

## Setting/Place and Time: Where in the World Are We?



“The house was so proud of itself that you wanted to make a lot of noise as you passed, and maybe even throw a rock or two. But the wood had a sleeping otherworld appearance that made you want to speak in whispers.”

– *Tuck Everlasting*

**T**uck *Everlasting* takes place in and around a small town named Treegap. Natalie Babbitt does not give us much information about exactly where in the world this town is located. By leaving out specific details about the region, country, or even continent where this story takes place, the author lets the reader know that the location is not the most important part of the book. The events that occur in *Tuck Everlasting* could occur in any ordinary town.

### **Place**

In *Tuck Everlasting*, the description of the surroundings—the town of Treegap, the Fosters’ house, the wood, and the Tucks’ house—draws the reader into this very special place. In the first

chapter the author starts to establish the setting by describing the road that leads to Treegap: “But on reaching the shadows of the first trees, it veered sharply, swung out in a wide arc as if, for the first time, it had reason to think where it was going, and passed around [the wood].” Babbitt traces the road as it wanders along curves, comes to a small hill, and ambles down to a meadow, coming at last to a wood. She wants her reader to know from the start that the town, the wood, and the road are all mentioned on purpose. She wants the reader to sense that somehow the road knew to veer sharply away from the wood and lead elsewhere instead.

On the other side of that wood, she continues, “the sense of easiness dissolved,” in the small town on the edge of the wood. “The road no longer belonged to the cows. It became, instead, and rather abruptly, the property of people.” At the very edge of Treegap the road goes by the Fosters’ cottage. Its “touch-me-not appearance” suggests that its owners do not welcome visitors. The description of the Fosters’ house, which is kept in tip-top shape and is run with a great deal of care and attention, gives the reader information about the people who live there.

The Fosters are protective of their property, which Babbitt describes as “surrounded by grass cut painfully to the quick and enclosed by a capable iron fence some four feet high which clearly said, ‘Move on—we don’t want *you* here.’” In the same chapter, we learn that the Fosters, who own and inhabit that first, proud house, also own the wood. Because it is the property of the Fosters, other people generally leave the wood alone.

In stark contrast to the Fosters' house, the Tucks' house in the wood is described as being in a state of disarray. Babbitt uses their house to represent disorder. Just as the Fosters' house is neat and uninviting, the Tucks' house is terribly messy but warm—just like its inhabitants. The Tucks' house paints a picture of who they are. Warm and welcoming, it is a house filled with the clutter that has accumulated over too much time.

Babbitt makes it clear from the start that “the village itself doesn't matter, except for the jailhouse and the gallows.” She lets the reader know that only that first house is important, “the first house, the road, and the wood.”

## **Time**

The author gives us some clues about the time period of this novel. Through details like Winnie's high-button shoes and the fact that the characters ride on horseback and in wagons rather than in cars, we know that the story probably takes place in the 1800s. At the very end, we learn the exact year the story takes place when the Tucks come upon Winnie's gravestone. It gives the years of her birth and death: 1870–1948. From this we know that the year she meets the Tucks is 1881 (because she is almost eleven), and that it is 1950 when the Tucks return to Treegap.

The epilogue also reveals how the area has changed with the passage of time. The Tucks are still traveling on horseback. When they pull into Treegap, they are laughed at by a man at a gas station. Babbitt introduces a gas station and a man in “greasy coveralls” to show how things have changed even though the

Tucks have remained exactly the same. The introduction of this new time period reminds us that though the rest of the world, even Tregap, has evolved, the Tucks have not. They *cannot*.

The setting of this story is simple—simple people living in an old-fashioned place and time. Babbitt creates an uncomplicated place for a complicated issue. Perhaps she chose it for that very reason, so that it would be easy to get to the heart of Winnie’s dilemma without modern or urban obstacles. If there were computers and airplanes, televisions and shopping malls, it might have been difficult to focus on the essential problems of eternal life. Instead, the setting is uncomplicated—some houses, a dirt road, a jail with gallows, and a wood. The simple setting allows Winnie to talk with a toad, wander off alone into the wood, sit in a rowboat on a pond, and observe the cycle of life up close. Babbitt uses all of this to keep the reader focused on the story line and the dilemma of eternal life.

### **Thinking about the setting**

- Why is the fact that no road goes directly through the wood important?
- What do you think the author means when she writes that the road’s “sense of easiness dissolved” at the edge of the wood?
- What descriptive words does the author use to describe the two different environments of the Fosters’ home and the Tucks’ home?

## Themes/Layers of Meaning: Is That What It *Really* Means?



“Everything’s a wheel, turning and turning, never stopping.”

—Angus Tuck, *Tuck Everlasting*

**T**uck *Everlasting* has several themes, or layers of meaning. (The theme of a literary work is its main idea and often is a general statement or opinion about life.) Natalie Babbitt uses metaphors and symbols to make the most important themes clear to the reader. A metaphor is a way of describing one thing by comparing it to something else.

### **Order versus disorder**

Throughout the book there is a constant mention of the order of things. This applies to the order of the Fosters’ world, particularly their house. But it also applies to the order of life. All things are born, live, and then die. The Tucks represent an interruption of this order—an eternal interruption of that order to be exact. Babbitt shows this disorder in a few ways. First, when Winnie arrives at their house, she is shocked at the state of disarray it is in: lots of dust and cobwebs, a mouse living in the table drawer, half-completed quilts. The house is a stark contrast to the one Winnie lives in. When she sees all of this, all she can think is:

“Maybe it’s because they think they have forever to clean it up.” The author uses the disorder to show that Winnie is being exposed to a different way of living for the first time. She lets Winnie follow her thought a little further when Winnie thinks to herself, “Maybe they just don’t care!” In fact, later when there are no napkins for her to use to wipe her hands properly, Winnie realizes that in this house it is quite all right to lick the maple syrup off your fingers. “Winnie was never allowed to do such a thing at home, but she had always thought it would be the easiest way. And suddenly the meal seemed luxurious.”

The author has accomplished two things. She has set up an orderly world versus a disorderly one, while praising the virtues and the shortcomings of both. In an orderly world, you have to clean up after yourself and keep everything in neat stacks, but the world goes on as it should—everyone living and dying and so on and so on. In the disorderly world, you can lick maple syrup off your hands and throw your clothes on the floor, but the people are stuck forever in one place in their lives. In a way, the disarray of the Tucks’ house represents the disarray the world would be in if the secret spring were revealed to the public.

Ultimately, Winnie learns to incorporate some of the Tucks’ way of living into her own life, taking certain lessons from her time with them. She realizes that her mother and grandmother are more interesting when they are disheveled from the heat, when they are unable to control the way they are feeling. They are simply hot and they have to let go, “their hair unsettled and their knees loose. It was totally unlike them, this lapse from gentility, and it made them much more interesting.” And later, Winnie, too,

becomes more interesting. At the beginning, the children in her town think of her merely as an extension of her tailored home. In the end, some of the townspeople find her an intriguing hero. She has come to life for them: “She was a figure of romance to them now, where before she had been too neat, too prissy; almost, somehow, too *clean* to be a real friend.”

### **Natural life cycle**

Babbitt uses the image of a wheel in the prologue to point out how the first week of August seems to just hang there, “like the highest seat of a Ferris wheel when it pauses in its turning.” The wheel becomes a symbol for life and is used again and again throughout the story. When Winnie and Angus Tuck are in the boat on the pond, he explains to Winnie that his family has fallen off the wheel of life, and that they are in an unnatural state. Angus says: “It’s a wheel, Winnie. Everything’s a wheel, turning and turning, never stopping. The frogs is part of it, and the bugs, and the fish, and the wood thrush, too. And people. But never the same ones. Always coming in new, always growing and changing, and always moving on. That’s the way it *is*.”

Winnie begins to comprehend this herself when she sees how the water moves out of the pond and into the ocean. She realizes that the pond water is like life and that while the water moves all around them, she and Angus are stuck in the rowboat. Tuck continues, “That’s what us Tucks are, Winnie. Stuck so’s we can’t move on. We ain’t part of the wheel no more. Dropped off, Winnie. Left behind. And everywhere around us, things is moving and growing and changing.” And when Winnie, whose mind was

suddenly “drowned with understanding of what he was saying,” blurts out that she doesn’t want to die, Tuck reassures her. “Not now. Your time’s not now. But dying’s part of the wheel, right there next to being born.”

Tuck uses the image of the wheel to make Winnie understand the importance of the cycle of life, just as Babbitt uses the imagery of the wheel again and again to show the reader how the wheel works, how it moves things along as they should be moved.

## **Independence**

Winnie’s independence is another important theme in the book. In fact, it is her search for independence that leads her to the wood and ultimately to the Tucks. Then, because of her experience with them and choices she makes, she carves out some independence for herself.

At the start of the book Winnie is frustrated by her family because they watch and care for her so diligently. She wishes she had a sibling to take away some of the attention. She tells the toad that she wants to do something on her own that “would make some kind of difference.” She even thinks it would be nice to have a new name.

When Winnie steps toward the wood, noting that she will make a final decision about whether or not to run away permanently once she gets there, she is actually taking her first steps toward independence. She gets braver and more independent with each step she takes. Although she has no choice in the matter when

she is kidnapped by the Tucks, she goes with them somewhat willingly, trusting her own instincts about their goodness.

There is a crucial moment, though, when it becomes apparent to the readers that Winnie has done some real growing up.

When the constable charges the Tucks with kidnapping, Winnie defends them. She tells the constable that she ran away and that she has gone with them willingly. Although she knows this is a lie, she has made an independent decision about who she will defend.

Later, when Winnie decides to help Mae escape, this sense of newfound independence sweeps over her as she sneaks out of the house at night, defying all of the rules that have been set for her. In fact, it is so easy that “she was struck by the realization that, if she chose, she could slip out night after night without their [her parents’] knowing.” Even as guilt comes over her, she reminds herself that she has to help Mae and the whole Tuck family.

Independence comes in the form of choices for Winnie. She chooses to walk through the gate and venture into the wood. She chooses to stay with the Tucks and get to know them. She chooses to defend Mae and eventually to help free her. And in the end, she chooses not to drink from the spring, but to live the way life was meant to be lived, with death as part of the wheel.

## **Greed**

An important theme in this book is greed. In *Tuck Everlasting*, the reader learns that the man in the yellow suit feels that money is the most important thing in the world. The reader also meets the Tuck family, who knows that there is one thing in the world that is much more important than any amount of money: protecting the secret of the magical spring.

The man in the yellow suit is very greedy. He will do anything, including threatening to harm Winnie, to find the source of the Tucks' immortality. He tells the Tucks he will sell the enchanted water "only to certain people, people who deserve it. And it will be very, very expensive." The man in the yellow suit is determined to let the world know about the magical spring. He does not care about the difficulties people would experience if they lived forever. He only thinks about how much money he will make. In the end, it is the man's greed for wealth that leads to his death.

In contrast, Angus and Mae Tuck display a great deal of selflessness. While the man in the yellow suit is selfish and concerned only about increasing his wealth, the Tucks focus on the larger picture: ensuring that no one else suffers the curse of living forever. The Tucks give up a great deal in order to protect their secret. For instance, they don't form relationships with other people so that no one will notice they do not get older. Mae describes how their old friends reacted to the Tucks' staying the same age: "They come to pull back from us. There was talk of witchcraft. Black Magic. Well, you can't hardly blame them, but

finally we had to leave the farm.” Even though it means living a lonely, difficult life, the Tucks know that they must never reveal their secret.

<b>Thinking about the themes</b>
• What do you think is the most important theme?
• How does the wheel metaphor help you understand the life cycle?
• What is good and what is bad about the prospect of eternal life?
• What is good about death? Does it make us see life differently?
• How long would you like to live?

## Characters: Who Are These People, Anyway?



"I cast my characters out of the possibilities—the kinds of people who are best going to be able to talk about my idea. The Tuck family has four members, and they were chosen specifically to talk about different points of view of living forever."

—Natalie Babbitt

**I**n some books, the characters' names are simply names the author likes for one reason or another, or names that are appropriate for the setting and the time. Not so for Natalie Babbitt's characters. Babbitt said, "That's one of the things I like the best! In most of my books, the characters' names have secondary meanings that the reader doesn't have to know. In *Tuck Everlasting*, Winnie's last name—Foster—means 'forester.' The name *Tuck* came from a thesaurus and an old dictionary. I wanted a name that meant life and was only one syllable. When I looked it up in my old dictionary, I found that *tuck* meant life. The first names in that book were chosen to go with the times—they're old-fashioned. You don't meet too many people with those

names very often anymore—although once I was approached by a woman who told me her name was Winifred Foster!”

Here is a list of the characters in *Tuck Everlasting*, followed by a brief description.

Winifred Foster	a ten-year-old girl, called Winnie
Mae Tuck	the mother of Jesse and Miles, wife of Angus
Angus Tuck	the father of Jesse and Miles, Mae’s husband
Miles Tuck	the older son of the Tucks
Jesse Tuck	the younger son of the Tucks
The man in the yellow suit	a man who wants to own the magical spring
The constable	the lawman who arrests Mae Tuck
The Fosters	Winnie’s family, which includes her father, mother, and grandmother

**Winnie Foster:** Winnie Foster, the main character in *Tuck Everlasting*, is a ten-year-old girl who lives a sheltered life in a small town. Her family is wealthy and reserved. She has no siblings and no friends to speak of. When we meet her in the beginning of the novel, she is lonely and bored. She wants to do something with her life, to have an adventure. She begins to consider this in a conversation with a toad that lurks across the road from her front yard. She tells him that she is tired of being watched by her family every second of the day and wants to be herself for once. She tells him she wants to “make some kind of difference in the world.”

Winnie is somewhat torn, though. When she sets out into the wood that next day, she is unsure of what to do. She won't commit to running away but thinks she'll see how she feels as she goes. It turns out she doesn't have to make a decision herself. Her life changes the moment she encounters Jesse Tuck in the wood.

Because Winnie is curious and open to new things, she doesn't walk away when she spies Jesse sitting by the spring. Instead, she watches him intensely, and soon finds herself on an adventure that changes her life. At first she is excited about her new experiences. "They were friends, *her* friends. Closing the gate on her oldest fears as she had closed the gate of her own fenced yard, she discovered the wings she's always wished she had. And all at once she was elated." Later, though, she becomes overwhelmed and scared. "She had never slept in any bed but her own in her life. All these thoughts flowed at once from the dark part of her mind. She put down her fork and said, unsteadily, 'I want to go home.'" Winnie continues to go back and forth regarding her feelings for the Tucks and the situation she has gotten into with them. Her emotions become more complicated. She is at once scared and sympathetic, overjoyed and distressed.

But mostly, Winnie is perceptive, very understanding, intelligent, and brave. We first become aware of her perceptiveness when the man in the yellow suit comes to her house and she is reminded of funeral ribbons. She somehow knows that he brings trouble. That same intuition makes her empathetic as well. She feels

deeply for the Tucks, and is pained when she notices sadness in them.

But it is Winnie's courage that changes her life. She has lived through something and learned from the experience, and she feels surer of herself for it. At the beginning, she doesn't even know whether or not to run away. In the end, she starts making independent decisions. When she sneaks out of the house and risks everything to save Mae, she not only displays her newfound independence, but also shows she has learned how to be a friend.

**Mae Tuck:** Mae Tuck is a wife and mother who cares deeply about her family. She tries very hard to keep her family intact. Mae is also very brave. It is she who saves her family and Winnie when she hits the man in the yellow suit over the head. She is a protector. Mae will stop at nothing to prevent others from taking on the burden of eternal life. She is kind, loving, optimistic, and resilient—she has led a long and sometimes difficult life, but still has energy to spare. All of those qualities are evident when she says to Winnie, “Life's got to be lived, no matter how long or short. You got to take what comes.”

**Angus Tuck:** Angus Tuck, called Tuck, is a kind but sad man, who “almost never smiled except in his sleep.” For that is when he dreams of heaven and is relieved to be able to forget for a minute that he will live forever. But the “melancholy creases of his cheeks” are displaced by a smile when he meets Winnie Foster. Perhaps most affected of all the Tucks by the curse of

eternal life, Tuck hides himself away from the world so that he doesn't have to watch it grow past him. Because he cannot die, he doesn't feel alive. He responds with sheer amazement to Winnie when he meets her. Winnie is alive to him because she will mature and grow old, and eventually die. It makes him feel alive to be near her.

He tells Winnie, "You can't have living without dying. So you can't call it living, what we got. We just *are*, we just *be*, like rocks beside the road." Winnie responds to Tuck's descriptions of immortality most of all. Her empathy comes out when she notices his creased forehead at the breakfast table and when he stares with envy at the man in the yellow suit when he is on the verge of death. Winnie knows that Tuck is in pain.

Natalie Babbitt has said that Angus Tuck is the most important character in the book. "He is the one whose advice Winnie follows."

**Miles Tuck:** Miles Tuck is "solid, like an oar," according to Winnie. He is broad and muscled and has dirt under his nails from working as a blacksmith to earn money. He had a wife and children who left him when they realized he would not age and he is sad that they could never know why. Instead, they lived and died as he could not and he sees that as tragic. Serious and diligent, Miles wants to do something important with his time someday. He tries to explain the importance of the cycle of life to Winnie when she goes out in the rowboat with him. There, she learns that he is critical of his father's decision to hide from the

world, and of Jesse's indulgent lifestyle. He thinks everyone ought to make himself or herself useful.

**Jesse Tuck:** Jesse Tuck is a seventeen-year-old boy who'll be seventeen forever and doesn't seem to mind one bit. He thinks that if you're destined to live forever, you might as well enjoy it. Winnie thinks he is the opposite of Miles and likens him to "water: thin and quick." He is optimistic, hopeful, and free-spirited. Winnie develops a crush on him. At first, she admires him because he is handsome and charming. Later, she adores him because he seems to like her, too. He wants Winnie to drink from the spring when she is seventeen and then marry him so they can live forever, together.

**The man in the yellow suit:** The man in the yellow suit represents the dark side of the Tucks' situation. He wants to exploit them by treating them like a sideshow. He has no morals. He doesn't see the Tucks as people, but as objects put on earth to make him rich. He refuses to see the consequences of his plan. Natalie Babbitt has explained:

Every fantasy has to have a villain. The MITYS is based on somebody that I actually knew . . . a completely amoral, hugely powerful, completely selfish person. We are used to villains that know what good is and go against it. The MITYS does not concern himself with good or bad. The only thing he thinks about is what he wants, without regard to what it might mean philosophically or to people's lives.

### **Thinking about the characters**

- Which of the Tucks do you feel closest to? Why?
- Would you like to have Winnie for a friend? Why or why not?
- Do you feel differently about Mae Tuck after she kills the man in the yellow suit? Why or why not?