

Revolver by Marcus Sedgwick

Revolver is a story that explores ideas of peace and non-violence – but by using the unlikely symbol of a gun.

Plot

Set in the Arctic Circle this is the story of 14 year old Sig Anderson and his family. It ranges from 1899 to 1967, from the violent days of the Alaskan gold rush to the Vietnam War. Sig is alone in a cabin with the body of his father, frozen to death on the lake. A threatening stranger appears and traps Sig in the cabin in a tense game of cat and mouse. Sig's only weapon seems to be this father's revolver. "*A gun is not a weapon...it's an answer to a question life throws at you when there's no one else to help*", Sig's father has taught him. But there's also his mother's voice in Sig's head: telling him to 'turn the other cheek.' Through a series of flashbacks Sig's strengths are revealed and he finds a middle path to solve the problem.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree that the theme of the novel is peace? What are some other themes that emerged for you?
2. Sedgwick asks: 'Are guns good or bad?' Discuss this question. Is there a middle ground: what arguments are there for having guns as a necessary evil or defence?
3. What is your reaction to this statement that the gun is a 'perfect machine'? What is your idea of a perfect machine?
4. In what ways does the gun still rule America? Does the gun still rule the world? How is this changing with the upsurge in people power movements since 2010?
5. '*I believe there's always a third option in life*' says Sedgwick. What do you think he means by this? What alternatives are there to violent response?
6. Discuss the sayings of Jesus about 'turning the other cheek' and 'loving your enemies.' Is this possible in a violent world?

7. What influence do parents' beliefs have on their children? Think of examples from your own life.
8. Should fiction for young teenagers be hopeful? How much grim reality should it include?
9. Was the ending of the novel satisfying to you? Why or why not?

Theme

The story explores themes of peace and violence in the context of family upbringing. The peace in the story is not an abstract concept but is grounded in the decisions the characters make. Peace is not won easily here – it's tested to its limits. Peace is found, not by retreating, but by directly confronting violence and seeking to understand it.

Sig's relationship with his parents is central to the story. On the surface the parents seem to have different beliefs: Maria puts her faith in God and Einar puts his faith in knowledge. Maria has her precious bible and Einar has his Colt, each waiting for its moment. Maria believes her children 'must learn to trust in love' while Einar is more pragmatic, trusting in his wits. But both his mother and father teach Sig to '*know what you will of the world...know what men are and the things they do.*' In the end it's their combined influence that saves him.

When finally confronted with the decision to shoot the gun Sig manages to combine the wisdom of both parents: he does not kill but he uses his father's cleverness to avoid murder. He wanted to be true to both of them: "*I was trusting in what our parents taught us, in their own different way*" he says to his sister. She replies that '*when you're stuck between two impossible choices, there's always a third way. You just have to look for it.*'

The gun saves Sig in a way, but there's a nice symbolic conceit at the end of the novel when the bible also saves him because the documents are hidden inside it. Perhaps more importantly, Sig learns how to move beyond fear of his enemy and stand up to intimidation. When he finally stands up to the bully, Wolff, he feels 'less as if he were a fly waiting to be squashed by a boot, and more like a boy facing a giant.'

In the Author's Note at the back of the book, Sedgwick comments on Sig's decision not to kill Wolff. *'I think it's up to each of us to decide whether guns are good or bad...all I would like to say is I believe there's always a third option in life...'* He doesn't say what this third option is, although the story gives us clues. Firstly, finding an alternative to violence requires some effort – it's not an easy option. Secondly, peace can only be established where there is a realistic view of 'what men are' – human weakness must be accounted for.

The ending sounds a little contrived but it has parallels in real life situations. During the Second World War many soldiers deliberately missed when shooting at the enemy, not wanting to take a life.

The Christian values of faith, hope and love keep cropping up in the story. Sig's mother preaches 'the path of peace': loving your enemies and forgiving them over and over if necessary. She teaches Sig and Anna to 'turn the other cheek' and 'turn from evil and do good.'

Jesus preached a lot about love. It's easy to forget this, especially after some violent periods in the Christian church over the last 2000 years. His stories and sayings included direct messages including: love your enemies, blessed are the peacemakers, forgive each other seventy times seven, and love your neighbour as yourself. One of the few sayings not quoted in *Revolver* is to *"Be wise as serpents—and harmless as doves."* (Matthew 10:16). I think this best embodies the beliefs that Sig's mother and father passed on to their children.

Writing Style

Sedgwick's writing is a model of great writing for the early teen age group: it has pace, economy, action, suspense, a resolution, and best of all, a convincing young protagonist. Sig faces choices no young person should have to, but this is why we read books, to test our own reactions to situations. There's also a clear moral compass operating here: Sedgwick often spells out the values of the characters and I think that's important for younger readers who need a sense of hope. But Sedgwick also introduces the complexity of moral choices and that's also something young people must eventually come to grips with.

Description of detail is important in this book but not for the sake of flowery descriptive passages. Each detail is carefully chosen to contribute to the plot and theme. The matches are a good example: *'the jumble of matches near his father's hands, looking like a microscopic version of the log jams the timbermen make...'* It's a detail that could easily be dismissed as simply a clever metaphor. But we keep noticing matches: the smoking match is used as an illustration at the chapter beginnings; the father sees them as 'a small chemical miracle' even as he is dying; and Sig returns to the match scene at the climax. The match is a symbol of hope in the story: fire means life in the Arctic; and hope is one of the key themes.

The setting also enhances the theme. The frozen wilderness is a life and death environment where the elements are more deadly than the humans. The township is a place where desperation grips the prospectors when they realize they can't afford to buy food or drink. It's the perfect setting for an intense confrontation and Sedgwick further winds up the tension by placing almost the entire story within a claustrophobic cabin in the snow.

Sedgwick is especially good at handling the complex time shifts in the book. He begins with the gripping present moment where Sig is with his father's body; then eases the reader back to the morning of that day. Then there's are two longer passage set 10 years before; and by half way through the book there are mini time shifts within chapters (eg, chapter 16). It's an effective way of drip-feeding information about the family history.

There's some sharp imagery too, especially when describing the villain, Wolff. His rugged face has been *'battered into shape by the Devil's hammer'*; he steps over a dead body *'as though it were nothing more than a piece of driftwood'*; and *'Wolff dropped the words onto the floor like little spiders, scuttling over to Sig and crawling up his legs.'*

Guns

'The Colt is the finest machine I have ever seen in my life...a piece of man's incredible ingenuity, a machine, perfectly designed around the hand of man,'

says Einar. He spends several pages (pages 107-110) describing how it works including the cleverness of the barrel that's smaller than the bullet, to force it out. Understanding how things work is important to Einar.

Like it or not, the gun is a significant invention in human development – one of the keys to the expansion and power of Eurasian civilizations. This novel is set during at the end of a violent century in American history (which included The Civil War): *'The revolver rules, the revolver is triumphant'* as Walt Whitman wrote. There's startling quote on page 157 from the president, Thomas Jefferson: *'let the gun therefore be the constant companion of your walks.'*

The frightening thing is how easy it is to shoot a gun, as Sig discovers when only a child (page 113). It's the same experience that the author himself had when firing a gun and also he says 'the strong desire I had to do it again.' Later the violence of a bullet wound is described by Einar in graphic detail – how it rips open a cavity in our human flesh. Once again it's his father's way of trying to tell Sig that these are the realities of life on the gold fields.

Nome Gold Rush

In 1898 three Swedish prospectors (called 'The Three Lucky Swedes'!) discovered gold near Cape Nome, Alaska. When news of their find got out it caused the largest gold rush in the history of Alaska. About 20,000 gold seekers journeyed to the area and a disorderly tent city sprang up on the beach-front. It was a lawless settlement with gangs and claim jumping was common. But the real gold-strike was yet to come. A prospector found gold in the sand on the beach and the rush was on: \$2 million of gold was taken from the beach in the summer of 1899.

By 1905, a more settled township, named Nome, had emerged with schools, shops and churches. Missionaries were active including Quakers and some from the Swedish Covenant Church. When a 900 mile trail was built leading to Nome in 1908, the population exploded and Alaska eventually became an established territory. Many large gold nuggets were found in the area and gold mining still continues today.

Brief Biography

'I write because I love it. You can't be a writer if you don't - it's too hard otherwise.' (Marcus Sedgwick)

Marcus Sedgwick has had a 16 year career in publishing and is an established writer of young adult fiction with over 10 novels published (and 3 for junior readers). His books have featured in many awards, including the Booktrust Teenage Book Award, the Carnegie Medal, the Edgar Allan Poe Award, and the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize. He is Writer in Residence at Bath Spa University, teaches creative writing, makes films, and has illustrated his own and others' books. His hobbies include stone carving and playing the drums: 'If I wasn't a writer I would love to have been a professional musician.' When asked if he had any advice for aspiring writers he replied, ' I think it's really important that you finish what you start - don't worry about how good your stories are, or how long they are, just practice finishing!'

Notes by Raymond Huber