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The Miracle Worker: A Play

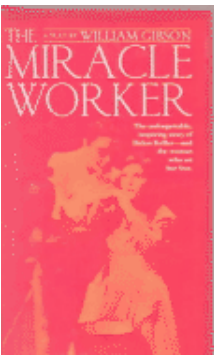
by William Gibson

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SUMMARY



THE MIRACLE WORKER opens with a doctor assuring Captain Keller and his wife, Kate, that their infant daughter, Helen will recover from a serious fever. Soon after the doctor leaves, however, Kate realizes that Helen is deaf and blind. In the next scene, Helen is about six years old. She is a wild, undisciplined child. Though they try, her parents are unable to control her. In desperation they hire a young woman, Annie Sullivan.

From the moment Annie arrives, it is clear that she and Helen will be gripped in a great struggle. But Helen is not the only problem for Annie. Annie must also convince the Kellers, especially the Captain, that she needs complete control of Helen if she is to reach the child. Annie is certain that language is the key to gaining access to Helen's mind, and she constantly spells the names of things on Helen's palm. Although Helen can spell them back on Annie's palm, the understanding that the words represent things eludes her. After spending two weeks together in the garden house. Helen finally obeys Annie, but when the time is up and they return to the family, Helen quickly reverts to her former behavior.

The Kellers are indulgent, ready to fall back in their old pattern of behavior, but Annie doesn't let them. When Helen spills a water pitcher on Annie, Annie takes her out to refill it. She spells "water" into Helen's hand, and suddenly the miracle happens. Helen understands.

Source: <http://www.janaedwards.com/MIRACLE/MiracleWorkerGuide.pdf>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Gibson was born November 13, 1914 in New York City where he spent most of his childhood. Gibson enjoyed success in his early academic years earning him the privilege of skipping grades. He showed promise as a writer being an avid reader and winning several awards for his writing in high school. Despite his success in literature, Gibson struggled in subjects such as math, science and history. Gibson was also a talented piano player and often performed popular duets with his father at community gatherings.

Gibson attended City College of New York City, but became frustrated after enrolling in a science program under the bad advice of a professor. He decided to pursue his love of writing as a result of the encouragement of his literature professor and his expulsion from college for not completing any other courses.

It would be 20 years before Gibson made a living in his chosen profession, and was supported until then by his wife and odd part-time jobs. His most popular plays are *THE MIRACLE WORKER* and *TWO FOR THE SEESAW*. In 1982, Gibson wrote a sequel to *THE MIRACLE WORKER* entitled *MONDAY AFTER THE MIRACLE* based on the life of Helen Keller as a college student.

Gibson now lives in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where he co-founded the Berkshire Theatre Festival.

Source: <http://www.janaedwards.com/MIRACLE/MiracleWorkerGuide.pdf>

(Accessed 8/04/05)



BOOK REVIEW

Deaf, blind, and mute twelve-year-old Helen Keller was like a wild animal. Scared out of her wits but still murderously strong, she clawed and struggled against all who tried to help her. Half-blind herself but blessed with fanatical dedication, Annie Sullivan began a titanic struggle to release the young girl from the terrifying prison of eternal darkness and silence.

THE MIRACLE WORKER, a play by William Gibson, has had an enduring presence as a piece of living literature. It appeared on Broadway during the 1959-60 dramatic season, was made into a motion picture a couple of years later, and then was remade as a television movie for the 1979-80 season. The play's genesis lies in the real story of Helen Keller (1880-1968), the woman who was struck deaf and blind by illness at the age of 19 months. *THE MIRACLE WORKER* tells how a young Helen was led out of her prison of silence and darkness by the remarkable Annie Sullivan, who set out to teach the girl sign language.

THE MIRACLE WORKER is a truly great play. Gibson brilliantly takes the historical facts of Keller's childhood (many of which can be found in *THE STORY OF MY LIFE*, Keller's 1902 autobiography) and turns them into a suspenseful, profoundly moving piece of theater. Although the core of the play is the fiery relationship between Sullivan and the wildly undisciplined Helen, Gibson's drama takes in the entire Keller household. I was particularly moved by the relationship between "Miss Annie" and Helen's frustrated but devoted mother.

THE MIRACLE WORKER is remarkable because much of the story is told not in dialogue, but in Gibson's stage directions. This is one of those plays which is not only powerful in performance, but also a gripping read.

Source: Amazon.com



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Warning! Some of the questions contain key elements of the plot. Do not read if you don't want to know what happens!

1. Before Annie Sullivan arrived, what strategies were Helen Keller's family considering in dealing with Helen?
2. Before Annie Sullivan's arrival, how did Helen's disabilities and behavior affect the Keller family? Be specific in discussing the Captain, Kate and James.
3. Describe Annie Sullivan. What kind of young woman was she? Cite examples from the play to support your views.
4. Describe Captain Keller and Kate. Why do you think they had so much trouble controlling Helen?
5. How do you think Annie's background, especially memories of her younger brother, Jimmie, influenced her behavior as an adult? Explain.
6. What are James's and Aunt Ev's roles in the story? Why do you think the author included them?
7. Why wouldn't Annie let Helen take food from her (Annie's) plate? Why was Annie's battle with Helen at the table so important?
8. Why was it necessary for Helen to be completely dependent on Annie during her learning? What was the Captain's reaction to Annie's demand that she stay alone with Helen at the garden house? Why do you think he finally gave in?
9. When Helen and Annie returned from the garden house, why do you think Helen "tested" Annie and her parents at the table? What happened? In your opinion, was Annie right?
10. Why do you think "water," "wah, wah" was the first word Helen recognized?

The characters undergo profound changes by the end of the play. Explain how Helen, Annie, the Captain, and James changed.

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Character Information

Helen Keller - Was born on June 27, 1880 in Tuscumbia, a small town in Alabama, USA. She was the daughter of Captain Arthur Henley Keller and Kate Adams Keller. Captain Keller was a plantation owner and ran a weekly newspaper. Kate Keller was the second wife of Captain Keller and Helen was her first child. When Helen was nineteen months old, she lost her sight and hearing due to meningitis fever. She became both blind and deaf. In 1887, Annie Sullivan became Helen's live-in tutor under the recommendation of The Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston. This relationship would become a friendship that would last for the rest of their lives.

Under Annie Sullivan's teachings, Helen learned 'finger-spelling' and Braille and quickly learned to communicate through spelling words into people's hands and through writing. At the age of 8, Helen left Alabama to attend The Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston with Annie where her quick learning and exceptional memory for detail earned her the nickname of 'miracle child'. By the age of nine, she learned to speak by feeling the shape of her speech teacher's mouth and shaping the same syllables with her own mouth. In a similar manner, she also learned to read lips by placing her fingers on the mouths of speakers.

By the time she graduated from Radcliffe College with honors in 1904, Helen Keller had become famous for her triumphs over her barriers of blindness and deafness. Helen devoted the remainder of her life to promoting social reform and to educate the public about the treatment of blind and deaf persons. She won many humanitarian awards and toured Europe, North and South America, Asia and Africa lecturing about the need to improve the lives of disabled people. She published 14

books including her autobiography *THE STORY OF MY LIFE*. She also met every President of the United States from Calvin Coolidge to John F. Kennedy.

Helen Keller died on June 1, 1968 at the age of 87 and will be remembered as one of the greatest women in the world. Senator Lister Hill eulogized her as 'one of the few persons not born to die.'

Annie Sullivan - was born in 1866 in Springfield, Massachusetts of poor Irish immigrant parents. From birth to age 14, Annie's life was for the most part a nightmare, which fuelled the fires of her rebellion and determination in her later years. Annie's father Thomas Sullivan was a drinker and a brawler, and her mother Alice bore five children, only two of whom reached adulthood. Alice died at age 28 when Annie was 8 years old. Annie contracted an eye disease, trachoma, that was untreated and gradually destroyed her vision. Her much loved brother Jimmie, was born partially crippled. At the age of 10, Annie and Jimmie were sent to the state poorhouse in Tewksbury, Massachusetts. The conditions in the poorhouse were extremely bad and the death rate, especially among the children, was very high. Death became a common event to Annie but her grief and loneliness knew no bounds when her adored Jimmie died.

After Jimmie's death, Annie's one desire was to get out of the poorhouse and go to school. She sensed she was different and she wanted so much more from life than the other inmates at Tewksbury. She studied at the Perkins Institution and struggled to become one of Perkins's top graduates and valedictorian of her class. Shortly after her graduation, Annie was offered one of the most intriguing challenges of all time - becoming Teacher to Helen Keller. Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller would become inseparable until Annie's death in 1936

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Further Reading

If you liked *THE MIRACLE WORKER: A PLAY* by William Gibson, you might like to read the following books, too!

SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR by Beverly Gherman

EDITH WILSON: THE WOMAN WHO RAN THE UNITED STATES by James Cross

DIANA, TWENTIETH-CENTURY PRINCESS by Patricia Giff

HELEN KELLER: A LIGHT FOR THE BLIND by Kathleen V. Kudlinski

GRANDMA MOSES, PAINTER OF RURAL AMERICA by Zibby Oneal

THE COURAGE OF HELEN KELLER by Francene Sabin

DEAR DR. BELL — YOUR FRIEND, HELEN KELLER by Judith St. George

HELEN KELLER: FROM TRAGEDY TO TRIUMPH by Katherine E. Wilkie

LOUIS BRAILLE by Jennifer Fisher Bryant

RON KOVIC by Nathaniel Moss

RAY CHARLES by David Ritz

JACKIER JOYNER-KERSEE: CHAMPION ATHLETE by Geri Harrington

VINCENT VAN GOGH: ARTIST by Peter Tyson

BOB DOLE: POLITICIAN by Marcia Wertime

ERNEST HEMINGWAY by Melissa McDaniel

CHRISTOPHER REEVE: ACTOR AND ACTIVIST by Margaret L. Finn

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT by Don Nardo

Source: Horizon database

Interesting Websites

http://www.afb.org/braillebug/braille_deciphering.asp

<http://www.afb.org/Section.asp?SectionID=1>