Reading Vipers

This week we will be looking at the chapter *Grieving.* Children should read this chapter and answer the VIPERS questions which follow the extract. This can be completed in segments over the week and should take 1-2 hours.

The questions will be focused on **Vocabulary**, **Inference**, **Predict**, **Explain**, **Retrieve**, **Summarise**.

23. Postscript

SQUATTING down with a trowel in his hand Will surveyed what was now the garden. Since the Dig for Victory campaign, he and Tom had pulled up all the flowers and had been planting vegetables in every available space. It was a shame really. The flowers had looked so colourful. All that remained now were neat brown rows with tufts of greenery sticking out of them.

He pushed the sleeves of his jersey up. He was wearing Zach's old red one with the hundred darns. Sticking the trowel firmly into the earth he began to dig a small trench. As he loosened the earth, several startled worms slithered away. He watched their gleaming bodies heading for the cabbage patch.

Will sat back on his heels and took a handful of seeds from a paper bag. Picking them tenderly one by one, he placed them in the trench. He was so absorbed in his task that he was oblivious to footsteps approaching the gate. He heard it clanging as it bounced to a close and looked

up. It was Carrie. She was running down the pathway, her face flushed.

'Did you get them?' she panted.

He nodded. 'They'se in my room. You want them now?'

She glanced down at his earth-stained hands. 'I could go and get them myself. You going to be long with that?'

'Just got two more rows. Then I'm finished.'

'Can we go down the river?'

Will looked surprised. 'Ent you got no more chores?'

She shook her head and grinned. 'I climbed out the window. It was the only way. As soon as I finish one job she finds me another one. If she sees me with so much as my fingers on a book she jes gets hoppin' mad.'

'I thought she was better now.'

'She is, but she still thinks readin' is being idle.'

She squatted down beside him and stared intently into his eyes.

'If I don't read a book soon I think I'll explode.'

Will laughed. 'Well, don't do it over me plantin'.'

'Have you another trowel? I could give you a hand, then we could clear off quick. If she finds me here I'll have to go back home.'

'No, I don't. Look, you go up to my room. If she comes round she'll see I'm on me own. We can go up to the river on the tandem. I'll lower the other seat.'

Carrie's eyes sparkled. 'Wizard!' and she sprang to her feet and made towards the cottage. 'Oh,' she cried despondently, swinging round. 'How can I ride, wearing this?' and she tugged at the pale green woollen dress she was wearing. 'Won't the crossbar make it go up?'

Will frowned for an instant and then hit on an idea.

'You can wear a pair of my shorts!'

Carrie looked doubtful. Will was a head smaller than her.

'Or Zach's, they'd fit you.'

'I daren't,' she said, feeling quite excited at the prospect. She'd been asking her mother for ages if she could wear shorts but had been told that she'd turn into a boy if she did and no man would want to marry her. Her father had said it was all right by him but he had already let her have her own way about the high school and didn't want to cause any more friction.

'Why not?' said Will.

'You don't think I'll turn into a boy if I wear them?'

Will looked up at her. Her hair stuck out in little wispy curls round her forehead and ears. Two pale green oval eyes stared down at him above permanently freckled cheeks.

'Carrie, you don't look anythin' like a boy. And who cares if you do?'

'Yes, anyway,' she said, suddenly feeling appalled at the thought, 'I don't want to get married. Imagine having to do housework all the time, every day. Yuk!' and with that she turned and ran into the cottage.

Will found her sprawled across his bed engrossed in a book. She jumped, raised her eyes guiltily and slammed the covers automatically to a close. She laughed.

'I thought you were Mum!'

Will strode across to a box in the corner where several of Zach's old clothes were folded neatly inside. He lifted up

a pair of red corduroy shorts with patches on the seat and found a green pair underneath that were less threadbare.

'Catch,' he said, throwing them at her and flinging a pair of braces on to the bed.

'I'll have to wear a shirt,' she added, joining him at the box. She found a white baggy cotton one and pulled it out.

'You better wear this, too,' and he picked up Zach's Joseph jersey.

'Oh, I couldn't.'

'Why not?'

'Well, it's special, isn't it?'

'Zach would be jolly pleased if you wore it. You know he would.'

She nodded and felt tears coming to her eyes. Will looked concerned.

'It's all right,' she said hastily. 'I'm not going to blub.' She picked up the shorts and put them on. 'They fit almost perfect.' She tugged at the waist. 'They're a bit baggy here, but the braces'll keep them up.' She unbuttoned her dress, stepped out of it and slipped her petticoat off over her head. Will buttoned the braces on to the shorts. He was surprised to see two tiny swollen lumps protruding gently outwards from underneath her vest. He wanted to reach out and touch her arms but stepped back quickly.

'There,' he said and he found himself laughing excitedly for no reason whatever.

Carrie pulled the shirt over her head and tucked it into the shorts, raising the braces up over her shoulders. Lifting up her arms and legs she cavorted around the room.

'They feel so comfortable,' she said, bouncing on the end of the bed.

Will produced four books from out of his haversack.

'That's where they were!' she cried.

'I couldn't get *We Didn't Mean To Go to Sea*, but I've got it reserved for you. So I got you this one instead.'

She took it from his hands.

'*At the Back of the North Wind* by George MacDonald. Never heard of it.' She flicked over the pages and began reading Chapter One. 'It looks all right. You got the others, did you?'

'Yeh. Here,' he replied, handing them to her, '*A Little Princess*, *David Copperfield* and *Black Beauty*.'

'Wizzo!'

'Don't start readin' them now or we'll never get down to the river.'

Carrie looked disappointed.

'Well, bring one and I'll take my sketch pad.' He emptied the haversack and shoved the pad and a piece of tarpaulin in. Carrie was chewing over which book to take. She chose *At the Back of the North Wind*. She put Zach's Joseph jersey on and Will slung the haversack on to his back.

'I'll go down first. See if the coast is clear,' he whispered.

Carrie felt a sudden urge to giggle. She placed her hand firmly over her mouth and crouched over the open trapdoor,

while Will slipped quickly down the steps and ou[illegible] back door. He reappeared soon after.

'Drat it!' he murmured. 'I'll need you to hold the bike steady while I lower the seat.'

Carrie crept down and followed him out into the back garden. She held the tandem firmly while Will twiddled away with the spanner. She began to grow anxious and her forehead felt hot. It would be rotten if her mother caught her now.

'There,' he said, surveying the seat. He put the spanner in the saddlebag. 'Now let's wheel her.'

They pushed the tandem out through the back gate and turned right twice so that they were beside the graveyard wall. Will grinned back at Carrie who was by the rear seat. He motioned her to the ground. Crouching down they manoeuvred themselves unseen to any would-be eyes towards the open road. He beckoned her up.

'Get on quick,' he urged.

'If anyone sees me now,' she giggled, 'it'll be all over the village in no time,' and she flung her leg over the bar and sat down, her feet comfortably resting on the pedals. Will followed suit and pushed off.

They cycled on, seeing no one, until they reached Annie Hartridge's cottage. She was in the front garden with the baby. She stared at Carrie in amazement and they left her open-mouthed as they sped, shrieking with laughter, up the road.

They stopped by a hedge near the woods and pushed the bike through a gap and down a small slope.

'We can leave it here,' said Will, leaning it up against a large oak. 'No one'll see it.'

They ran silently and swiftly in and out through the trees, hiding behind them in case anyone else might be in the woods. When they finally reached the river they burst into hysterical laughter.

'You should have seen her face,' spluttered Carrie.

Will immediately held his haversack as if it was a baby and did an imitation of Annie Hartridge watching them cycle by. Carrie clutched at her stomach and laughed helplessly.

'No, stop it!' she cried. 'I'll wet my pants if you don't.'

'You mean Zach's pants,' he added.

'Please, please . . .' she begged and she crossed her legs and tried to think of disasters in an effort to control herself. Will collapsed onto the ground and leaned against a tree. He stared across at the river, panting. Carrie calmed down and joined him.

'Here,' he said, pulling the raggedy tarpaulin from his haversack, 'you sit on this.' He spread it out at the foot of the tree.

'Where are you going?' she asked when Will left her sitting on it.

'Only over here. I'm going to draw you.'

She picked up her book and propped it up open on her bent knees. Raising her eyes for a moment she gazed at the bubbling spring river and glanced at Will. He was sitting cross-legged on his haversack several yards away, his sketch pad already open. He looked up and smiled.

'Don't it make you feel strange, me wearing Zach's clothes?'

He shook his head. 'I'm wearing one of his jerseys.'

'Yes, I know, but . . .' Her voice drifted away. 'I've never worn a dead person's clothes before. I should feel horrid, shouldn't I? But I don't. I feel good.' She sighed and let her body sink into the tree trunk. 'I wish the holidays could be like this all the time,' she murmured. 'Mum's been so horrid.'

'Is she the same with Ginnie?'

'Ginnie likes housework! She doesn't complain. She says the more she learns now the better wife she'll be when she's older. Anyway, Mum gives me extra to make up for the term. She says learnin' and doing homework isn't work. And she says I'm getting stuck up. Do you think I am?'

'No.'

She stared back at the river. Will put down his sketch pad.

'Are you still unhappy at the high?'

'It's gettin' better now. I came fifth in the end-of-term tests.'

'I know. You told me.'

'Did I?'

He nodded.

'It's jest that it's important. They were really shocked. They think because I talk countrified I must be stupid. Did I tell you, one of the girls came up and started talking to me real friendly, like, on the last day of term.'

'No.'

'Yes. She said I weren't to take any notice of the other girls. That I was a lot cleverer than most of them.'

Will stared at her.

'What's the matter?'

'You talk different now.'

Carrie looked crestfallen.

'You sound a bit like Zach.'

Her face brightened.

'That's all right, then.'

'Are you going to read your book? I want to draw.'

She nodded and happily sunk herself into Chapter One.

Will began sketching her face. Then he sketched her body, her foot, her hands holding the book, her knee, and as he did so he was filled with an intense joy. Carrie was lost in a *North Wind* world, eagerly devouring each page. Neither of them noticed the time pass until they discovered that they were screwing their eyes up in order to see.

'Crumbs,' said Carrie, startled. 'I'd better get home.'

Will packed up the haversack and they ran through the woods and up the slope towards the tandem. They squeezed it through the hedge and clambered back on to it. The blackouts were already up on Annie Hartridge's windows. They sped past and dismounted at the graveyard wall. Crawling swiftly beside it they turned the corner and ran with the bike along the road and through the gate. Will opened the back door and peered in.

'Run,' he whispered urgently to Carrie and he beckoned her in and cautiously closed the door behind them. He heard Sammy barking in the living room.

'Drat!' he murmured.

Carrie scrambled up the steps and flung herself through the open trapdoor, Will following close behind.

He found her fumbling in the half light for her dress. She tore off Zach's clothes and danced around in her vest and

pants, too absorbed in getting into her petticoat and dress to feel embarrassed. Will felt surprised that he wasn't embarrassed either. They climbed down the ladder and tiptoed quickly out through the back door into the garden.

'Made it,' she said.

'You forgot the other books,' said Will, noticing that she still only had the one she was reading.

'I'll sneak the others in one by one. I'll stuff this one down my knickers in case I'm caught. I don't know when I'll see you next. I'll probably be kept in for a week now,' she added grimly. 'Still,' she said, smiling, 'it was worth it.'

Will walked with her as far as Dobbs' field. They stood quietly for a moment and drank in the evening.

'Looks like it's going to be a good spring,' said Carrie, breaking the silence, and she pointed to a cluster of small, swollen buds on the branches of a nearby tree hanging silhouetted against the sky.

'Do you think,' said Will, gazing over the wall at the oak tree, 'do you think you can die of happiness?'

Carrie looked at him, puzzled.

'It's jest that I feel as if I'm going to burst and that, if I did, there'd be bits of me all over this field.'

She laughed, and after they had parted at the gate by the arched lane Will returned to the cottage. He pumped water into a large tin jug and carried it past the long deserted Anderson and through the back door into the hallway. As he hung his cap up he became conscious that his peg was lower than usual.

'I used to stretch up to that,' he muttered to himself.

He picked up the jug of water and carried it into the living room. Sammy leapt around his ankles, vying for attention. Will put the jug on the floor and squatted down to stroke him.

How strange, he thought, looking at Sammy's face, to think that I was once terrified of you.

Tom was sitting in the armchair looking at the wireless programmes in the newspaper. The kettle was steaming on the range. Will picked it up with a cloth and poured a little into a teapot. After he had swirled it around to warm up the pot, he poured it away and added some tea and more water. He allowed it to stew for a while, before pouring it into two cups. Sammy flopped down by the pouffe and Will plonked himself down beside him.

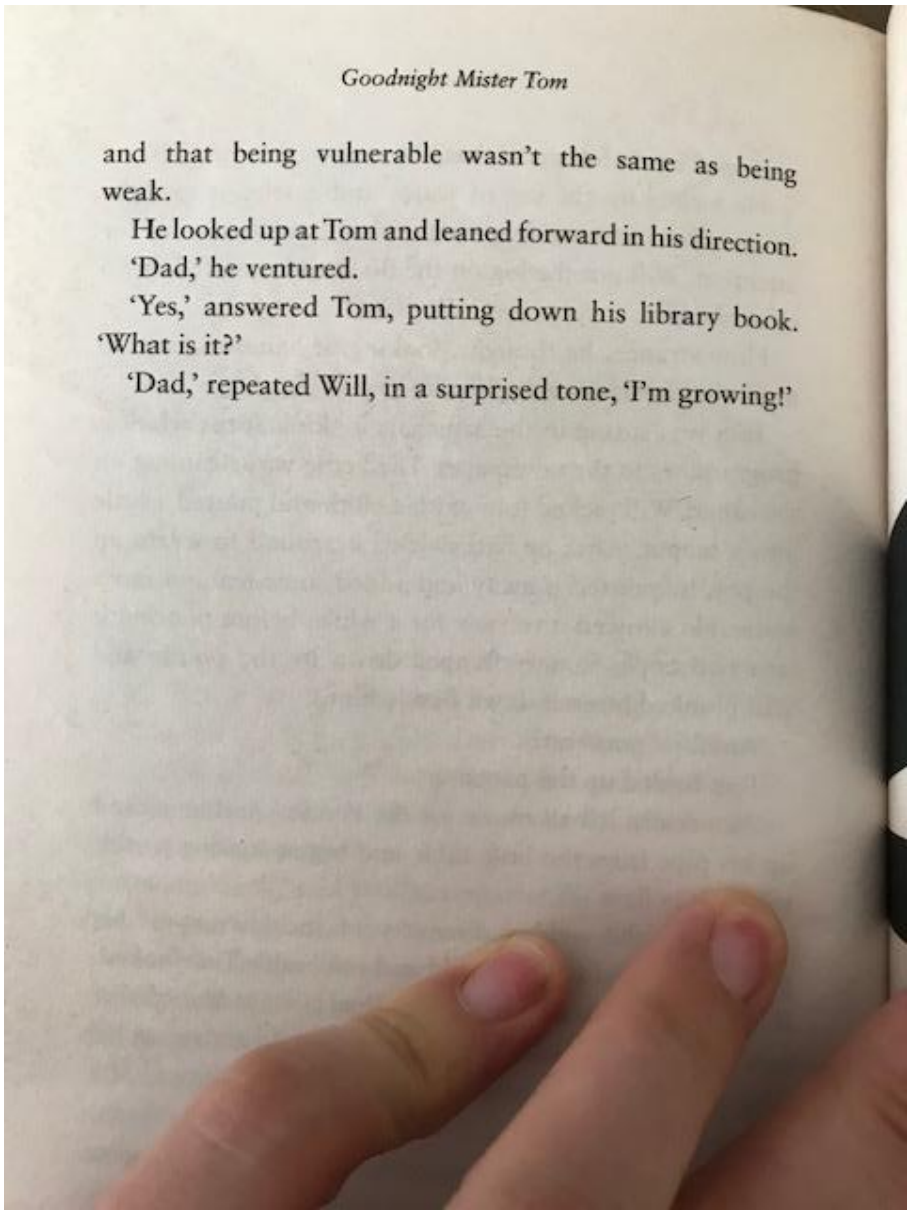
'Anythin' good on?'

Tom folded up the paper.

'Not really. It's all music for the Forces.' And he picked up his pipe from the little table and began stuffing it with tobacco.

As with the sudden discovery of the lowness of his peg Will noticed now how old and vulnerable Tom looked. It unnerved him at first, for he had always thought of him as being strong. He watched him puffing away at his pipe, poking the newly lit tobacco down with the end of a match.

Will swallowed a few mouthfuls of tea and put some fresh coke on the range fire. As he observed it tumble and fall between the wood and hot coke, it occurred to him that strength was quite different from toughness



Goodnight Mister Tom

and that being vulnerable wasn't the same as being weak.

He looked up at Tom and leaned forward in his direction.

'Dad,' he ventured.

'Yes,' answered Tom, putting down his library book. 'What is it?'

'Dad,' repeated Will, in a surprised tone, 'I'm growing!'

Vocabulary

What does postscript mean?

How can you tell Carrie is filled with anticipation?

Define 'crestfallen'.

Inference

Why is Carrie doubtful about wearing Will's shorts?

Why do Carrie's eyes fill with tears?

Who does Carrie imitate?

Predict

Predict what Carrie wants to see.

If there was a sequel, what do you think it would be about?

Explain

Did you like the story? Explain your answer with reasons and examples from the text.

Retrieve

Why had they dug up all the flowers?

What does Will suggest that Carrie wears?

Why does Carrie get the urge to giggle?

Why do you think Carrie's mum has been horrid?

Summarise

Summarise the whole story in less than 200 words.