

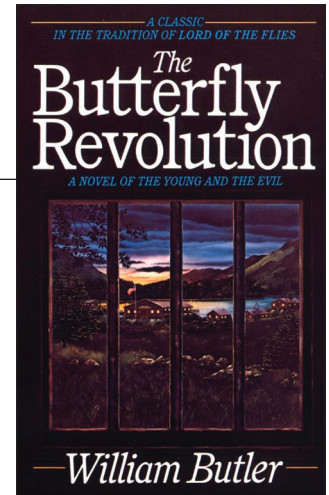


The Butterfly Revolution

by William Butler

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Reading Level: 9.0



• about this book •

Plot Summary

When Winston Weyn's uncle gives him a diary for his thirteenth birthday, Winston appreciates this gift much more than the one his parents provide—a trip to “one of those cheap city summer camps where all they do is runaround and yell and play baseball and swim.” Intellectually precocious, an avid reader and student, Winston is a poor candidate for a summer of reckless athletic fun, but his father wants to make him into a “regular guy” like his older brother, Howard. Winston, however, is determined to be himself at all costs. Against the advice of his family he plans to pack his books off to camp with him; it is with books and in the world of ideas that Winston really lives. But the month that follows will thrust Winston directly into a world of experience where power and knowledge collide and his formidable thirteen-year-old intelligence will prove inadequate to protect him from the amoral force of an individual who manipulates intelligence and power to dangerous ends.

At Camp High Pines, Winston's sojourn begins quietly. He is not teased by his cabinmates; in fact, he is even made cabin leader, and is given an opportunity to learn to swim, carefully, in the shallow water. But his reputation as an intellectual has preceded him. When one of the older boys, Frank Reilley, a strong, arresting-looking individual, approaches Winston to ask if he knows the meaning of the word lepidoptera, Winston is wary. But the older boy with the strange purple-looking eyes admires intelligence, and his request for Winston's dictionary is genuine. “Your brother says you're nuts,” Reilley remarks. “I figure that's because you're smart and he's an ass.”

Against the backdrop of normal camp activities, author William Butler sows the seeds of the trouble that will break out: the boys in Winston's cabin resent his behavior as cabin leader, particularly the system of fines he imposes to deal with infractions of the rules (although Winston himself struggles with the problem of reporting other boys who pay an illegal visit to the girls at their sister camp, Low Pines); a fight between some of the elder boys ends when one of them, John Mason, is placed in “The Brig”; Frank Reilley's friend, Stanley Runk, menaces Winston and his friend, Ham, with a huge hunting knife. Each of these actions serves as a precursor to the more serious eruptions that occur during the revolution that follows. Even at the outset, Winston writes in his diary, “The boys having the best time . . . are the smallest kids. They just do what they are told and don't have to be responsible about anything.”

Forced by one of the counselors to participate in a childish butterfly hunt, the older boys decide they've had enough. At a meeting of the cabin leaders, Frank Reilley announces that there is going to be a revolution designed to show Mr. Warren, the camp director, that the older boys will not be treated like ten-year-olds, that they need and desire more “action” than the camp provides. In addition, one of the older boys, Manuel Rivaz, has been expelled for getting caught at the girls' camp. This action serves to further solidify the older campers' opposition to the director. When Don Egriss (a black camper who

earlier had saved Winston from drowning) questions Reilley further, he replies sarcastically, "I'll tell you why . . . Egriss, in a word even you can understand. For fun. That's why. It's fun to know you don't have to be expelled. It's fun knowing you can be as old as we are without having to pretend like you're really eleven." Stanley Runk expands this explanation: "[We're revolting] against the butterflies, Egriss . . . against the birdies, against the slow pace, the drag, Warren Talent Show, marshmallows, tiddlywinks . . . You pipe up about this to anybody, fellow, and you're in The Brig with Warren. You understand?" then, to capture Winston's support, Reilley asserts, "I like books too, kid, but books are about doing things, aren't they? Let's not live our whole lives in between the covers."

With Stanley Runk's knife raised and his arm around Mr. Warren's neck, the boys succeed in seizing control of the camp. Reilley's plans are thorough; his half-crazed, excited manner both inflames and frightens the other campers into submission. With the help of some of the older boys, he takes over the girls' camp, and the kitchen, and Winston captures the camp flag. To the younger campers it is all a game, like cops and robbers, like "Capture the Flag," which they'd played just a few days before. But it does not stay a game for long.

As Reilley appeases the campers with free ice cream, parties, and incursions into the girls' camp, he strengthens his hold. A Supreme Revolutionary Committee, where all authority resides, is formed. Then the first "traitor to the revolution" attempts an escape. Frank Divordich, disillusioned and frightened, tries to leave. But he is caught, tied to a tree, and whipped. Shaken by the violent incident, Winston confides his fears to Don Egriss.

"The butterflies are gone," Egriss tells him. "What did you expect?"

The Supreme Revolutionary Committee takes over the administration building and the counselors of both the boys' and girls' camps are held in The Brig. The punishment doled out to "counterrevolutionaries" keeps the campers frightened and contained. Winston rises in the ranks of the revolution; propaganda is an important function in the revolution, and Winston is its chairman. He is also appointed to the Supreme Revolutionary Committee, where he can monitor what is really going on. Meanwhile, Winston continues his reading: John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, Thomas Jefferson, and Henry Thoreau. He struggles to understand their words even as he takes part in a serious political action. It is becoming clear to Winston that the revolution is no longer being waged for "fun."

Winston begins to be frightened at the way the S.R.C. meetings deal with the subject of loyalty to the revolution, its continuation and growth. Reilley orders him to get a map of a nearby town and to locate buildings on it. When he asks Reilley why he must do this he is told not to ask questions, that questions have nothing to do with loyalty.

Internal conflicts soon surface. Frank and his friend "General" Stanley Runk quarrel, and Frank has Runk arrested along with another unstable "officer," John Mason, who has attacked one of the girls at Low Pines. Winston continues to wonder why everyone obeys Frank; aside from his ability to keep the revolution going organizationally, what is it that gives him his power? "If no one obeyed him," Winston thinks, "Frank couldn't do anything about it." But they do obey him, even Winston. They are too afraid not to, too guilty to stop this thing that has grown much bigger than any of them believed possible. In the meantime, Don Egriss has decided to leave camp and asks his friend Winston if he'd like to leave with him.

Winston then discovers that Frank has possession of Stanley Runk's knife as well as the .38 revolver that belonged to Mr. Warren. More disturbing to him, however, is the acceptance of former cabin leader George Meridel's petition by the S.R.C.; now everyone in the camp must say the Pledge of Allegiance and sing the National Anthem every morning. But Winston is a confirmed atheist and has already made known his opposition to Meridel's law-and-order fanaticism. Out of principle he asserts he will never say the pledge: "I don't care if they hang me for it."

A man of principle, Winston Weyn goes into ideological battle against the founders of the Butterfly Revolution over the issue of freedom of choice. Invoking the constitution and the writings of Thomas Jefferson, he defends his position. But Meriden calls him crazy and Frank Reilley insists that the principle of this revolution is obedience to its laws. Meanwhile, Don Egriss has made good on his threat to leave, but he is captured and sent to The Brig. There, Winston visits him and witnesses the conflict between Egriss and Mason that later results in Mason's murder. But how did Don get hold of Mr. Warren's .38 service revolver? It is clear to the reader that someone "arranged" for the gun to be found in The Brig.

Confusion and increasingly violent behavior mark the last days of the Butterfly Revolution. Winston is brought up on charges, some of which are unfounded, but instead of being placed in The Brig he

is stripped of his rank and made an ordinary militiaman, his activities branded subversive. He can no longer make sense of Frank's activities and becomes convinced that Frank is crazy. The violence and the chaos that have been unleashed culminate in the tragic hanging of Don Egriss by the girls at Low Pines, whose frustrated desire to take revenge upon Mason finds expression in the killing of an innocent victim. Distraught and horrified, Winston decides it is time to quit the revolution. All he wants now is to avenge his friend's death. "I hate everyone here except Paul and Ham . . . I'm going to kill Frank Reilley . . . and that will stop this rotten revolution."

But Winston does not kill Frank. He buries Don and, shortly afterward, the police arrive, tipped off by another escaped camper. In the end, they discover the body of Mr. Warren, who had been murdered by Stanley Runk and left to decompose in some nearby caves. The leaders of the revolution are taken to Detention Hall where they are questioned. Because of the diary Winston has kept, there is a record of all that has gone on. It is this diary that proves Winston innocent of the more serious charges. Although he is released and returns home, he is a changed and shaken individual. In addition to his grief over the terrible murders at the camp, Winston carries within him his own responsibility for the actions he performed on behalf of the revolution. Something further has been spoiled for him now. He writes in his diary: "I used to have this happy feeling about books and about knowledge, that there was nothing I couldn't learn, but now there are so many things I don't understand and don't know if I will ever be able to understand. So it seems I can't just study and figure out all the things I want to know, and there are some problems people are supposed to struggle with, just struggle with until the struggling itself works its way into some kind of answer. Just struggle."

→ discussion and writing

comprehension & discussion questions

May 25-29, pages 9-18

1. What opinion of Winston Weyn do his father, his brother, and the kids at school hold?
2. In what ways does Winston seem different from most thirteen-year olds? What are some of the things he does that show this?
3. What are Winston's expectations about camp? How do you think the boys there will treat him?

May 30-31, pages 19-29

1. What is it that Frank Reilley believes has scales? How does he prove this?
2. Describe Frank Reilley. Why does he seem strange to Winston?

June 1-2, pages 30-44

1. How does Winston become cabin leader?
2. What actions does he take as leader and how do the boys respond to them? What would your response be?

June 3-4, pages 45-69

1. Why does Winston object to collecting butterflies?
2. What is his counselor's view of nature and the individual's relationship to it? What happens when the older boys go butterfly hunting?
3. Why do you think Winston goes to the girls' camp with Paul Divordich? What is the result of this foray?
4. What are Frank Reilley's plans for the camp? How does Winston get drawn into them?

June 5, pages 70-84

1. How do the boys take control of the camp? What frightens Winston during the takeover?
2. How do you know that Winston thinks of the revolution as a game? Does the reader feel the same way? Do you think the author wants the reader to consider the revolution "fun" at this point? Explain.
3. What does Frank Reilley describe as the revolution's purpose? Why do the campers go along with him?
4. How is the revolution organized? Which campers do not take part in it?

June 6-8, pages 85-110

1. Why does Frank Reilley raise Winston to the rank of Captain and ask him to join the Supreme Revolutionary Committee?
2. What is the task of the Supreme Revolutionary Committee?

June 9-10, pages 111-120

1. Why must the Propaganda Committee read all the letters the campers send out?
2. What issues in the writing of Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill does Winston object to? How are these related to the occurrences around him?
3. What is the conflict between Stanley Runk and Frank Reilley? How is it resolved?
4. Who are the prisoners of the revolution and how have they been cared for?

June 11-12, pages 121-142

1. Why does Winston believe it is time to call off the revolution? Why doesn't he do anything to stop it?
2. Describe the further changes in the revolution and the methods Frank Reilley uses to carry them out.
3. Winston asks: "Could we have had the revolution without the knife?" What is your opinion on this question?
4. Why does Winston object to the Pledge of Allegiance? How far is he willing to go to defend his beliefs?

June 13-14, pages 143-166

1. What is George Meridel's rule and how does it affect Winston?
2. Why do you think Frank Reilley handles John Mason's punishment in the way he does? How does Thelma Hogan believe Mason should be punished?
3. What are some of Winston's worries about Reilley at this point in the novel?
4. Who are the people in The Brig and what are their crimes?
5. How is Winston involved in Don Egriss's incarceration?
6. Why is Winston brought to trial? What accusations are made against him? Which ones are justified? Which ones are fabricated? What is Winston's punishment?
7. How does Reilley benefit from the confusion at the camp?

June 15-17, pages 167-182

1. For what purpose does Winston decide to get himself sent to The Brig?
2. Explain the revolution's new motto: "On our own terms."
3. What are the circumstances of John Mason's death?
4. Discuss Winston's deep-seated objections to the revolution and how he deals with them.
5. Why does Stanley Runk think Reilley wants a real revolution? What evidence is there to support this belief?

June 18-10, pages 183-205

1. Why does Don Egriss die? Why was he killed? Who does Winston believe is responsible for his death? What sentence in the book shows this?
2. What is Winston's plan for Frank Reilley? What do you think of it?

June 21-23, pages 206-221

1. Why does Winston build Don's monument in the shape of a pyramid?
2. How does the revolution end?
3. What has been responsible for the terrible smell at the caves down the river? In what way do you think this has contributed to Reilley's increasingly distracted nervousness?
4. What happens to the members of the Supreme Revolutionary Council? What happens to the rest of the campers?
5. What role does Winston's diary play in getting him released from Detention Hall?
6. Why is Winston confused about reading and studying at the end of the novel? What are some of the things he does not understand?
7. What are the issues people are meant to "struggle with"?

literary analysis

point of view

- The action of *The Butterfly Revolution* is seen from the point of view of the thirteen-year-old protagonist. What are the qualities that make Winston Weyn well suited to the role of the narrator?
- Why is it important that Winston get and use a diary?
- How does Winston's extensive reading contribute to his role in the revolution? In what way was his reading dangerous? What things did he fail to understand about the course of a revolution; the fight for individual liberty; the dangers of a totalitarian leader?
- In what way does Winston change by the end of the novel?

character

- Select the four most significant characters in the book, and explain how each one's personality served the action of the novel.
- Using these same four characters discuss what motivated each of them at the start and at the conclusion of the revolution.
- Name the individuals that were killed during the revolution and the manner in which each one died. What role did weapons play in their death? What other factors contributed to the murders?
- How does Frank Reilley get and hold his power? What quality does he possess and what skills does he use to make him leader of the revolution? Which of his attributes make him dangerous?
- How are the girls and the girls' camp at Low Pines depicted in the novel? In what way do their roles in the revolution differ from those of the boys?

plot

- Write a one-sentence description of the plot of *The Butterfly Revolution*. How does the author make such a plot believable to his readers?
- Plot is often defined as "character in action." Discuss the plot of the novel in terms of this definition.
- What are the precipitating causes of the revolution and its long-term effects?

title

- How did the author arrive at this title? Reread pages 46-47. In what ways is the revolution symbolic of the actual butterfly hunt it takes its name from? In what ways is the choice of a butterfly ironic?
- What are the essential differences between the Butterfly Revolution and revolutions such as the American, Russian, or French? Think particularly in terms of causes and effects.

setting

- How does the fact that the action takes place at a summer camp make possible the staging of a revolution?
- What specific aspects of the camp's geography and facilities make it possible for the revolution to take hold?

foreshadowing and symbolism

- What is significant about Winston's first meeting with Frank?
- Why is it both incongruous and significant that butterflies do have scales? What other invertebrates possess scales? What is the connection Butler wants his readers to make between butterflies and snakes?
- At what point in the novel did you believe that someone had been killed? What prior indications does Butler give the reader to suggest this?
- How does Butler help the reader to anticipate the following: Don Egriss's death; Winston's defection; Mason's crime?

theme

- What are the key issues about knowledge and power which the book raises?
- Winston calls himself a moralist. What is morality? Explain Winston's actions during the

revolution in terms of morality. What disturbing implications does Butler want the reader to think about?

- c. What are the issues that Butler wants his readers to “struggle with” after reading his book? Is *The Butterfly Revolution* a morality tale? A warning?
- d. What is the view of human nature that this book expresses?

• suggested activities

activities

1. Adopting the diary form that Winston Weyn uses, write a description of a group action that you were drawn into, perhaps against your better judgment. What were the causes of the action and what were its results?
2. Using fictional names and the diary format, write a description of a group action that your narrator is drawn into—one that has serious consequences.
3. Write an essay comparing Winston’s description of himself as a moralist with his actions during the revolution.
4. Write a definition of morality, then draw up your own moral code.
5. Write an essay in which you analyze Butler’s portrayal of group behavior among teenagers and children. Based on your own observations of how kids behave in groups, consider the plausibility of the actions in *The Butterfly Revolution*.
6. For a joint English and Social Studies project, divide the class into groups to research a specific totalitarian leader: his rise to power; his period of control; the aims and methods of his government; and the causes of his demise.
7. Write an essay identifying those tendencies within people that allow them to be manipulated in terms of your idea of fashion, the kind of music you like; your notions of right and wrong, your values in general.
8. Research with the class those constitutional and societal safeguards that are designed to prevent the rise of totalitarian leaders in the United States.
9. Write an essay discussing the way in which Frank Reilley was able to play upon Winston’s concerns about individual liberty to further the revolution.
10. Write an essay discussing how the Butterfly Revolution could have been stopped, at what points, and by whom. Why then, did it continue?
11. At the conclusion of the novel, Winston writes, “So it seems I can’t just study and figure out all the things I want to know . . . There are some problems people are supposed to just struggle with. . . .” What are the things he has been studying that summer in camp? In what ways have they been unable to help him with the problems he encountered during the revolution? What are the problems Winston will have to struggle with? After discussing this question with the class, have students write an essay setting forth their answers to this problem.

• vocabulary

Identifications

Herodotus, 480ca-425 B.C.—A Greek historian known as the Father of History who was the first person known to research the events of the past, treating them in a rational rather than mythical manner.

Pentateuch—The first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It relates the history of the Jews from Creation to the death of Moses.

The Book of Job—An Old Testament book that deals with the problems of undeserved suffering and God’s justice. The faithful Job endures God’s test of his belief. His faith remains steadfast despite the loss of his wealth, the death of his children, and a plague of boils.

Harpagus, 6th century B.C.—A Median general who, in refusing to allow the death of the infant Cyrus, was subsequently punished by the cruel king Astyages who served Harpagus the flesh of his infant son at a feast.

Karl Marx, 1818-1883—The German socialist who believed that economic structure is the basis of history, shaping the social, political, and intellectual aspects of life. Since, according to Marx, the inequities of capitalism cannot be abolished by reform, only destruction of the entire capitalist

economy and the establishment of a new classless society will suffice. His theories were set forth in the major work, *Das Kapital*, which had great influence upon the development of Russian communism.

John Stuart Mill, 1806-1873—The English philosopher and economist. His works are recognized for their idealistic humanism and their essential belief in the value of the individual.

Henry Thoreau, 1817-1862—An American essayist, poet, and naturalist. “Civil Disobedience” is the essay he wrote discussing the right of the individual to oppose the state when matters of conscience are concerned. Thoreau himself spent a night in jail for refusing to pay the poll tax, a means of registering his opposition to U.S. government involvement in the Mexican War.

• about this guide's writer

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