

# Orange Inheritance Reading Guide

## *So Long, See You Tomorrow* by William Maxwell

### Chosen by Ann Patchett

**'One of the great books of our age. It is the subtlest of miniatures that contains our deepest sorrows and truths and love – all caught in a clear, simple style in perfect brushstrokes' Michael Ondaatje**

#### About *So Long, See You Tomorrow*

In rural Illinois two tenant farmers share much, finally too much, until jealousy leads to murder and suicide. A tenuous friendship between lonely teenagers – the narrator, whose mother has died young, and Cletus Smith, the troubled witness to his parents' misery – is shattered. After the murder and the upheavals that follow, the boys never speak again. Fifty years on, haunted by words left unsaid, the narrator creates a devastating reconstruction of events and attempts atonement for a lifetime's regret.

#### About the Author

William Maxwell was born in Illinois in 1908. He was the author of a distinguished body of work: six novels, three short story collections, an autobiographical memoir and a collection of literary essays and reviews. A *New Yorker* editor for forty years, he helped to shape the prose and careers of John Updike, John Cheever, John O'Hara and Eudora Welty. *So Long, See You Tomorrow* won the American Book Award, and he received the PEN/Malamud Award. He died in New York in 2000.

#### Points for Discussion

Maxwell presents four characters obviously suffering from loneliness of some kind: Cletus, the narrator, Lloyd Wilson and Clarence Smith. Who else in the novel is suffering from loneliness? Consider each character and discuss whether they have accepted their situation or are fighting for something better.

How does the fact that we never learn the narrator's name add to our sense of his isolation?

Despite the fact it ends in estrangement and discord, *So Long, See You Tomorrow* could nevertheless be described as a paean to the power of friendship. Identify the great friendships of the novel and discuss whether the fact that they do not last undermines their significance.

Several passages in the novel are presented from the farm dog Trixie's point of view. Why does Maxwell do this and how does he explore the novel's major themes through this character?

Why does Lloyd Wilson give in to his feelings for Fern Smith? Do you believe he is really in love with her? Was the triumph of desire over morality inevitable?

'I know you don't care in the least about me, or your daughters, but I don't see how you could do that to Clarence.' Why are we led to perceive Lloyd Wilson's betrayal of his friendship with Clarence Smith as worse than his infidelity to his wife? In what ways might the unspoken agreement of loyalty between Clarence and Lloyd be as sacred as their respective marriages?

Places, and buildings in particular, are presented as having great emotional resonance in *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. Why does Maxwell take such care to describe the half-built house on Ninth Street and the time the narrator and Cletus spent playing among the rafters? What might this symbolise?

The narrator describes the soothing familiarity that a well-known building can have for a child, especially when everything else in their life has been thrown into disorder: 'Children tend to derive comfort and support from the totally familiar – an umbrella stand, a glass ashtray backed with brightly coloured cigar bands, the fire tongs, anything.' Do you remember taking solace from objects around your own home as a child? Why do you think children form such strong attachments to the physical objects which populate their early lives?

How does Maxwell evoke the hardship of the tenant farmers' existence? Do you think the fact that they are not the owners of the land they farm has an effect on their lives as a whole?

Why is Cletus' bicycle so important to him? Is it symbolic?

In what ways does Maxwell's spare style fit the subject matter and setting of *So Long, See You Tomorrow*?

