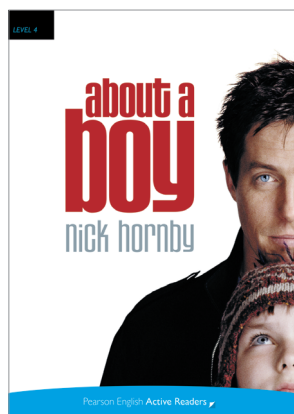


About a Boy

Nick Hornby



About the author

Nick Hornby was born in 1957 in Surrey, England and graduated in English Literature at Cambridge University. Later, he taught English to foreigners and worked as a freelance journalist for several important newspapers. From childhood, he was a keen fan of the Arsenal football team and this probably inspired his first well-known book, *Fever Pitch* (1992). Next came *High Fidelity* (1995), closely followed by *About a Boy* (1998). All of these books have been adapted for the cinema. He has also written two other novels along with several works of non-fiction. Hornby now lives in London and much of his writing is set there. He is married and has a son, who was diagnosed with autism when he was 2 years old. With his wife, he set up *Treehouse*, a special school to help such children.

Summary

Will is thirty-six but behaves like a teenager. He's single, rich and cool. He has no responsibilities – no job, no family, no worries. Marcus is twelve and very different from the average teenager. He has just moved to London with his divorced mum, Fiona, and is having problems adapting to his new life and his new school. Fiona is depressed and heading for a breakdown. Will and Marcus meet by chance the day that Fiona tries to kill herself. She recovers, but Marcus is worried that she will try again, leaving him on his own. He turns to Will for help. Although Will runs away from this responsibility at first, he realises that he can help Marcus, not with his suicidal mother, but by teaching him how to be a 'normal' kid who wears the right trainers and listens to the right music. Will and Marcus change each other's lives forever. Marcus teaches Will to grow up and accept responsibility, whereas Will teaches Marcus to live in today's world.

Chapters 1–2: Will spends his days doing very little, a bit of shopping, reading and watching *Countdown* on TV. He likes to have lots of girlfriends and decides to go to a single parents' group (SPAT), where he can get to know lots of women who find it hard to meet men. There, he talks to Suzie, telling her that he lives with his son, Ned. Meanwhile, Marcus is worrying about his new school in London because the other kids laugh at him and bully him. One day, he comes home to find his mother in a terrible state. She tells him she needs a rest and that he has to go with Suzie and the SPAT group to a picnic the following Saturday.

Chapters 3–4: Will goes to the SPAT picnic with Suzie and meets Marcus. While Will is avoiding answering questions about his imaginary son, Marcus thinks he has killed a duck by throwing bread at it. When they get back to Marcus's house, they find out that Fiona has tried to kill herself. They take her to the hospital and she recovers, but Marcus is afraid she will do it again. He decides that two people in a family isn't enough and plans to get Will and Fiona together. Unfortunately for Marcus, Fiona isn't Will's type of woman and he returns to his old life until one day, Marcus appears on his doorstep. On seeing Will's flat, Marcus realises there is no son and threatens to tell his mum if Will doesn't go out with her.

Chapters 5–6: Marcus starts visiting Will often after school. One day, when Will opens the door, there are two boys throwing sweets at Marcus. Will gets very angry with the boys and advises Marcus to change his look. He buys him some new trainers, but they are stolen the next day at school. Fiona finds out about the visits and the imaginary son and forbids Marcus to see Will again. At school, Marcus goes to see the head teacher about his trainers and he meets Ellie, one of the school's rebels and a big Kurt Cobain fan. Ellie thinks Marcus is funny and they become friends.

Chapters 7–8: Marcus invites Will to his house for Christmas. Will hates Christmas but he goes reluctantly. At first, he has a good time but then Suzie arrives and she gets angry because Will had lied to her about having a son. On New Year's Eve, Will meets a woman called Rachel and falls in love. To sound more interesting to her, he pretends that Marcus is his son. Rachel also has a twelve year old son called Ali and she invites Will and Marcus to her house to meet him. Marcus agrees to pretend to be Will's son, but when he meets Ali things go badly wrong.

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Ali is angry that Will likes his mum and shouts at Marcus. Marcus runs away from the house, but Will takes him back and they become friends.

Chapters 9–10: Will is in love for the first time in his life and he realises he has to tell Rachel the truth. Fiona gets very depressed again and Marcus asks Will to help. At first, Will refuses but then he feels bad and asks Rachel for advice. Rachel offers to talk to Fiona, but cleverly forces Will to do it. Fiona tells Marcus that he must go to Cambridge to see his father, who has broken his arm. Ellie goes with him. The day they travel, newspaper headlines inform us that Kurt Cobain has killed himself. Ellie gets drunk, jumps off the train and throws her boot through the window of a music shop that has a big cardboard figure of Kurt Cobain inside.

Chapter 11: Marcus and Ellie are taken to the police station and they tell their story. Marcus's dad and his girlfriend arrive and then Fiona, Will and Ellie's mum get there. Ellie is forced to meet the owner of the shop and she apologises. Marcus has a long chat with his dad and tells him that he's fine. Marcus now knows he has people and he can cope. In short, he has grown up. Will, meanwhile, realises that Rachel has changed his life completely and for the first time he gets seriously involved with somebody, responsibilities and all.

About the film

The film *About a Boy* was a big hit. It stars Hugh Grant as Will and Toni Collette as Fiona. It's set in North London and remains close to the book until the end. Instead of the adventurous trip to Cambridge, Marcus enters a rock concert at school, singing a 1960s ballad. Will, knowing people will laugh, helps out by accompanying him on his electric guitar. The film ends with Christmas at Will's flat. Many of the main characters are there, but not as couples, just a big group of people as Marcus likes it. Hornby says he thinks the ending is true to the spirit of the book.

Background and themes

Growing up, relationships and responsibility: This book explores the learning process that a child goes through as he or she is growing up. Marcus is finding life hard to deal with and is struggling, as many adolescent teenagers do, with family and school problems and knowing how

to make friends with his peers. Through experience, Marcus comes to realise he is not alone in the world and he asserts himself in his own right. Ironically, Hornby demonstrates how even fully grown adults sometimes fail to have grown up, developing the theme through the character of Will, who only learns to accept responsibility after a long learning process at the age of thirty-six.

Bullying: Marcus suffers at school because he is different from the other kids and attracts the attention of bullies. The author acknowledges bullying as a fact of life that will always be there. Indeed, in British society more and more media attention is focused on this phenomenon. The book also addresses the possible ways of avoiding being bullied, some more successful than others. The head teacher's suggestion of keeping away from them is somewhat ridiculous, as the bullies find Marcus and not the other way round. Will's suggestion of a change of image is maybe more practical, but also fails. It seems that only when Marcus develops his own self-confidence, as he does at the end, will he be able to deal with this victimisation.

Single parenting: The problems of bringing up a child as a single parent are highlighted in this book. Fiona is so wrapped up in her own problems that she fails to see what is happening in Marcus's life. When Fiona tries to commit suicide, Marcus comes to believe that two people cannot make a happy and secure unit. The author suggests that making single parents into couples is not necessarily the answer. His alternative solution is to make a community of people who are close to each other and care about each other. He also suggests that organisations like SPAT can sometimes provide an environment in which isolated and lonely single parents can meet other people.

Discussion activities

Chapters 1–2

Before reading

- I **Discuss:** Tell the students that one of the main characters in the book is Will. He is very rich and has never worked. Ask students in small groups to think of the advantages and disadvantages of never working in your life. Get feedback from the whole class and write a list of advantages and disadvantages on the board. Now ask the students *If you were rich, would you work?* and take a class vote to see how many say 'yes' and how many 'no'.

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While reading (p. 4, after 'He didn't stay much longer:')

- 2 **Predict:** Tell the students that they are going to read about Marcus and his mum, who have just started a new life in London. Explain that Fiona is a single mother and that Marcus is unhappy at school. Tell students in pairs to predict the kinds of problems each of these characters might have. Get feedback from the whole class.

After reading

- 3 **Role play:** Put students in pairs. One of them takes the role of Will and the other takes the role of Suzie. They meet at the SPAT party.
Suzie: Explain about your ex-husband and the problems you have being a single mother. Ask Will questions about his life.
Will: Listen to Suzie's story and ask her questions in a kind way. Answer her questions about your life, inventing the story about your ex-wife and Ned.

Chapters 3–4

While reading (end of p. 25)

- 4 **Guess:** Ask students to discuss in pairs why Marcus thinks he's seen his mother. *Is she really there? If she is, what is she doing? If she isn't, why has Marcus imagined this?*

After reading

- 5 **Pair work:** Write the following adjectives on the board: *attractive, boring, calm, clever, crazy, fashionable, fortunate, generous, nervous, odd, proud, sensible*. Ask students to discuss which of these adjectives can be used to describe Will, Marcus, Fiona and Suzie, giving reasons for their choices. Get feedback from the whole class. As a follow-up, students could choose adjectives from the list to describe themselves.

Chapters 5–6

Before reading

- 6 **Discuss:** Students discuss the following questions in small groups.
In what ways do you think Marcus is being bullied? Why are some students doing this? How do you think Marcus feels? What could he do about it? Have you ever seen things like this happening in your life? What can schools do to stop this happening?

After reading

- 7 **Discuss:** Ask the students: *Why was Ellie in trouble with the head teacher? (Because of the sweatshirt she was wearing.) Ask: Do you think she should be punished? How?* Now ask the students in small groups to discuss why students usually get into trouble at school and in what ways they are usually punished for these things. Ask them to discuss whether the punishments are fair or not. Encourage them to include examples they have experienced themselves.

Chapters 7–8

Before reading

- 8 **Discuss:** Ask students to talk about Christmas in small groups.
What are the typical things people do at Christmas? What do they eat? Who do they spend it with? What type of presents do people give each other?
 Ask students if they like Christmas, or any similar celebration, saying why or why not.

After reading

- 9 **Write and ask:** Write *Why couldn't Ali hear Rachel when she shouted at him?* on the board and elicit the answer (Because he had his headphones on). Ask students to write a question about something in Chapters 7–8. Have students ask and answer each others questions.

Chapters 9–10

Before reading

- 10 **Pair work:** Ask students to discuss the following questions:
Do you think Will should tell Rachel that Marcus isn't really his son? Why or why not? How do you think she would react if he did? Do you ever tell lies? When and why?

After reading

- 11 **Role play:** Remind students that Will and Fiona went to a pizza restaurant to talk about Fiona's problems. Refer them back to p. 76 if necessary. Ask students to act out the conversation between Will and Fiona.
Fiona: Explain your problems.
Will: Listen, ask questions and suggest advice.

Chapter 11

Before reading

- 12 **Discuss:** Ask the students to discuss the following questions in small groups and then get feedback from the whole class.
What do you think will happen to Ellie because of the broken window? What do you think her mum will think? Will Marcus be punished too?

After reading

- 13 **Discuss and write:** Explain how the film ends differently from the book (see **About the film**) or if you have access to the film, show the last part. Discuss with the students which ending they prefer. Now put students into small groups and tell them to think of an alternative ending. Get them to make some notes and then to give an oral presentation to the rest of the class, or if you have time they could act out their new endings.