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Cynthia Voigt

The Runner (Tillerman Cycle, 4)

United States (1985)

TAGS: Alexander the Great Aristotle Cyrus the Great Daedalus Fall of Rome Persian Empire Sisyphus Trojan War





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General information	
Title of the work	The Runner (Tillerman Cycle, 4)
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States of America
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1985
First Edition Details	Cynthia Voigt, *The Runner*. New York, NY: Atheneum, 1985, 225 pp.
ISBN	9781442428812
Official Website	cynthiavoigt.com (accessed: March 12, 2020).
Genre	Fiction, Novels
Target Audience	Young adults
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Creators



Cynthia Voigt , b. 1942
(Author)

Cynthia Voigt is an American author best known for the Tillerman family novels. She is the author of 33 books for children and young people, and two books for adults, spanning a range of genres and audiences. Born in Boston, Massachusetts, Voigt graduated from Smith College in 1963 and later became a secondary school English teacher. Her novels have won numerous awards, including the prestigious Newbery Medal for *Dicey's Song* in 1983. The first Tillerman novel, *Homecoming*, was nominated for a National Book Award in 1982.

Source:

Official Website (accessed: 04 September, 2019).

Bio prepared by Sarah Hardstaff, University of Cambridge, sflh2@cam.ac.uk

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Additional information

Translation

Dutch: *De hardloper*, trans. M Slagt-Prins, Querido, 1987.

French: *Samuel Tillerman*, trans. Rose-Marie Vassallo, Flammarion, 1993.

German: *Samuel Tillerman, der Läufer*, trans. Matthias Duderstadt, Sauerländer, 1989.

Swedish: *Bullet*, trans. Hans-Jacob Nilsson, Bonniers juniorförl, 1986.

Sequels, Prequels and Spin-offs

The other titles in the Tillerman Cycle are:

- *Homecoming* (1981),
- *Dicey's Song* (1982),
- *A Solitary Blue* (1983),
- *Come A Stranger* (1986),
- Sons From Afar (1987) and
- Seventeen Against the Dealer(1989).

Summary

The Runner is a prequel to the other Tillerman books (reviewed elsewhere in this survey). Set in 1967–1968, the novel focuses on Samuel 'Bullet' Tillerman in his final year at high school before signing up to go and fight in the Vietnam War. His siblings have already left the family home, leaving Bullet alone to deal with his abusive father and downtrodden mother, Abigail. At his recently desegregated school, Bullet, himself bigoted against black people, largely ignores racial conflict, preferring to focus on running. When he is asked to coach a black student called Tamer Shipp, Bullet finds his prejudices and ways of thinking challenged. In a pivotal scene in the novel, Bullet asks Tamer to make a promise not to fight in the Vietnam War. Bullet also has a night out at a local bar with Francis Verricker, the younger Tillermans' wayward father. The novel ends with Abigail turning up unexpectedly to see Bullet run for his school, followed by a final chapter set in 1969 in which she is informed of his death in Vietnam. Several of the novel's themes, such as fatalism, history, and male relationships, are connected explicitly to the history and culture of antiquity.

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Analysis

As *The Runner* is a prequel, readers of the other books already know about Bullet's fate. As such this is, as Victor Watson writes, "a narrative driven by destructive and frustrated energies" (2003, 102). Watson also points out the novel's circularity: "The circularity is not inclusive and embracing but imprisoning… [Bullet's] running – always returning back to exactly where he started – gets him nowhere." (p. 103). The fatalism that permeates the novel links to broader philosophical questions and classical allusions that run throughout the series: elsewhere, futile effort is linked to the myth of Sisyphus (see Voigt's *Sons From Afar*, 1987).

An additional classical link with the other Tillerman novels occurs when Bullet meets Francis Verricker, who takes him to a bar and tells him that "the first dance floor was built by a Greek. Daedalus, and he's the same guy who made wings to get out of prison, him and his kid, they were both locked up." (Voigt 1985, 113). The story of Daedalus and Icarus is also mentioned in *Sons From Afar*, where it becomes one of many father-son reference points for Francis's estranged sons, James and Sammy. While they discuss the themes of the story seriously, Francis barely acknowledges the role of Icarus and treats the story as evidence of his own good memory in this appearance in *The Runner*.

Francis's mention of a mythological father-son relationship reflects the novel's focus on masculinity and relationships between men. Several of Bullet's interactions with other potential male role models are similarly characterised by direct references to classical history, culture and mythology. Early in the novel, Bullet's father tells him "There's a long precedent for adolescent rebelliousness… Aristotle refers to it. You won't know who he is." (p. 36). As well as highlighting the dismissive way Bullet is treated by his father, this scene helps establish one of the core tensions in the novel, between the timelessness of Bullet's anger and his connections to society in a specific time and place.

In another early scene, Bullet's employer Patrice compares him to a "barbarian":

> "You know, traditionally, the barbarian has swept over the civilized world… Goths – or Visigoths – or Ostrogoths – and the Vandals, and the Huns. Poor old Rome, like a kitchen floor, swept and swept, don't

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you think? The Achaians [sic] at Troy. The Vikings along the coasts of Ireland and England and France." (p. 42)

Patrice teaches Bullet that history is a matter of perspective. This is reflected in a later discussion where he encourages Bullet to see both guerilla warfare and great armies in a longer historical context, prompting Bullet to mention both Alexander the Great and "that Persian you told me about, with his ten thousand deathless soldiers" [the *anthanatoi*/Immortals] (p. 144). Patrice also forces Bullet to confront his own prejudices and anti-black racism when he reveals his mixed racial heritage and compares American racism to Nazism. This prompts Bullet to reappraise his attitudes and eventually open up to Tamer as a running partner and friend.

Another influence on Bullet's thinking is his US History teacher, Walker. While his students are discussing racist violence in the school, Walker writes A.E. Housman's 1917 poem *Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries* on the board, encouraging his students to "use it as a model" of "thinking, as opposed to judging" (p. 72). Walker emphasises Housman's profession as a scholar of classics, while students draw parallels with the Vietnam War (*The Runner*'s epigraph comes from Housman's *To an Athlete Dying Young).* Walker later teaches his class about the Roman occupation of Britain, with Voigt again evoking the tension between the timelessness of human feeling and the specifics of history (p. 181). As well as Vietnam and the Romans, Walker's lessons include discussion of the American Civil War and the Cold War. Meanwhile Patrice tells Bullet about his experiences as a resistance fighter during the Nazi occupation of France. Although Voigt resists simplistic parallels between Roman imperialism, Nazism and the USA, this novel nonetheless draws on examples from antiquity to raise questions about aggression, militarism, occupation and oppression in multiple contexts.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Alexander the Great Aristotle Cyrus the Great Daedalus Fall of Rome Persian Empire Sisyphus Trojan War
Other Motifs, Figures,	Adversity Appearances Authority Communication Conflict Death

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and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Disobedience Diversity Emotions Friendship Gaining understanding Gender Gender, male Historical figures History Humanity Identity Individuality Integrity Isolation/loneliness Judgement Learning Loss Masculinity Nation Oppression Parents (and children) Past Peers Philosophy Political changes Punishment Race Relationships Resilience Respect Sacrifice School Society Sport Students Teachers Values Violence War Youth

Further Reading	Digilio, Alice, "What Makes Bullet Run? The Runner by Cynthia Voigt", *The Washington Post* (accessed: October 16, 2019). Hardstaff, Sarah, "Whose war? Symbolic Economies in Conversations about Conflict in Mildred Taylor's *The Road to Memphis* and Cynthia Voigt's *The Runner*", *The ALAN Review* 45.3 (2018): 64–71. Reid, Suzanne E., *Presenting Cynthia Voigt*, New York, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1995. Watson, Victor, "The Tillerman Series", in Margaret Meek and Victor Watson, eds., *Coming of Age in Children's Literature: Growth and Maturity in the Work of Philippa Pearce, Cynthia Voigt and Jan Mark*, London: Continuum, 2003, 85–124.

Addenda	Other tags: common points between Rome and USA Roman occupation of Britain

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