

Plot

Whole plot summary

12-year-old Marcus moves to London with his divorced mother, Fiona. He worries about his depressed mother and starting school. Will is 36, lives off his father's royalties and can't commit to a relationship. Will joins SPAT to meet single, divorced women after inventing a child for himself called Ned. He meets Suzie who invites him on a group outing where he meets Marcus. When they take Marcus home, they find Fiona unconscious after taking an overdose.

Fiona survives but Marcus is scared. He is bullied at school and very lonely. Marcus spies on Will and works out that 'Ned' is made up. He threatens to reveal the truth to SPAT and he starts to visit Will at home. Marcus meets a tough, 'cool' girl, Ellie, in school.

Will spends Christmas with Marcus and Fiona and is shocked by their singing!

Will meets a single mother, Rachel and falls in love. He pretends that Marcus is his son and takes him along to meet Ali, Rachel's son. Marcus runs out after Ali threatens to kill him if Will and Rachel go out with each other.

Rachel finds out that Marcus isn't Will's son but forgives him. She makes Will face up to dealing with Fiona's depression and he starts to mature.

Marcus and Ellie visit Clive in Cambridge. Ellie breaks a window after hearing of the death of Kurt Cobain. At the police station, Clive, Lindsey, Will, Fiona and Ellie's mother arrive to pick them up. Will enjoys life with Rachel and Ali and still sees Marcus.

Themes

Isolation	Maturity	Sadness
Adulthood	Love	Relationships
Growing up	Friendship	Families and family life
Being accepted	Change	Compassion

Vocabulary

Third person narrator	First person narrator	Perspective	Prose
Chapter	Chronological	Metaphor	Simile
Role model	Stereotype	Irony	Sarcasm
Bildungsroman	Fiction	Fact	Reality
Humour	Contemporary	Literary	

Background

The story is set in London in 1993 and there are several references to the pop culture of the time.

Media and pop culture are associated with the characters' lives. Marcus refers to TV programmes or films as he tries to understand real life situations. Will organizes his time around watching *Countdown*. Ellie identifies with the rebellious music and spirit of Kurt Cobain.

Structure and Form

A sort of coming-of-age story. 12-year-old Marcus, journeys into adulthood and maturity. It is also a journey of maturity for 36-year-old Will. Both Marcus and Will find their level of maturity and learn to fit into society.

36 chapters, alternatively from the point of view of Marcus (odd numbered) and Will (even numbered). At first, the two characters and their stories are separate but they converge and become intertwined from when they meet in Chapter 8.

Assessment Objectives

- AO1** Respond to texts critically and imaginatively; select and evaluate relevant textual detail to illustrate and support interpretations.
- AO2** Explain how language, structure and form contribute to writers' presentation of ideas, themes and settings.

Character

Marcus Brewer

A sensitive 12-year-old, nervous about starting a new school. Worries about his mother overdosing and dying. Acts like a child in a grown man's body. Doesn't understand sarcasm and often feels isolated.

Will Freeman

36-year-old who doesn't work, he lives off royalty payments from his father's Christmas song. Selfish and immature but actually quite lonely whilst being scared of making a commitment in a relationship. Scared of being rejected. Pretends to be a single parent in order to attract women. Good hearted and strikes up an unlikely friendship with Marcus.

Fiona

Marcus' mother. Struggles with depression and finds it difficult to cope. Looks and dresses like a hippy and makes Marcus listen to the music she likes. Struggles with relationships and isn't much help when Marcus is bullied.

Rachel

Independent, perceptive and with many interests. She is the first woman with whom Will falls in love.

Ellie

A naughty, intimidating girl, 3 years older than Marcus in school. He is a bit scared of her at first, Marcus comes to worship her, and she takes him under her wing. Wears Kurt Cobain t shirts and reacts badly to his suicide. She has a good relationship with her mother who is a single parent.

Clive

Marcus' father. Divorced from Fiona and lives in Cambridge. Has a new girlfriend, Lindsey.

Ali

Rachel's unpleasant teenage son.

Suzie

A woman Will went out with.

Tips

- Read the extract carefully and remember to write about the effect of key words and phrases.
- Prepare quotations lists for the main characters to show how they develop in the novel.

You are advised to spend about 40 minutes on this question.

How does Nick Hornby present the changing relationship between Marcus and his mother, Fiona, in *About a Boy*? (20)

The relationship between Marcus and his mother, Fiona, changes and develops throughout 'About a Boy'.

At the beginning of the novel, the relationship seems bitter, forced even. I think this is because Marcus isn't open and honest with his mother and her personal feelings seem to cloud her love for him. It is not an ideal relationship.

However, they do have a bond and seem very close as mother and son. For example, when they talk about McDonalds and being a vegetarian, she says, 'I would just be disappointed if you did'. This is where they discuss how she played a role in him becoming a vegetarian. She clearly is trying to impress her own views and beliefs on him, which I think is unfair, without letting him make his own choices and grow up as a typical adolescent.

Further on in the story, the relationship between Marcus and Fiona starts to deteriorate. On the 'dead duck day', Marcus unwillingly spends the day out with Suzie and Will with SPAT and returns home to find his mother has attempted suicide. This event has a great effect on their relationship. Fiona's emotional instability and incapability cause Marcus to feel the suicide attempt is a direct result of him and that she does not care about him. This is because he is too young to understand the other hardships his mother is facing and this only extends the emotional gap between them.

When Marcus discovers his mother's suicide note, he angrily lashes out, 'you can't love me when you're dead', showing his disapproval, upset and anger towards his mother and her actions. When Marcus realises that he alone isn't enough to look after his mother, his relationship with her starts to improve as he attempts to set her up with Will.

Nick Hornby then represents their relationship in a cheerful, loving and improving way. Although this new found happiness in their relationship takes another turn for the worst when Fiona starts to 'cry in the mornings' again. This makes Marcus more determined to help his mother which shows that even though he refers to his mother as 'nuts' and that he wasn't 'really bothered' about her, he does in fact love his mother and does his best to look after her. In this way, Nick Hornby represents a loving relationship between them.

When Marcus and Ellie are arrested in Cambridge, after Ellie breaks the window, Fiona becomes very emotional. She gives Marcus a hug and admits in front of Clive, Lindsey, Will and Ellie's mother, that she hasn't been a good mother to Marcus.

She later admits to Will that she thinks she is losing Marcus, as he is growing up so quickly, she even tells him that she thinks Marcus has been smoking. However, she can't see the funny side when Will laughs at this.

The relationship between Marcus and Fiona improves now that Marcus seems happier because he has more friends, is less isolated and has come out of himself. In turn, Fiona is not so mentally and emotionally dependent on Marcus. Nick Hornby finishes on a note of humour when Marcus finally admits that he 'bloody' hates Joni Mitchell, a singer Fiona used to make him listen to.

Commentary

This response is solid and focused as it tracks the changes in the relationship. Key events are selected in a thoughtful way and some quotations are integrated and discussed.

You are advised to spend about 20 minutes on this question.

How does Nick Hornby suggest Marcus' character in this extract? (10)

Contrary to what he told Will, Marcus wasn't really bothered about leaving his mum on her own. He knew that if she did try anything again it wouldn't be for a while, because right now she was still in this weird, calm mood. But telling Will that he wanted his mum to come with them was a way of getting her and Will together, and after that, he reckoned, it should be easy. His mum was pretty, and Will seemed quite well off, they could go and live with Will and his kid, and then there'd be four of them, and four was twice as good as two. And maybe, if they wanted to, they could have a baby. His mum wasn't too old. She was thirty-eight. You could have a baby when you were thirty eight. So then there would be five of them, and it wouldn't matter quite so much if one of them died. Well, it would matter, of course it would matter, but at least it wouldn't leave somebody, him or his mum or Will or his little boy, completely on their own. Marcus, didn't even know whether he liked Will or not, but that didn't come into it any more; he could see he wasn't bad, or a drunk, or violent, so he would have to do.

It wasn't as if he didn't know anything about Will, because he did: Marcus had checked him out. On his way back from school one afternoon he had seen Will out shopping, and he had followed him home like a private detective. He hadn't really found out much about him, apart from where he lived and what shops he went in. But he seemed to be on his own – no girlfriend, no wife, no little boy, even. Unless the little boy was with his girlfriend at home. But if he had a girlfriend, why was he trying to chat up Suzie?

'What time is this guy coming?' his mum asked. They were tidying the house and listening to Exodus by Bob Marley.

'In about ten minutes. You're going to get changed, aren't you?'

'Why?'

'Because you look a wreck, and he's going to take us to Planet Hollywood for lunch.' Will didn't know that last bit yet, because Marcus hadn't told him, but he wouldn't mind.

She looked at him, 'Why does it bother you what I wear?'

'Planet Hollywood.'

'What about it?'

'You don't want to look like an old bag there. In case one of them sees you.'

'In case one of who sees me?'

'Bruce Willis or one of them.'

'Marcus, they won't be there, you know.'

'They're there all the time. Unless they're working. And even then they try to make films in London so they can go for lunch.'

Fiona laughed and laughed. 'Who told you that?'

A kid at his old school called Sam Lovell had told him that. Now Marcus thought about it, Sam had told him some other things that turned out not to be true: that Michael Jackson and Janet Jackson were the same the person, and that Mr Harrison the French teacher had been in the Beatles

'It's just well known.'

'Do you still want to go there if you're not going to see any stars?' He didn't really, but he wasn't going to let her know that.

'Yeah. Course.'

His mum shrugged and went off to get changed.

In this extract, Nick Hornby suggests the character of Marcus as being quite naïve, childlike and optimistic.

In the first line of the extract it shows his relaxed attitude, 'wasn't really bothered'. He calmly analyses the situation involving his mother's attempted suicide in an innocent way.

Nick Hornby does a talented job of revealing Marcus' mental age to the reader. At the beginning of the extract he cleverly associates his mother being in a calm mood with 'weird', which shows that he knows his mother's true personality and traits and can decipher what is usual and what isn't.

However, as the text continues, Hornby presents Marcus' childlike mind where everything is simple 'and then there'd be four'. This means to suggest that he believes Marcus would consider the situation as being easy because he has no experience with it. This side of Marcus, suggested by Hornby, highlights to the reader that Marcus is still a child and I think he empathises with Marcus' character.

Hornby also suggests that Marcus is a fairly blunt character. This is shown where he states 'wouldn't matter quite so much if one of them died'. This gives the impression that Marcus' character is bold and optimistic in that he is thinking of suicide and how to make that more positive by adding another member to his family which he believes would soften the loneliness of the others.

Also Marcus is portrayed as a very realistic character, 'so he would have to do'. He has the ability to put things into perspective which suggests a more mature side to Marcus.

However, in the middle of the extract, Marcus' playful, childlike nature is highlighted again as he refers to himself as a 'private detective'.

In addition, Marcus' character is suggested to be smart as he plots to subtly manipulate Fiona and Will into a relationship with his clever ideas but the childlike theme is kept throughout in the way he attempts to manipulate them by simply dressing his mother better and providing them with a date. He is too young to fully understand how these more adult, mature relationships work, which is suggested throughout by Hornby.

Finally, Marcus' selflessness and caring side is shown where he says, 'he didn't really' which refers to the fact he doesn't really want to go but he is doing it for his mother.

Therefore, I believe that Hornby suggests Marcus' character here to be a very caring, loving son who is also smart for his age and yet at the same time, very inexperienced. His childlike qualities shine throughout the extract.

Commentary

The response is focused, sustained and thoughtful throughout. Textual evidence is selected and discussed carefully.