

STEPHEN KING

THE GIRL WHO LOVED TOM GORDON

ABOUT THE BOOK

IN BRIEF:

Summer, 1998. Nine-year-old Trisha McFarland and her brother Pete are coping with the aftermath of their parents' divorce. On the weekends they don't go down to Malden to stay with their father, their mother takes them on outings. Trisha wishes with all her heart that these would stop - it's always on these trips that the worst fights happen. But when Trisha's mother takes her on a hiking trip, something much more frightening occurs. She is only separated from her family for a minute, but it's long enough to get lost in the woods, with only her walkman for company . . .

IN DETAIL:

Structured like a baseball game, with nine innings, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* is one of Stephen King's most beautiful and accomplished novels. Trisha McFarland is a fascinating child protagonist, and King's account of how she survives in the woods is utterly gripping.

After she loses her family, Trisha is tormented by inner voices telling her that she'll never find her way out of the woods. When she sleeps bugs and mosquitoes feed on her flesh, and her waking moments become increasingly dominated by terrible hunger as the supplies in her lunch-sack slowly diminish. To distract herself, she starts listening to her walkman and becomes gripped by a baseball game, identifying with a player named Tom Gordon.

Tom Gordon is a real baseball player, but King treats him in a fictional manner, concentrating on the role he fulfils for the girl as she tries to remain optimistic and not lose hope. Soon she begins to hallucinate and imagine Tom Gordon is really with her, the only person who can protect her from the various horrors she encounters in the woods, including the terrifying wasp-priest.

This is a novel about conquering fear, about being strong and remaining true to yourself even in the moments of worst desperation. The resourcefulness and courage of this nine-year-old girl are elegantly portrayed throughout, even when she is facing true darkness.

QUOTES:

'Utterly compulsive, bears ample witness to King's mastery of his craft' *Mail on Sunday*

'Moving, gripping. One of his best . . . A literary home run' *Mirror*

'Vintage King...the quality of the prose is consistently impressive and his trump card is his ability to arouse empathy for the plight of his young heroine' Matt Thorne, *Independent on Sunday*

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY:

The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon was delivered to King's publishers as a happy surprise, published between two of his most significant later novels, *Bag of Bones* and *Hearts in Atlantis*. A relatively short novel (by King's standards), it shows him dealing with some fascinating themes. King mentions in the postscript that although Tom Gordon exists in real life, the version of him in this book is fictional, and that he can attest from personal experience that the impressions fans have of celebrities are always fictional. This novel can be seen as King addressing the subject of hero worship, only in the field of sports rather than his usual focus on literature.

King has long been a baseball fanatic, a Boston red sox fan who (with Stewart O'Nan) co-wrote a book chronicling the 2004 baseball season.

King has linked *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* with *Misery* and *Gerald's Game* as one of his 'situational' novels, writing that it all comes from the premise of 'one kid lost in the woods'. It fits well with these two novels as what might be described as one of King's more naturalistic novels.

STARTING POINTS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Trish's favourite song is Tubthumper by Chumbawumba. Other featured bands include Boyz to the Maxx, Hanson Mmm-Bop and the Spice Girls. How does Stephen King use specific music to create character and a sense of time?
2. Who is Tom Gordon and how does he relate to the story?
3. How does the baseball game structure relate to the action of the novel?
4. How does Stephen King make his nine-year-old girl's voice seem realistic?
5. Who is the wasp-priest and what role does he play in the novel?
6. How does Stephen King manage to maintain the dramatic tension throughout the novel?
7. What part does nature play in the novel?
8. Is this a horror novel?
9. How important is Trisha's family life to the novel?
10. What part does religion play in the novel?
11. Who is the Subaudible?
12. Are there any other novels that have a sporting theme that are similar to this one?

READ EXTRACT:

The world had teeth and it could bite you with them anytime it wanted. Trisha McFarland discovered this when she was nine years old. At ten o'clock on a morning in early June she was sitting in the back seat of her mother's Dodge Caravan, wearing her blue Red Sox batting practice jersey (the one with 36 GORDON on the back) and playing with Mona, her doll. At ten thirty she was lost in the woods. By eleven she was trying not to be terrified, trying not to let herself think, *This is serious, this is very serious*. Trying not to think that sometimes when people got lost in the woods they got seriously hurt. Sometimes they died.

All because I needed to pee, she thought . . . except she hadn't needed to pee

all that badly, and in any case she could have asked Mom and Pete to wait up the trail a minute while she went behind a tree. They were fighting again, gosh what a surprise *that was*, and that was why she had dropped behind a little bit, and without saying anything. That was why she had stepped off the trail and behind a high stand of bushes. She needed a breather, simple as that. She was tired of listening to them argue, tired of trying to sound bright and cheerful, close to screaming at her mother, *Let him go, then! If he wants to go back to Malden and live with Dad so much, why don't you just let him? I'd drive him myself if I had a license, just to get some peace and quiet around here!* And what then? What would her mother say then? What kind of look would come over her face? And Pete. He was older, almost fourteen, and not stupid, so why didn't he know better? Why couldn't he just give it a rest? *Cut the crap* was what she wanted to say to him (to both of them, really), *just cut the crap*.

The divorce had happened a year ago, and their mother had gotten custody. Pete had protested the move from suburban Boston to southern Maine bitterly and at length. Part of it really was wanting to be with Dad, and that was the lever he always used on Mom (he understood with some unerring instinct that it was the one he could plant the deepest and pull on the hardest), but Trisha knew it wasn't the only reason, or even the biggest one. The real reason Pete wanted out was that he hated Sanford Middle School.

In Malden he'd had it pretty well whipped. He'd run the computer club like it was his own private kingdom; he'd had friends – nerds, yeah, but they went around in a group and the bad kids didn't pick on them. At Sanford Middle there was no computer club and he'd only made a single friend, Eddie Rayburn. Then in January Eddie moved away, also the victim of a parental breakup. That made Pete a loner, anyone's game. Worse, a lot of the kids laughed at him. He had picked up a nickname which he hated: Pete's CompuWorld.

On most of the weekends when she and Pete didn't go down to Malden to be with their father, their mother took them on outings. She was grimly dedicated to these, and although Trisha wished with all her heart that Mom would stop – it was on the outings that the worst fights happened – she knew that wasn't going to happen. Quilla Andersen (she had taken back her maiden name and you could bet Pete hated that, too) had the courage of her convictions. Once, while staying at the Malden house with Dad, Trisha had heard her father talking to his own Dad on the phone. 'If Quilla had been at Little Big Horn, the Indians would have lost,' he said, and although Trisha didn't like it when Dad said stuff like that about Mom – it seemed babyish and disloyal – she couldn't deny that there was a nugget of truth in that particular observation.

IF YOU LIKE *THE GIRL WHO LOVED TOM GORDON*, YOU'LL LIKE:

Gerald Game

Misery

It

'The Body' in *Different Seasons*

OTHER BOOKS BY STEPHEN KING:

FICTION:

Carrie

'Salem's Lot
The Shining
Night Shift
The Stand
The Dead Zone
Firestarter
Cujo
Cycle of the Werewolf
Christine
The Talisman (with Peter Straub)
Pet Sematary
Skeleton Crew
The Eyes of the Dragon
The Tommyknockers
The Dark Half
Four Past Midnight
Needful Things
Dolores Claiborne
Nightmares and Dreamscapes
Insomnia
Rose Madder
Desperation
Bag of Bones
The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon
Hearts in Atlantis
Dreamcatcher
Everything's Eventual
From a Buick 8
Cell
Lisey's Story
Duma Key
The Dark Tower I: The Gunslinger
The Dark Tower II: The Drawing of the Three
The Dark Tower III: The Waste Lands
The Dark Tower IV: Wizard and Glass
The Dark Tower V: Wolves of the Calla
The Dark Tower VI: Song of Susannah
The Dark Tower VII: The Dark Tower

By Stephen King as Richard Bachman
Thinner
The Running Man
The Bachman Books
The Regulators
Blaze

NON-FICTION:
Danse Macabre
On Writing (A Memoir of the Craft)

WEBSITE LINKS:

www.stephenking.co.uk
www.stephenking.com