



[Home](#) > Revolver

Revolver

Books Reviewed:

[Revolver](#) [1]

Issue:

[178](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Rebecca Butler](#) [3]

Editorial Choice:

off

BfK Rating:

4

This is a book that goes out of its way to pose moral dilemmas for young readers. Sig and Anna are children growing up in poverty in the frozen wastes of North America in 1910. Their father, Einar, has recently died. He leaves his widow, Nadya, the children's step-mother, just two valued possessions, a Bible and a Colt revolver.

A great deal of authorial time and energy is devoted to this gun. Its mechanism and means of use are minutely and lovingly described. The question poses itself: is this healthy reading material for young minds?

A ruthless predator named Gunther Wolff tracks the family down. He claims that as a result of some long-past deal, Einar owed him money. When the family denies knowledge of any hidden gold, Wolff threatens to kill one of them. Sig has just been trained in the use of the revolver. The second moral question arises: is Sig justified in defending his family at gunpoint?

The usual literary criteria for judging a book ? narrative skill, characterization, ingenuity in plotting ? pale into insignificance alongside the philosophical considerations pressingly relevant to Sedgwick's work. Any writer can make a case that one should be kind to animals and respectful to the old. It is a much harder task to identify a weapon of war as the emotional focal point of a family, and to make the case for its use by a 12-year-old in extreme circumstances. The pillars on which Sedgwick builds his work are meticulous research about weaponry, evocative language about this desolate landscape and the skilful balancing of contradictory arguments. The measure of the achievement is that these linguistic and dialectical skills merge into a whole that continuously sustains the reader's interest, a remarkable achievement.

My only criticism of the book is that it is guilty of prejudice against the disabled. Wolff is missing a thumb. As so often in books, the disability becomes a symbol of malevolence. When will authors learn not to equate physical difference with evil intent?

Running Order:

48

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