

STUDY NOTES FOR
RUNAWAY WILL by Linda Fisher

Book Summary

On his sixteenth birthday, Will Shakespeare is shocked when his father strikes him in the face with his fist. He is even more shocked when his mother tells him he must leave home. His uncle has found a job for him in London—until his father calms down. Will leaves Stratford and, within hours, is miles from home but lost in the dark woods. He encounters a roving band of Gypsies whose queen, Volka, offers to take him in. Will goes along with them, but plans to escape because, at that time, congregating with Gypsies is punishable by death. After he sees the beautiful Melita however, Will forgets about leaving. The dangers he faces as a vagabond include ferocious bears, murderous people, and the real possibility he may never make it back to Stratford alive.

Author Information

Linda Fisher wrote her first novel when she was sixteen and failing algebra. She wanted to understand why her instructor seemed to be so unhappy. Giving the teacher a sad, doomed romance early in life supplied that answer. (The instructor may simply have been unhappy because Fisher was such a poor algebra student.) *Runaway Will* is Fisher's second novel about Will Shakespeare. The first, *A Will of Her Own*, follows fifteen-year-old Lady Lucy Culpeper, as she and William Shakespeare, the young wannabe-playwright, solve a murder mystery and foil a plot to assassinate Queen Elizabeth. Fisher lives with her family in Prattville, Alabama, and teaches high school English (where she is a happy teacher).

Some references to Gypsies in Shakespeare's Plays

As You Like It, Act V, scene 3, l. 16, a servant speaks of the need to keep time in music, as "like two gypsies on a horse"

Romeo and Juliet, II, 4, 44, Mercutio says of Cleopatra that she is "but a gipsy" compared to Romeo's Rosaline

Antony and Cleopatra, I, 1, 10, Philo, Antony's friend says at the very outset of the play that Antony's heart "is become the bellows and the fan to a gipsy's lust", and the next moment Cleopatra enters being fanned by servants;

Act IV, scene 12, l. 28, Antony says of Cleopatra (very like Will's thoughts about Melita at the end) that she "like a right gipsy, hath, at fast and loose, beguiled me to the very heart of loss".

Pericles, III, 2, 84, a character says of a woman who seems to be dead, that they may be able to revive her, as he had once heard that an Egyptian dead for nine hours was revived by the power of music.

Reading Enrichment Questions, Activities, and Suggested Answers

(These reading enrichment questions link to Bloom's Taxonomy, New Version.)

Remembering

1. At the outset of the story, Will is lost, alone, and hungry. Encountering the Gypsies seems to solve all three problems, but he is actually worse off than before. Why?

[Will recalls his father's words that any English citizen who associates with the Gypsies is guilty of a crime punishable by death. In addition, the man named Claud seems to have a mean streak, just like Will's father, so Will plans to escape as soon as possible.]

2. What was the daily life of the Gypsies like? How did the lives of ordinary English people, like the ones in Banbury, differ from the lives of the Gypsies? What did the English people gain from the Gypsies' visits?

[Because they had no country, Gypsies were forced to roam, living out of their wagons. Their life was arduous, just like that of the English people among whom they traveled, for in the late sixteenth century everyone (except the tiny minority of royalty and upper-class) had to work hard to feed and clothe and shelter themselves and their families. But unlike the English, Gypsies could not plant crops or own land. In addition, they worried constantly about being killed or imprisoned by authorities. Most of the English people were glad to see the Gypsies, because the nomads repaired their damaged household goods. The Gypsies also provided entertainment.]

3. What does Will offer to teach to the Gypsy children? Why does Volka compare Will to a cat?

[Will offers to teach English words to the children in exchange for the food and shelter the Gypsies provide for him. Volka says that she will learn from Will, because he is like the proverbial cat and has landed on his feet.]

4. When Will leaves the Gypsies to journey to London alone, Claud follows him. What does Claud tell Will about the *zhin*? How did Claud steal the *zhin* and frame Will?

[Claud tells Will that he found the valuable gold-covered *zhin* hidden in the seat of Volka's chair. It was easy for Claud to hide the *zhin* in Will's knapsack and then tell Volka that Will had stolen it. If Volka and the others had not followed Claud, his plan would have succeeded, and he would have slain Will and taken the *zhin* to London at once to sell.]

Understanding

5. Will learns the meaning of three Romany words: *devel*, *mahrime*, and *gadjikane*. Briefly define *devel*. Use the other two words to explain why Will is not allowed to touch the Gypsies' food.

[*Devel* is the Gypsy word for God. *Gadjikane* means non-Gypsy. *Mahrime* means unclean. Will, being a *gadjikane*, is also *mahrime* and would make food unclean if he touches it.]

6. Will tries to tell young Arben why words are so important. Describe how Will uses words to persuade Walther to continue translating the play to the children.

[Will believes that all the Gypsies need to know English so they will be treated fairly among the English. He flatters Walther by pointing out that Grigor is not learning English, and therefore the other boy's tribe will be easier for the English to trick. Also, Walther will show himself to be smarter than Grigor, and everyone will look up to him.]

Applying

7. Will's father struck him with his fist. How do you feel about corporal punishment within families? Is it ever appropriate to punish a child by hitting him with a fist? What about spanking? Why or why not?

[Answers will vary.]

8. When Will finds the sheets advertising performances of London plays, he thinks of another use for the clean back of the outdated sheets: to write letters home. He also wishes he could give the sheets to Beno for the boy to draw upon. What does it reveal about Will's character that he thinks about helping the Gypsy boy, even though his memories of the Gypsies are painful? Have you ever used an item in a way for which it was not intended and felt creative about your re-use? If so, describe the circumstance.

[Students may respond that Will's thought to give paper to Beno shows a generosity of spirit. Their answers to the other question will vary.]

9. Walther has abundant self-confidence. Will seems less confident in himself. Where do you think self-esteem comes from? How does a person gain a healthy, positive view of his own worth?

[Answers will vary. Some students may respond that Walther's positive relationship with his father has aided in forming his self-confidence, and that Will's seeming lack of confidence may stem from his father's disapproval of him.]

Analyzing

10. Outside the glover's shop in Banbury, Will and Walther argue about the value of gloves. Will says that gloves helped raise him and his brothers and sisters, since his father's glove shop provided the family's income. What product or service helped to raise you? Do you have strong feelings about that product or service—for or against? Why or why not?

[Answers will vary, but students should mention specific products or services, such as the military, a corporation, or small business.]

11. When Will meets Grigor for the first time, he jokes to Walther that the boy may be an imposter because he is taller than Walther had suggested. What does Will's joke foreshadow?

[The joke about Grigor foreshadows the discovery at the Bear Garden that Claud has been an imposter. Will first had the "outrageous idea" that Claud might be pretending to be the real Claud during a conversation with Cozzy, but Will believed no one would take his idea seriously, so he never mentioned it.]

12. The man whom Will meets as “Claud” is an imposter, but he must have looked similar enough to the real Claud to fool Volka and Cozzy. Compare and contrast the *fake* Claud with the *real* Claud—the man Will knows as Vittore. Mention at least three personality traits.

[Students may mention Vittore’s kindnesses to Will as contrasted with Claud’s cruelties. Vittore was an honest man, but Claud was duplicitous. Vittore seemed to have genuine attachments to his Gypsy background, but Claud had no authentic Gypsy roots.]

Evaluating

13. While listening to Volka, Will has an epiphany that, in her own way Volka is as much a queen to her people as Elizabeth is to the English. If Will had never lived among the Gypsies, do you think he would have come to this realisation? Why or why not?

[Answers may vary, and this story is fiction, of course, but many students may believe that Will would never have viewed Gypsies with sympathy and understanding if he had not lived among them. On the other hand, some may believe that Shakespeare, because his writings revealed him to be an enlightened individual, may have viewed all of humanity with sympathy.]

14. Will notices that “these Gypsies seem drawn to imperfect things”—like Kono, the three-legged dog, the horse without a tail, and even himself, an unfortunate runaway. What does this tendency of the Gypsies reveal about them?

[Gypsies, being cast-offs from society themselves, may consciously take in those people and creatures who need their help. Will sees the Gypsies as kind—except for Claud.]

Creating

15. Look at a map to follow Will’s journey from Stratford to London. Sketch Will’s travels on a poster, showing where major events happen, such as where he might have first encountered the Gypsies, where Banbury and Eton are, and where the Bear Garden existed in Southwark.

[Students may enjoy doing this as partner activity and keeping the map while they read the novel. Their posters can be hung on the wall after completion. The teacher may want to use a large map of England from the outset and point to the places where Will’s journey takes him.]

16. What do you think will happen to Will after he leaves the Gypsies at the end of the story? Will he return home, and, if so, what will his family’s response be to him? Will he go on to London, and, if so, how will he support himself?

[Answers will vary, but students may want to write Will’s future experiences in the form of diary entries (on the backs of those play advertisements) or as scenes from a play.]

Selected Bibliography for Further Reading

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