

To Understand All is to Forgive All

William Irwin. *Little Siddhartha: A Sequel*. Shanti Arts Publishing, 2018.

William Irwin gives readers a deeply moving and insightful work into human relationships, our connection to others, the nature of reality, the pursuit of flourishing, and human nature in general. *Little Siddhartha* centers on three generations of family and explores how they respond to the pressures of life, their place in the world, and the fractured relationships that result. Starting with the younger Siddhartha's mantra of "Eat, drink, and be merry," and ending with a concerted chant of "Om," Irwin weaves a tale that explores the spiritual recesses of human existence, calling on readers to understand, forgive, and most importantly, to listen.

Irwin creates a complementary tale that runs parallel to Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922). While developing the same themes of longing for wisdom and the search for meaning and happiness, *Little Siddhartha* brings greater focus to the complex relationships of family and friends. Hesse's *Siddhartha* chronicles the lives and relationships of Siddhartha and his friend Govinda as they seek enlightenment and happiness, ultimately ending with their reconciliation and Govinda's enlightenment. But where Hesse's book ends with Siddhartha lamenting the absence of his son (little Siddhartha), Irwin weaves little Siddhartha back into the story. As a result, *Little Siddhartha* creates another layer of fathers, mothers, sons, and friends navigating the complex fears, hopes, and disappointments that comprise human relationships. Fathers want their sons to follow in their footsteps; sons want their fathers to be heroes and can easily become disappointed and/or disillusioned with reality; mothers want their families to be at peace; and within these intimate interactions, we all must make decisions and face the insecurities of life. *Little Siddhartha* brings a sense of relevancy to the characters and how they relate to contemporary readers and can be enjoyed by itself or as a companion piece to Hesse's original novel.

Irwin's *Little Siddhartha* begins with Rahula recounting the story of his father, little Siddhartha. Little Siddhartha grew up an orphan, experienced the premature death of his mother while on a religious pilgrimage, and "suffered" a reacquaintance with his absent father, his namesake, the elder Siddhartha. These three characters dominate the rest of the story, detailing the currents of their lives and relationships, illustrating their individual search for truth and meaning, and the obstacles faced. The younger Siddhartha is the main character and offers readers the most complex set of emotional connections. From a young boy embarrassed by his father's choice to be a hermit-monk, to

his stubborn perseverance to reclaim his life of luxury, the younger Siddhartha provides an ever-present mirror for readers to examine their own pettiness, anger, self-deception, vocation, abuses, and a whole host of other existential features of life and spirituality. As the relationships between the younger Siddhartha and his father and son ebb and flow, they appear destined to be apart, but Irwin creates a captivating tale that shows how each stream of life eventually converges into one great river.

Little Siddhartha is written for a general audience, yet provides valuable lessons on Buddhism, spirituality, and life that will be insightful to a professional audience. The central themes of self, family, love, forgiveness, existence, and peace are easily accessible and deeply moving. The book could be used to supplement a course, as a college common reading book, or simply as an enjoyable read. Proponents of pacifism and nonviolence will be challenged to reflect on their own lives and family experiences. Did a higher calling towards peace activism result in family disagreements? Have relationships been “irrevocably” damaged? Have you lost your sense of purpose, feeling as though a vital part of life is missing? Pacifists and other mindful readers will find themselves working through these and similar questions as they journey with Siddhartha and his family through loss, devastation, hope, and reconciliation. In short, Irwin’s *Little Siddhartha* will help readers self-reflect and contemplate what is truly important in life—and might even inspire some to visit a local river, just for a listen.

Court Lewis

Owensboro Community and Technical College