

**COME MEET BRANDON WILLARD—AN EIGHT-YEAR-OLD BOY ON THE
RUN FROM THE LAW**

“*Slow Way Home* is a gem—both gritty and heartwarming at once. Complex characters and major themes reward the reader—who won’t be able to put this deeply moving novel down. A wonderful, emotional read.”
—Lee Smith, author of *The Last Girls*

READER’S GUIDE TO

Slow Way Home
By Michael Morris

Plot Summary:

On the surface, Brandon Willard seems like your average eight-year-old boy. He has an obligatory love for his mama, peanut butter, and GI Joe. But Brandon’s life is anything but typical.

Brandon is wise beyond his years and able to look at the world around him with an understanding that he’s the only person he can count on. It’s an outlook that serves him well the day his mother leaves him behind at the Raleigh, North Carolina, bus station and sets off for Canada with the latest in a series of men she hopes will bring her happiness. Soon Brandon finds himself on his grandparents’ farm spending carefree days playing with his cousins and fighting to forget the past. It is there, with the hard work and love of his grandparents, that Brandon finally allows the love of an adult to seep into his pores and iron out the wiry places until his nerves are as steady as any other boy’s.

When his mother shows up a year later with a new man in tow, Brandon’s grandparents ignore the law and flee with Brandon rather than return him to the daughter they deem unfit. Creating a new life and identity in a small Florida town, Brandon meets people who empower him with self-worth and self-respect. He slowly becomes involved with “God’s Hospital”—a church run by the gregarious Sister Delores, an African-American woman who serves members of the community both black and white. Yet Sister Delores’s outreach doesn’t exactly inspire everyone. When a violent act threatens to rip the town apart, Brandon and his grandparents are put in a perilous situation that will forever change the course of their lives.

Michael Morris on Writing

Slow Way Home

The idea for *Slow Way Home* actually came before I wrote my first novel. During a business trip to Fort Lauderdale I happened to notice an RV park with campers almost stacked on top of each other. My first thought was that someone could get lost in such an environment, and then the image of an older couple with a young boy came to mind. Slowly, over the course of a year, the idea was enriched by a host of characters, including the child advocate, Nairobi; the socially conscious minister, Sister Delores; and Aunt Gina, the well-to-do state legislator.

Grandparents raising grandchildren is an important issue to me. I was stunned to learn that 2.5 million grandparents are raising grandchildren in this country. The lack of custodial rights for grandparents in the United States is another policy issue that led me to write the novel. Having had a troubled early childhood in a home plagued with domestic violence, the love of my grandparents was an anchor that steadied me. That same devotion helped to guide me as I tried to capture Brandon's feelings and inner struggles.

1. Brandon Willard longs for a close-knit extended family, and yet it is the people in the community who become his key allies. Do you have people outside of blood relatives you consider to be "family"?
2. *Slow Way Home* addresses custodial rights of grandparents. Should grandparents have a legal right for custody of their grandchildren? What are your feelings about the legal system upholding custodial rights of parents when abuse or abandonment are involved?
3. Throughout the novel, Brandon is searching for a place to call home. Do you think he ever found it? What is your definition of home?
4. Sophie, Brandon's mother, repeatedly tells Brandon that she loves him. How do you think Sophie would describe love? What obstacles do you think the "working poor" have today as single parents?
5. Do you think that Brandon's grandparents, Pearl and A.B., fled with Brandon to protect him or to satisfy the guilt over their failure with Sophie? Do Pearl and A.B. ever come to terms with their past mistakes? Does Brandon help Sophie come to terms with her own past?
6. How does Sister Delores's church in Abbeville differ from Brother Bradley's church in Raleigh? How did Pearl come to terms with the crisis in her faith?
7. Why did Brandon's friend Beau need to gain acceptance from Mama Rose and her son Alvin? Did Beau ever come to terms with Alvin's role in burning God's Hospital?

8. Racism is portrayed in the novel as both overt, such as Alvin's role in the Ku Klux Klan, and hidden, as in the case with A.B.'s concern about Brandon attending a minority church. What changed A.B.'s attitude toward Sister Delores? Which type of racism do you see in your own community?
9. When Sister Delores visits Brandon at the foster home he tries to kiss her, but she pulls away from him and cautiously watches the neighbor across the street. Why do you think Sister Delores responded in such a manner?
10. When Brandon goes to live with Gina Strickland, he enters a world he has never known, one of wealth and privilege. In what ways did Brandon help Gina come to terms with her own past?
11. Gina Strickland joins forces with Brandon's attorney, Nairobi, and together they lobby to reduce Pearl and A.B.'s sentences. What long-term effects do you believe this allegiance had on Gina's politics? How would you describe Nairobi's relationship with Brandon given the issue of race and the culture of the early 1970s?
12. Winston and Brandon first meet at a party manners school hosted by an aging socialite. What impact did this training have on Brandon? Do you think such a school was part of the Old South or do you believe the formal training still has a place in today's society regardless of region?
13. Esther, Gina Strickland's longtime housekeeper, is extremely allegiant to Gina's welfare. Do you think the relationship went beyond that of class structure, or was it merely based on the way Esther viewed her job as caretaker? How would you describe Esther's relationship with Gina?
14. At the end of the novel, what do you think will happen to the section of the farm that Brandon purchased? Where do you envision him taking Pearl?
15. According to the latest census, 2.5 million grandparents are raising grandchildren in the United States. What are some of the benefits that such a household can provide? Are there drawbacks to grandparents raising their grandchildren? What type of impact does this have on the children, the grandparents, and the community in general?

“Slow Way Home is a novel for the heart.
It is pitch perfect....The opening chapter is one of the most poignant and
powerful I have ever read. This is a fine book.”
—Anne Rivers Siddons, author of *Nora, Nora*