

BookNotes

Teacher's Guide



THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

Friendship
Family
Self-Discovery
Abandonment

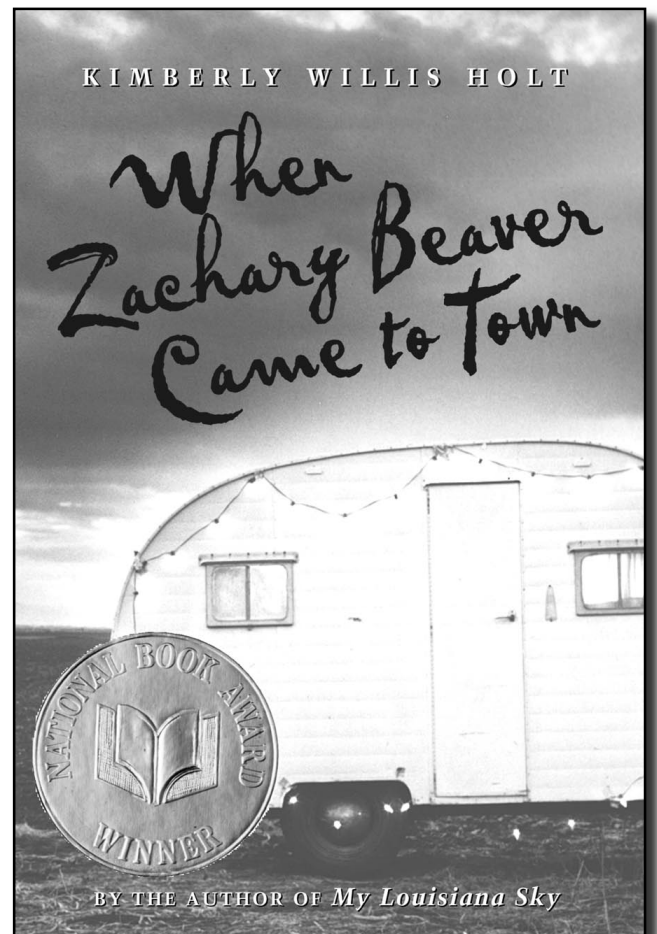
Grades 5 up

About the Book

Zachary Beaver, the fattest boy in the world, comes to town and changes the lives of everyone in Antler, Texas—especially that of 13-year-old Toby Wilson.

Up until the summer of 1971, Toby Wilson's life appeared rather ordinary. He and his best friend Cal liked to roam the small town of Antler, Texas, where they live, escaping the summer heat at Wiley Womack's snow cone stand and dreaming about girls like Scarlett Stalling. But everything changes when Toby's mother leaves home for good; Wayne McKnight, Cal's older brother, is killed in Vietnam; and Zachary Beaver, the fattest boy in the world, enters town.

At first, Toby and Cal are disgusted when they meet all 643 pounds of Zachary Beaver, but when Zachary is left alone by his guardian, Paulie Rankin, the boys befriend him and learn important lessons about the power of friendship.



Yearling • 0-440-22904-9

AWARDS

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An ALA Top Ten Books for Young Adults

A School Library Journal Best Book

A Horn Book Fanfare

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Pre-Reading Activity


Engage the class in a discussion about the true qualities of friendship. Have students create a list of the things that they have in common with their best friend and the things they may disagree on. Then have students share their lists. Ask them what the phrase “unlikely friendship” means? Discuss the fact that sometimes people from different backgrounds can still be friends. How might an “unlikely friendship” change a person’s life?


THEMATIC Connections


In the Classroom


This coming-of-age story is both humorous and poignant, making it a perfect choice for class read-aloud or a novel study. Kimberly Willis Holt clearly understands the feelings of a thirteen-year-old boy and deals honestly with topics such as death, war, and obesity.


The themes of friendship, family, abandonment, self-discovery, and bullying/rudeness will guide readers to a better understanding of the important things that affect a person’s life. In addition to discussion questions related to the themes, this guide provides activities that link language arts, social studies, science, music, and art.

 **FRIENDSHIP**—Toby and Cal have been friends for a long time. How does Cal need Toby when Wayne dies? Discuss whether Cal is more upset with Toby because of the letter he wrote to Wayne or because Toby didn’t attend Wayne’s funeral. When Zachary Beaver first comes to town, the people of Antler see him as a freak and tease him. At what point in the novel do Toby and Cal begin to see Zachary as a friend? Why does it take Zachary so long to warm up to the boys?

 **FAMILY**—Describe Toby’s relationship with his parents. How is their relationship different from Cal’s family? Describe Toby’s feelings for Wayne, Cal’s brother. Why does Toby write a letter to Wayne and sign Cal’s name? Reread the dialogue exchanged between Toby and his dad while they are fishing. (p. 192–197) How do Mr. Wilson’s words explain what has happened to their family? Does this talk help Toby better understand his father and the decisions he has made?

 **ABANDONMENT**—Toby, Cal, and Zachary Beaver have all been abandoned in some way. Ask students to compare and contrast the way each boy deals with his loss. How do they help each other? Toby says, “For a little person mom sure leaves a hole.” (p. 48) Discuss whether Toby’s decision to read all the unread letters from his mother is symbolic of his acceptance that she isn’t coming home.

 **SELF-DISCOVERY**—Toby says, “Loser is my middle name.” (p. 107) Why does he see himself as a loser? Toby changes during the summer of 1971. Ask students to chart his changes from the beginning of the novel to the end. What does he learn about himself? Discuss Zachary’s role in Toby’s self-discovery.

 **BULLYING/RUDENESS**—When Zachary Beaver rolls into town in his trailer that is decorated with lights, people shout things like “Fatty, fatty, two by four. Can’t get through the kitchen door,” and ask embarrassing questions like “How much do you eat?” Discuss whether these are the words of bullies or simply rude people. Why is Toby so sensitive to the way Zachary is being treated? Discuss how Zachary deals with it.

INTERDISCIPLINARY *Connections*

LANGUAGE ARTS—At the end of the novel, Toby reads all the unopened letters from his mother. Have students write the letter that Toby decides to write to his mom. What does he tell her about the summer? What does he say about her leaving home? What does he say about himself?

Miss Myrtie Mae is the town historian and librarian. Have students write an article that she might write for the town scrapbook about Zachary Beaver.

Zachary Beaver likes to read. Ask students to select a book that Toby and Cal might put in the Antler Library in honor of Zachary. Have students write an appropriate inscription for the book.

SOCIAL STUDIES—The novel takes place during the Vietnam War. Ask students to research the years during which the Vietnam War occurred and who the Presidents were during this time frame. Freddy, the bait shop owner, tells Toby that he fought in World War II. He says, “Back then, we came back heroes.” (p. 124) Ask students to research the years during which World War II took place. Discuss with the class the different circumstances of these wars and what Freddy meant by his comment.

Paulie leaves Zachary in Antler while he travels to locate other sideshows. Ask students to use the Internet to find out the history of circus sideshows. Why do some people call these shows “freak shows”? Encourage students to share their findings in class. How are such “freak shows” an exploitation of people with abnormalities?

HEALTH—Miss Myrtie Mae’s brother, the Judge, either suffers from senility, dementia, or Alzheimer’s disease. Ask students to use the Internet or books in the library to find out the characteristics of each of these conditions. How are these conditions treated?

SCIENCE—Toby says that most farms in his area of Texas use herbicides to control weeds and insecticides to get rid of bugs. Mr. McKnight releases ladybugs in his cotton fields once a year. Ask students to find out the most common herbicides and insecticides that farmers use to protect their crops. What is the danger in using such products? What do ladybugs do to help crops? Have students find out the safest methods for protecting crops.

MUSIC—Toby’s mother left home to pursue a career in country music. Bring in country music from the 1960s and from today. Play the music for the class and ask students to draw comparisons between the styles of songs from the two decades. How are they different? How are they the same?

ART—Most circus sideshows are advertised in advance with a poster that features the coming attraction. Ask students to think of other sideshows that Paulie Rankin locates in his travels. Then have them make a poster announcing the show.

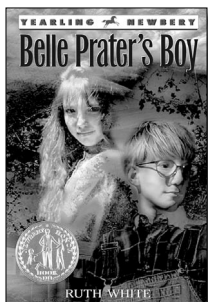
Vocabulary/ Use of Language

The vocabulary is not difficult, but students may find some unfamiliar words that they should try and define using clues from the context of the story. Such words may include: *octaves* (p. 79), *optimum* (p. 85), *dinghy* (p. 192), and *concordance* (p. 207).

RELATED TITLES by theme

Belle Prater's Boy
Ruth White

Self-Discovery • Family • Friendship
Abandonment
Grades 5 up / 0-440-41372-9



Journey
Patricia MacLachlan

Family • Friendship • Abandonment
Self-Discovery
Grades 4 up / 0-440-40809-1

Blubber
Judy Blume

Self-Discovery • Bullying • Friendship
Grades 4-6 / 0-440-40707-9

Find a Stranger, Say Goodbye
Lois Lowry

Self-Discovery • Family • Abandonment
Grades 6 up / 0-440-20541-7

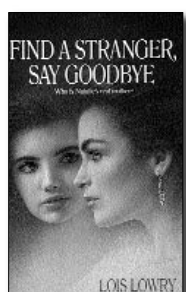


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ABOUT the Author

Kimberly Willis Holt's first novel, *My Louisiana Sky*, was named an ALA Notable Book and one of the ALA's Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults. *My Louisiana Sky* also received a Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Award for Fiction and the Josette Frank Award for Fiction given by the Bank Street College of Education. Her second novel, *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town*, won the 1999 National Book Award for Fiction. Ms. Holt resides in Amarillo, Texas, with her husband and daughter.

INTERNET RESOURCES

The Grand Ole Opry

www.opry.com

The official Web site for The Grand Ole Opry.

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