she did to him both physically and emotionally. Mr. Tom was the first person to treat William with kindness. Zach is the first friend in William's nine-year-old life. William had been made to believe he was bad and not worth anything. Consequently, his mother causes most of the conflicts in the story.

Inferential Comprehension

What was the significance of William vehemently objecting to being called "Willie" by the fire warden?

While he was in the country, people called him either "Will" or "William" so he associated those names with good times in his life. William's mother called him "Willie," and she mistreated him. He was also taunted at school in London about his name. Therefore, the name "Willie" was part of a past that William wanted to escape and forget. He felt "Willie" was another person who was not worthy of love.

Constructing Meaning

Why were so many children evacuated to the countryside just before the war began, and then brought home shortly after war was declared?

Many parents panicked at the thought of war. There had been much bombing during World War I, and parents took the opportunity to save their children. At the start of the war, however, there were no bombing raids on London, so the parents thought they could safely bring their children home. Unfortunately, the bombing of London did finally commence, and it was devastating. More children were evacuated and re-evacuated when the bombing began in earnest.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The story is set in a small village in England just prior to and during World

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War II. Have the students research the bombing of London during both world wars to see the influence the first war had on the precautions taken during the second. One precaution was evacuating the children from London. Other precautions were blackout curtains and bomb shelters. There are many stories of the heroics of the people in England during these dark times.

Understanding Literary Features This is a complex story that includes many themes. Ask the students to identify the themes. Some possibilities include: everyone is worthy of love, a person isn't lost in death if someone remembers him or her, a person can be happy doing things for others.

Understanding the Author's Craft The author wrote the dialogue in the story phonetically with the accent of the country village of Little Weirwold. Have the students list words from the book and discuss their meaning. Some examples are: "ta" (thanks), "ent" (ain't), "cuppa" (cup of tea). Most of the British expressions can be defined by the context in which they are used.

Understanding Characterization The main character, William Beech, was abused by his mother. This is a sensitive subject that, unfortunately, is still an issue today. Have the students discuss other literature in which the main character was mistreated by family, but overcame it. Some examples are: Huck's treatment by his father in *Huckleberry Finn*, and Pip's treatment by his sister in *Great Expectations*.