



THE GILDER

A fable by Grant Wattie

FOR READING GROUPS

The Gilder is the story of Wil, a grower's son turned away from a children's game at six years old for being too big. He becomes the most celebrated portrait painter in an Empire that has taken down all its mirrors, selling a gift nobody should ever have sold, until a letter from home arrives one week too late. It is a fable about who you were before the world told you who to be.

THE ONE QUESTION

Every argument in this guide is the same question wearing different clothes, so put it on the table first and come back to it at the end of the night:

Who are you when nobody is watching and nothing is being asked of you?

The book gives you three answers to fight over, one per voice.

The Clerk's answer: you are what your entries say. The painter, the prize-winner, the one who is asked. Identity is built out of doing and kept up the way a ledger is kept up. Most of the world runs on this answer. The book drowns it in chapter 13, coat and all.

Ana's answer, and the driver's: you are the role you are playing right now, held lightly. At the dance Ana borrows a young man for five minutes and "let go of the part the moment it was done with, which he noticed, because he never had." The driver is a fiddler to two horses at two in the morning and a driver by day, and grips neither. On this answer the self is not a thing you keep; it is the way you meet the moment, feeling and action together, put down when the moment is done. The disease is not having roles. It is being unable to let go of one.

The restorer's answer: you are the original, whole under whatever got painted over it. "What I have never once found, and I've looked, is a hole. There is only a covered one." The sculptors used to say the angel was already in the marble; she says the picture was always under the black. Nothing you did made you, and nothing done to you unmade you.

Then the trap question, once the room has picked sides. The book agrees with the restorer, but watch where it lets anyone actually meet the original: a boy painting a ewe in an empty paddock, a widow crossing her yard at six in the morning so nobody sees, a fiddle played to horses, an old woman singing to a ship's wake, a man drawing his wife's hands for no one. Every proof in this book happens with no audience and nothing asked. So the question comes back around and lands on the room: when did you last do anything that way, and who showed up while you did it?

THE ARGUMENTS

This book picks ten fights with things most of us grew up believing. Pick a side. Defend it.

1. **The world says you must achieve to be someone. The book says you were someone before you did anything.** Wil wins every prize two hemispheres offer and none of it ever reaches the field he lost at six. The people who are someone in this book did nothing for it: a boy at a water trough, a baby in enormous longjohns, a half-starved pup carried home in a coat. Whose side are you on, and what would you have to put down to change sides?
2. **The world says you must work hard to get anywhere. The book says the place he wanted was never at the end of work.** Wil works for thirty years to reach a supper table that stood twelve feet from his childhood bed, and there was never a toll on the door. When Ana catches him filling the wood shed, she says it in five words: "I will not be paid." Is your own hardest work taking you somewhere, or standing in for arriving?
3. **The world says some people don't deserve to be forgiven. The book says deserving never came into it.** Is Ana's forgiveness the largest act in the book, or does it let Wil off too lightly? Is there someone you refuse to forgive because they haven't earned it, and what would happen if earning were never the currency?
4. **The world says beliefs aren't real. The book is not so sure.** Nothing was ever truly taken off anyone; belief did the rest. And yet the Minister's bought decisiveness put real walls down on real villages, and a fear with no shape kept a real woman indoors for nine years. A superstition is only a superstition until a whole town acts on it; they burned actual witches. If a false belief changes what everyone does, in what sense is it false, and which of your own beliefs are doing real work in your house right now?
5. **The world says honour the size of your wound. The book says Wil's, at full size, was two frightened boys and a hoop.** Half of every room resists this: mine isn't small, and don't you dare minimise it. Sometimes that half is right. Where is the line between re-measuring a wound and belittling it, and who gets to draw that line?
6. **The world says starve the bad wolf. The driver says feed them both.** You already know the two-wolves story with the other ending. The driver says a starved dog doesn't die, it gets out, and his got out for a year. Fight your demons, or set a plate for them where you can see them: which have you tried, and what happened?
7. **The world says forgive quickly, and also says forgive only after remorse. Hazel does neither.** She charges no grovelling and full price: fourteen months of her father's time, paid at a gate in all weathers. Too cruel, or the only honest terms on offer? How long is forgiveness allowed to take before it becomes a new cruelty, and who decides, the debtor or the bill?
8. **The world says don't get too big for your boots. The book says playing small is the same disease in the other coat.** The stooped man in the story Wil reads aboard ship spent thirty years fitting himself to doors that were never too low, and was well liked for it, and Wil calls him sensible. Wil ends unmeasured, not modest. What has staying the right size cost you, and who taught you the size?
9. **The world says being truly seen will heal you. The book is not so sure.** Ana sees Wil whole at twenty-six, "There you are," on a harbour wall, and he sails anyway, with her blessing, and his daughter's question hanging at the rail. If being loved and seen were enough, the book would end in chapter six. Why wasn't it enough? What did the water have to do that her eyes could not?

10. **The world says what you've lost must be found again, worked for, won back. The book says nothing true was ever lost.** The singer's board is never found, and she sings anyway, to the wake, four evenings out: "You didn't sell your singing. You sold your leave to sing." The whole Empire runs on belief, and under every belief the being sits untouched, whole to the last eyelash. What have you stopped using because you believed it was sold, and what would it take to give it back its leave?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. (Chapter 1) At six years old, Wil does a sum on the wet grass: there is too much of me, so there will have to be less of me. Nobody ever checks it. Who could have checked it, and why did nobody get the chance? What was the sum you did as a child that nobody checked?
2. (Chapter 1) The two boys with the hoop are not cruel. They say “you’re too big” the way you say the day of the week. Is a wound worse when nobody meant it? Who in this story is actually to blame for anything? And what is the most casual sentence that ever shaped you?
3. (Chapter 1) The Clerk promises Wil he will never be caught short again, and his wage is small: “you will hardly notice it going out.” What did the Clerk actually cost, item by item? Was he ever wrong, in any single piece of advice? Then why was he ruinous?
4. (Chapter 3) Wil’s father sells his own smile for the price of a portrait and says, “That’s a fair likeness.” The travelling painter insists he only ever takes what a man has truly stopped using. Is the painter the villain of this book, or its most honest tradesman? Who let the smile fall empty in the first place? And what in your own life has stood unused so long that losing it would not hurt?
5. (Chapter 2) The mother says: “I priced my questions too dear and then wondered why nothing got said in this house.” What does she mean? Is she complicit in the silence, or its other victim? What question have you stopped asking, and what has the stopping cost?
6. (Chapter 4) When the silver cup goes on the second shelf, Wil concludes the cup was too small, not that the sum was wrong. Have you ever brought home a cup that got shelved? What did you decide it meant?
7. (Chapter 5) The restorer says there is no such thing under all that varnish as a missing picture, only a covered one, and that you cannot get at your own cheek: “the face is on the outside of the man.” Do you believe her first claim? Is anything in a person ever truly destroyed? And who is allowed near your cheek with the cloth?
8. (Chapter 7) An entire empire took down its mirrors, one hook at a time, with no law ever passed and no one deciding. What has your own household quietly taken down? Who noticed?
9. (Chapter 7) The fat painter says he and Wil do the same work, and the difference is “I take my coat off first.” One sells flattery and calls it flattery; the other sends people home cured, or so the city says. Which of them is more honest? What do we pay for today that works the same way?
10. (Chapter 9) The driver will not play the Marble Hall: “A man goes up those steps whole, and he comes down priced.” His wife keeps the bottle in the open on the shelf. And his two-dogs story ends the opposite way from how it is usually told: feed them both. Which of the three would you argue with, and which one did you need to hear?
11. (Chapters 8 and 11) Hazel writes “come home for the blossom” nine springs running, and Wil’s eye learns to slide over it. He answers the money, which is the question nobody asked. What sentence is underlined in your life right now, and how many more springs does it have?
12. (Chapter 12) In the lane, the thing Wil carried for forty-four years stands up at its full size, and its full size is very small: two frightened boys and a hoop. He finds the box he carried across two hemispheres is empty, and the empty comes as release. Do you believe that moment? What would it take to open your own box, and what if it isn’t empty?
13. (Chapter 13) In the black water, Wil chooses between the crate and his life, and opens his hand. Be honest: would you have gone back down for the crate? What is wrapped around your own right hand?

14. (Chapter 15) Ana fights for the marriage with a packed trunk standing between them in the rain: “I’m not fighting you, you great fool. I’m fighting for it.” She refuses the first marriage and offers a second one, grown out of everything they buried. Is her forgiveness the largest act in the book, or is she owed more than she gets? Would you rather be married to Ana, or be Ana?
15. (Chapter 15) Hazel keeps her father at the gate for a year, and never once apologises for it. Her price is not remorse but time, paid in the road in all weathers. How long is forgiveness allowed to take before it becomes a new cruelty, and who decides: the debtor, or the bill?
16. (Chapter 16) The smile was never in the crate. It comes back at a supper table, forty years on, at the sight of a child in enormous longjohns. If nothing that was ever truly in a person leaves them, what are we all so afraid we have lost? And Ana’s last word: “deserving never came into it.” What would change in your house if that were true?

A NOTE FROM GRANT

Thank you for bringing The Gilder to your group. The arguments are there to be fought over, so let people disagree. One good argument and the one question at the end make a full night.

Grant

ASK ME TO JOIN YOUR GROUP

If your group reads *The Gilder*, I would be glad to join you by video call for 40 minutes, wherever you are. Ask at grantwattie.com/thegilder/book-clubs with your club's name, how many are reading, and two or three times that suit, in your time zone. I answer every request myself.

Grant