

# **Among Schoolchildren Study Guide**

**Among Schoolchildren by Tracy Kidder**

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# Plot Summary

Among School Children by Tracy Kidder is an account of Christine Zajac's fifth grade classroom at Kelly School in Holyoke Massachusetts. For an entire year, Kidder observed Chris' classroom. Through his observations, Kidder explains the trials and tribulations that Chris must go through as a teacher in a poor neighborhood in the United States. He uses Chris' anecdotes as a larger comment on the American school system as a whole.

The novel begins with Chris preparing her classroom for school. It is September and while Chris has enjoyed her Summer vacation, she is ready for a new batch of children. On the first day, the children assess Chris. She makes it clear that while she will treat them fairly and is sweet, she demands the best. If a student does not do her best, she will make them do it again. On the first day, one child catches her attention. Clarence is an adorable African American boy. Chris immediately realizes that he cannot keep still or concentrate in class. The first week starts and Clarence does no homework. Chris demands that he do so by keeping him after school and refusing him recess. Already, this is turning out to be a rough year.

Clarence is not Chris' only problem child. Robert likes to physically hurt himself for attention; Chris is afraid that Pedro is developmentally challenged; Jimmy falls asleep in class. Chris' class management skills are really getting a work out. Luckily, Chris also has Judith, an extremely smart Puerto Rican girl from the Flats. Judith is always looking to learn more. She offers Chris sanity amongst the madness in the classroom. To Ms. Hunt, Chris' student teacher, Chris is amazing at controlling the class. Whenever Pam attempts to teach, she loses control of the classroom. Kidder points out that teaching is a hard profession to train for. While teachers are expected to go to college and do student teaching to get ready for their own classrooms, sometimes it is not enough. Often, teachers are thrown into the fire without any preparation. Kidder insists that America should put more emphasis in training teachers, so that they are better equipped to handle children like Clarence and Robert.

As the year progresses, Chris' problem with Clarence escalates. He is causing physical harm to other children, disrupting the class, and causing Chris anxiety. Chris really tries her hardest to control Clarence, but her attempts fail. He is finally removed from her classroom by the school administration. Chris feels as though she has failed Clarence, but now that he is gone, she is able to concentrate on the rest of her class. Chris can now help Claude, who never really started learning. She has time to push him whereas with Clarence in the room, she had no time for anyone but Clarence.

Throughout the book, Kidder also tries to show the inequality of education and ethnicity in American schools. Chris is a teaching that expects the best out of her students, but many teachers are not like this. They give up on students before they can make a difference. If the teacher is not pushing the child and there is no support from a parent, children do not get motivated. This can often be linked to the social economic class of the child. Children from poorer backgrounds have younger parents who do not always

take an interest in the children lives and educations. Therefore, education cannot equalize.

Finally, the year draws to a close. Chris is happy with the progress that many of her students made, but also upset that they have not changed more. She did everything she could in the time that was allotted. It is not that she did not try. She simply ran out of time.



# September, Chapters 1-3, (pg 1-24)

## September, Chapters 1-3, (pg 1-24) Summary and Analysis

Among School Children by Tracy Kidder is an account of Christine Zajac's fifth grade classroom at Kelly School in Holyoke Massachusetts. For an entire year, Kidder observed Chris' classroom. Through his observations Kidder explains the trials and tribulations that Chris must go through as a teacher in a poor neighborhood in the United States. He uses Chris' anecdotes as a larger comment on the American school system as a whole.

In chapter one of the book, it is again a new school year and Mrs. Chris Zajac, a 14-year veteran teacher has a new classroom of 5th graders. Everyday, the thirty four year old teacher is sure to wear a dress or skirt, even though there is no dress code. Although at home Chris is relaxed and calm with her friends and family, it is important to show her new class that she means business.

Chris is a teacher at an elementary school in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Her classroom is filled with children of many different colors. The majority of the children are Hispanic, but some are also African American and White. Chris realizes the importance of "laying down the law" on the first day of class. Her mantra is "If you don't do your best, Mrs Zajac will make you do it again." With this statement, she lets the children know that she expects them to give all their effort at everything they do.

Chris allows the children to pick their own desks the first day of class - just to see how they arrange themselves. She quickly sees who she be moved. Alice and Margaret are both White and from the uppercrust of Holyoke families. so she sits Felipe, a very talkative Hispanic child between the two girls to keep them from being too chatty, but also allowing them to get to another a child of another ethic group. She also seats Judith, a popular smart Puerto Rican girl, next to Alice (In hopes that they might become friends). In the middle row, Chris seats the "problem students:" Clarence, Robert (a burly child), Julio (a second time fifth grader),and Courtney (a beautiful little girl who needs to concentrate on work).

On the first day of class, Chris keeps a special eye on a small African American boy named Clarence. Chris asks her student teacher, Miss. Hunt, to watch Clarence. The two women notice that Clarence can barely keep still in his chair. He does no work and makes frequent trips to the pencil sharpener. Before the year starts, Chris always receives her new class' cumulative (cume) folders. The thicker the folder, the worst the past - and Clarence's folder is thick. Chris wishes not to judge Clarence (or any other child) on their past. On the second day of class, Clarence has not done his homework and refuses to do work. Chris tells Clarence since he has done no work he gets no recess. In retaliation, Clarence kicked another student, Felipe, in the leg. For the rest of the day, Clarence still refuses to do work. Chris keeps Clarence after school. To her



dismay, Clarence begins to cry. Chris feels bad for Clarence and asks him if they can start over. Tomorrow should be the beginning of a new Clarence. He gives her a short nod and goes to join his friends.

On the third day of school Clarence arrives without homework and refuses to work. Chris again keeps him late. Both Chris and Clarence were angry about staying late on a Friday. She insists that if he won't do work, he'll stay after school, he will not take his aggression out on other students, and he will listen to Mrs. Zajac. Clarence leaves, but screams that he hates Mrs. Zajac in the hall. Chris is dejected and sad. Over the weekend she can only think of Clarence. She decides she was too harsh on him, and should "kill him with kindness" this week. To her surprise, Clarence comes in Monday morning as a "new" Clarence.



# Awakenings, Chapters 1-3 (pg 26 - 53)

## Awakenings, Chapters 1-3 (pg 26 - 53) Summary and Analysis

At the beginning for the Awakenings section, Kidder explains the schedule of Chris' action packed school day. Before the children arrive at the classroom, Chris sets up her chalk boards by writing the word and math problem of the day. At eight o'clock, math begins. Chris has students from other classrooms come to her class, while some of her students leave. At Kelly School, children are "levelized" for math and reading - meaning they are matched by their abilities. The next half hour is devoted to spelling and then fifteen minutes for study time. Next, students joined and left Chris' classroom for reading. The next hour kept Chris on her feet teaching social studies. Finally lunch arrives at eleven thirty.

After lunch in the facility room, Chris is thankful to have the day slow a bit and have the classroom schedule become less strict. She reads to the children for 15 minutes and then asks them to write in their journals. They can write anything as long as they write. This was followed by an hour or more of creative writing and finally science. It is never a dull day in Chris' classroom.

Math classes are always lively. In chapter 2, Kidder explains how Chris tries to engage different levels of math students. Felipe and Robert from Chris' homeroom stays while a disruptive boy named Manny joins her low math group. Some students go to the board to work out problems while Chris sits with Jimmy and Jorge and helps them with problems. Judith sits quietly at her desk reading because she is finished her math assignment. Chris decides to spice up her math class by asking her students to teach her how to do the math problems on the board. Excitedly, they all begin to pay attention and beg to participate. Chris, being a dedicated teacher, is always looking for a way to engage her class. She is excited and satisfied to have their participation.

As chapter 3 begins, Kidder introduces the school's principle Alphonse Laudato, a fast talking, dedicated educator. Al will do anything to ensure the success of Kelly School. Al is not one of those principles that makes his teachers' lives difficult. Al took action if a child was sent to his office. For this reason and many others, Chris stands behind him as an administrator. Al mostly visits the classrooms of new teachers to give them feedback, while leaving veterans like Chris alone.

Kidder explains that it is difficult to find dedicated teachers and administrators such as Al and Chris. In a profession where salaries are low, and little respect is gained, it is hard to feel as though one is making a difference. Women were pushed into teaching professions in the early-1930s. A new push for public education caused a demand for teachers. If women were hired, salaries could be kept low. Teachers were expected to quit once they were married. Thus, much emphasis has been put on education, but not on training teachers and teachers do not stay around long.



# Homework, Chapters 1-3, (pg 57-107)

## Homework, Chapters 1-3, (pg 57-107) Summary and Analysis

Kelley School is located in Holyoke, a neighborhood also known as the flats. Holyoke was one of America's first planned industrial communities. Chris actually grew up in the flats and returned after she graduated from college. Her father had worked for a paper company called National Bank Book. In the 1970s, however, growth was stifled as Holyoke's industries started to decline. The city's population fell and sections of the Flats deteriorated. Lately, state and local governments had begun putting money back in the Flats. Kelly School was supposed to start the revival of the Flats. The school is the largest and fanciest of the city and outfitted with two large gyms and a playground. Over time, the exterior of the building has been worn down by vandalism and graffiti.

The demographic breakdown of children at the school are as follows: 30 black, 11 Asian, 265 white, and 314 Hispanic (which mostly means Puerto Rican). The school had been desegregated in the 1980s. Sixty percent of the school's population receives some sort of public assistance.

As chapter 2 opens, Chris marvels at the improvement of some of her students. As she does many nights, she begins to grade the student's social studies test. Arabella, an eager learner, has come very far. Her sweetness and willingness to change has allowed her to improve. Dick, who claimed that North America was a country, has also improved and scored 100% on his social studies test. Felipe is still throwing tantrums, but also proving to be a very talented artist. Jimmy scores a 28 on the test. This is disheartening because he should have done better. Jimmy is constantly in a daze. When he does not understand, we shuts down. Margaret and Alice both do well on their test, but Margret has not been able to separate herself from Alice.

Pedro, a child that never misbehaved, worked hard to get Fs. She worries that Pedro may be retarded. When Chris attempts to get in contact with his family, but notices sent home with Pedro are ignored. Finally, Chris gets in contact with Pedro's family and they reevaluate his learning plan. Judith continues to be a success. She is so smart that Chris is sure she will do great things with her life.

Robert has continued to perform poorly and receive Fs on his tests and papers. During class Robert had taken to hitting himself hard in the thighs, stomach, and face. He would write letters to his father that would never be mailed and made distressing entries about burning down the school in his writing journal. For once, it seems as though Clarence has scored a 79 on his exam. This makes Chris happy, because he must have studied for once. Clarence continues to be troublesome. He has inflicted physical harm on Arabella and Felipe. He also beat up another boy in the bathroom. Clarence could be sweet. He wrote love letters to Judith and a nice poem for Chris. But as soon as they have another tiff, Clarence retaliates.





# Discipline, Chapters 1-5, (pg 111-142)

## Discipline, Chapters 1-5, (pg 111-142) Summary and Analysis

On Wednesday afternoons, Chris leaves the children with the music teacher. As the children experiment with different instruments and the teacher leads them in song, they become completely unruly. They stand on chairs, scream, and jump about. Clarence has a field day. The music class offers a chance for the children to explore their creative styles. While the children feel free to go wild with the music teacher, they also rarely treat Chris' student teacher, Pam Hunt, with much respect. Chris understands that a large part of her job is classroom management and discipline.

Chapter 2 begins with Pam trying to teach Chris' class. While Pam teaches the class, Chris makes a point to leave. The children will behave while Chris is present, but change as soon as Pam is alone with them. Chris leaves the classroom so that Pam can learn how to deal with the class on her own. Pam's problem is that she is not firm enough with the students. She gives an order and when it is not obeyed she gives a punishment. She is then not able to follow through with her threats. Chris attempts to work with Pam by giving her tips such as scanning the room for signs of trouble, don't put children in a situation where they may get into trouble, and if a child is getting rambunctious, call him out on it at once.

These tips are helpful, but very hard to put into practice for a student teacher with no experience. It is as if students like Robert and Clarence are waiting for Pam to mess up so that it seems she has no authority over them. Pam is not a bad teacher. Many of the children like being tutored by her one on one. Chris is not angry with Pam and she does not get impatient. She wants Pam to do well. This is the nature of the teaching beast. Teachers must have failures before they can have successes. In chapter 3, Pam leaves. To her surprise, both Clarence and Robert are sad to see her go.

In chapters 4 & 5 Chris is ready to get her class back. While she enjoyed having Pam teach, she missed being in control and aware of what was happening in her classroom. To get the children reinvested in their lessons, Chris creates games for them to play. These games are fun, but also assist in helping the children learn. As the end of the fall semester draws near Chris is happy because the students are making progress and she has finally gotten more participation for her parents. She and her students have their holiday party and leave for Winter Break. The party is uneventful except for the fact that Chris gives each child a gift certificate to McDonald's. Clarence refuses the gift and this hurts Chris. Chris is sad that she will not see her children for a couple of weeks, but excited for much needed rest.



## Sent Away, Chapters 1-8, (pg 145-193)

### Sent Away, Chapters 1-8, (pg 145-193) Summary and Analysis

At the beginning of Chapter 1, Chris gets a new child in her class, Juanita. Juanita is from out of town, but was forced to move to Holyoke after her father gets remarried. She was mistakenly put in a bilingual class which further slowed her progress during the school year. Chris is saddened by this sad, lonely child. She promises to help Juanita make progress this year.

As always Clarence is still causing trouble. While Chris expected this, it is truly beginning to worry her. Because she constantly focuses all of her attention to Clarence, the other children in the class feel ignored. They also feel the strain of Chris and Clarence's relationship. While Chris does not want to give up on Clarence, she does not want the other children in the class to suffer. Clarence gets into a fistfight with Robert and then steals money from his mother who drags him out of school and starves him for a day. Clarence has also begun to openly defy Chris. This worries her very much.

In Chapters 3 -8 Kidder explains the events that lead to Clarence's removal from Chris' classroom. Later in February, Chris is called into a meeting with Al, the school psychologist and the head of the school's Alpha class. The Alpha class is a special class for troublesome students at Kelley school. Once children are placed into these classrooms, they usually never come back. This worries Chris because part of her wants to send Clarence away, while the other does not. In the end, it is not up to Chris. The head of the Alpha classes decides to take Clarence because he sees Chris' desire to keep him. He also sees that Chris has done everything in her power to help him.

For some reason, Clarence sense that something is up. Suddenly, he becomes a wonderful student. He no longer causes a commotion. Chris is sick at the thought of telling Clarence he is leaving her class. Finally the school is able to inform Clarence's mom of their decision. Chris finally tells Clarence that he will be leaving. To her surprise, he does not change his behavior back to his old ways. She figures he is hoping everyone will change their mind.

On Clarence's last day, he dresses up. This simply breaks Chris' heart. He is scared and does not understand why he is leaving. When Clarence goes to the bathroom, Chris uses the opportunity to tell the class that Clarence is leaving. Most of the children think he is leaving because of his behavior. Maybe even because Chris is punishing him. She tells them to all write about it in their journals. The students can sense Chris' sadness. As the day closes, Chris is worried and sad. Next week will begin the recovery of her class. Hopefully now she can help all her students advanced.



## Recovery, Chapters 1-4, (pg 197-228)

### Recovery, Chapters 1-4, (pg 197-228) Summary and Analysis

After Clarence's departure, Chris hopes that she will be able to concentrate on the rest of the children in her class. As spring begins, Al lets the teachers know that Kelly School must do better. The test scores of a national standardized test were not kind to Kelly students. Thirty percent of Kelly School's sixth grade students had failed the test. This made Chris upset. What had she done wrong with her students from the previous year?

Chris feels as though she is going to miss Clarence very much. Although they constantly fought, Chris was very invested in seeing Clarence change. She thinks that the children will miss Clarence more than they know. Contrary to this belief, the kids are happy to see Clarence go. They understand that Chris did not send him away, but they did not enjoy the way he disrupted the class.

Chris begins to think about her class. Jimmy will probably fail the test next year, as would Pedro, Robert, and Claude. While Claude's progress was not stunted, it was only because he never started learning. He was socially awkward and unable to make relationships with other children in the class. Robert on the other hand, while not violent with others, he often beats himself. Chris can usually stop the behavior with a look or warning. Chris desperately hopes that Robert will get to a psychiatrist.

As the first week without Clarence limps along, Chris decides to get involved with each member of her class. For Claude, she insists that he get himself organized. She sits him out in the hall to organize his desk for an entire afternoon. Robert is becoming more unmanageable and Chris notices that he is actually happy when she yells at him. Chris decides that Robert must be isolated from her and the rest of the class. If he is not being given attention for his bad behavior perhaps it will stop. At first Chris moves him to the front of the class so that she could not see him. She and the rest of the class completely ignored Robert. By the end of the 3rd day, he could not stand it. The next day he came in with his homework. He continued to do so for the next couple of days.

By the beginning of Chapter 5, Chris is exhausted. She has gotten her low math group from long division to decimals. Her whole class is also excitedly participating and talking to her about the pioneers on the Oregon Trail. Chris comes to school dressed as a pioneer. She explains to the children what the hardships of the trail were like. This is yet another way that Chris can get her students more involved. Now that Clarence is no longer in the class, Chris has the time to be more creative with her class. She sees that she can focus on their problems and is sorry that she let so much time go by before helping some of the other students. As Chapter 4 comes to a close, Chris is saying goodbye to her class for Easter Break. The class celebrates together and the children happily leave.



# Isla del Encanto, Chapters 1-2, (pg 231-258)

## Isla del Encanto, Chapters 1-2, (pg 231- 258) Summary and Analysis

Because Chris is from Holyoke, she has remained a member of the same congregation for her entire life. Although the population of the congregation has shifted from white to mostly Hispanic, Chris will not give up her church because she enjoys the priests and sermons. Chris thinks that by staying with her church, it has allowed her to learn more about the Puerto Rican Community. The church traditions have changed slightly, which always catches Chris off guard. But she soon adjusts and is also carried away by new traditions and customs.

Holyoke is a city dealing with a population in transition. The town's history has Irish roots, but recent times have brought an influx of the Puerto Rican population. After World War II Puerto Ricans flooded the United States seeking refuge. The first five Puerto Rican families moved to Holyoke in 1958. With the promise of factory jobs, people continued to flood into the US as well as Holyoke. Employers saw Puerto Ricans as inexpensive labor. This also pushed the unemployment rate up. Soon, there were working Puerto Ricans, but also many were unemployed.

Chris is appalled by the arrogance of some of her fellow townspeople. She often hears them complain about "those goddamn Puerto Ricans." This sickens Chris. She explains that she teaches many smart, intelligent Puerto Rican children and then the entire group of people should not be judged. While the graffiti and vandalism in the area is blamed on many Puerto Rican youth, Chris has seen people of other ethnic groups committing crimes also. Chris becomes angry when bigoted people are cruel to her class because of their race.

It is not only older white people that feel prejudice towards Puerto Ricans. Some teachers at Chris' school do also. A teacher had offered to organize a trip to Puerto Rico for the Kelly School staff over Spring Break. Many teachers could not go because they had to pay out of pocket. Others insisted they would never travel to Puerto Rico and were unwilling to learn more about the country. Chris feels that it is important to see Puerto Rico and learn more about the culture that exists there. Although she is very open towards people of other cultures, she never turns down an opportunity to learn more. This is what makes Chris such an outstanding teacher. She will go the extra mile to understand the children she is teaching. She fights preconceptions and stereotypes presented to her by others. Many teachers are not able to do this. Thus, this is what separates Chris from many of them.

Chris, her husband Billy and their two children all went on the trip. While there, Chris has the opportunity to go to a local elementary school. She is in her element. The

teachers quickly embrace her, as do the children. Chris is so taken in by the school that she has to fight off urges to take over and begin teaching class.



# The Science Fair, Chapters 1-3, (pg 263 - 295)

## The Science Fair, Chapters 1-3, (pg 263 - 295) Summary and Analysis

It is finally May, and Chris decides to take the class on a field trip to Old Sturbridge Village. Robert is not allowed to attend because he has been misbehaving again. The kids and Chris have a pleasant ride to Old Sturbridge Village, a remake of a 1834 town. The children had the opportunity to view a civilization from the past. It was very nice for Judith and Arabella to see the Village and get a sense of what is outside of their apartment buildings in the Flats. When the field trip ends and the children are back on the bus, they leave the tranquility, greenery, and beauty of the village and head home to the abandoned buildings and graffiti ridden streets of the Flats.

The year is quickly coming to a close. Chris is hoping the her students are still improving. She sees that chubby Ashley is finally trying at her Spelling. She is also responding to Chris' criticisms and accolades. Claude is also improving. He has been taking his tests, doing his homework, and offering to be helpful in the classroom.

The Science Fair was also another tradition at Kelly School. Any child could enter, and the project also gave parents the opportunity to get involved in their child's schoolwork. Chris is shocked that Claude has taken an interest in the fair. He has decided to make a model on how lakes and ponds form. Chris is shocked that Claude is so excited about the fair and knows so much about his project.

On the day of the fair, Chris visits all her children at the fair. Claude is doing surprisingly well. Claude articulately explains his river diagram to Chris and she is thrilled. Other students like Arabella and Alice who have their parents present have great projects. Other children like Courtney, Kimberly, Pedro, and Jimmy do not have parents present and their projects are very lacking. Chris finds Ashley sitting alone at her table. She wishes she would have assigned Ashley a partner. Ashley quietly and cautiously explains her water wheel to Chris.

Chris wonders where Robert is. Earlier, he had claimed that he left his project at a convenience store. Another teacher had taken him to retrieve the project, but he was now nowhere to be found. Chris finds Robert in her classroom, clearly upset over something. It appears that Robert actually attempted to do the project. He had attempted and failed, but still attempted none the less. Chris comforts Robert and tells him that she is thrilled with his attempt. They both head back to the fair. To Chris' delight, Claude wins a ribbon in the fair. All the other children that did not win look extremely disappointed. Chris decides that next year they will make sure all children get an award.



Chris was surprised when her class gets to the Civil War in Social Studies. She begins explaining the war as well as slavery to her students. Chris finds it hard to make them understand that simply because of their skin color or how they were born other people can hold prejudices against them. Judith, however, understands the concept. The intelligent child that she is, she knows that she is from the projects and is judged because of it. But Judith is not ashamed. She is proud. She points out all of the great things that she and her parents have done. She will not shame her family or other Puerto Ricans by denying where she came from.



# June (Chapters 1-3)

## June (Chapters 1-3) Summary and Analysis

Many great Americans have put much emphasis on American education: W.E.B. Dubois, Thomas Jefferson, and Horace Mann, to name a few. While public schools are aplenty and America spends approximately \$150 billion on education every year, the American school system has not turned out to be the great equalizer that Horace Mann hoped. Tests and surveys show that many American adults come out of high school and college without complete understanding of math, reading, and comprehension. Many attempts to reform the American school system have been attempted, but have failed. The reform movement of the 1980s failed to be as moving as that of the '60s. In the late-1980s, schools were seen as a prison.

For weeks of the school year are left and Chris decides that there is not a moment to waste with her children. She quickly makes a list of all the children that owe her work: Claude, Kimberly, Ashley. Chris' classroom receives another child, Miguel. Miguel is very smart and curious. He does not make his ambitions or desire to learn a secret as Judith does. As the weeks dwindle down, Chris announces to her class that she will be moving to sixth grade. Many of the children are excited,

Its now time for Chris to tie up lose ends. She files a complaint against Robert's mother for not taking him to a child psychologist. Chris has Pedro tested and learns that he has the IQ of a genius, She asks that Pedro and Julio be but in a class for students struggling with English for next year. There comes a point at the end of the year where a teacher realizes she has done a lot, but not everything she had hoped to do. Felipe will not understand fractions this year, and Jimmy still slept through many of Chris' lessons. Claude was still disorganized, but there is a method to his madness.

As school gets closer to ending, the children have a field day. Chris is excited to spend some time outside of the classroom with her students. Soon they begin cleaning out the classroom for the next year. Jimmy, never really paying attention throws out the classes' journals. Chris quickly pulls the notebooks out of the trash. One paper catches her eye. It is one of Clarence's old stories. Chris smiles to herself and tucks the story into one of her desk drawers.

Chris does not like to forget her students. As she as thought many times that she would like to follow the progress of Judith, Chris has done the same with a student named Susanne. Susanne is doing well in college and hoping to attend Harvard Law School. Chris greatly inspired Susanne do tell well at school and believe in herself. While Chris was taken with Susanne, Susanne was taken with Chris.

During the last day of school, Chris received a surprise visit from Clarence. His presence in the doorway shocked her, but Chris quickly invites him to come inside.





Clarence is hesitant and refuses to speak with his old classmates. He regards them cautiously and then leaves not wanting to stick around.

On the last day of school, Chris hands out the children's report cards. This is a scary time for them because they not only find out their grades, they also learn which teacher they will have next year. A couple children have Chris next year, but a few others are disappointed because they did not get her. They spend the rest of the afternoon cleaning out the classroom and listening to music. When it is time for the children to leave, they act as if it is any other day. Chris is quickly getting sentimental and as they children leave, she calls goodbye. Not many of them look back.

A lot has happened this year. Chris never gave up. Even when she had to deal with Clarence and Robert, Chris did not give up, she ran out of time. She is excited for this summer, although she will miss her class. The next year will bring a new set of faces and Chris is ready for the challenge.



# Characters

## Chris Zajac

Christine (Chris) Zajac is a fifth grade teacher at Kelly School in Holyoke, Maryland. Chris has been a dedicated teacher for over 15 years. For an entire school year, writer Tracy Kidder becomes a member of Chris' classroom to observe her teaching as well as the children in her classroom. Chris is warm, loving, and caring. She cares a great deal for the children in her classroom and thrives to make a difference in their lives. Although Chris is caring, she is by no means soft. She is stern with her class. With one look she can silence a room full of twenty children. She is always looking for ways to challenge everyone in her classroom, whether they are an advanced or remedial student. She expects the best and if her children do not deliver the best, she will "make you do it again."

The novel focuses in on Chris' relationship with several students, particularly Clarence, Robert, and Judith. Chris treats and reacts to each student separately because of his or her separate needs. Judith is an exceptionally smart fifth grader whose math and reading skills are at a 6th grade level, while Robert and Clarence are the class' problem children.

Chris' character allows for the reader to view the true dual nature of a teacher. Chris is one way with her children in class, but she is different in her personal life. She has a husband and her very own children to care for. Many times people forget that their teachers also have personal lives. Because Kidder allows the reader to see both sides of Chris, the reader can learn more about her as well as sympathize with her situations.

## Clarence

Clarence is the only African American student in Chris' class. On the first day of school, she recognizes his inability to keep still as well as his wondering eyes. As the class year continues, Clarence proves to be one of Chris' most difficult and challenging students. Not only does Clarence have behavior problems, he also refuses to learn. During the first week of class, Chris attempts to nip Clarence's homework problem in the bud. She holds him after school, and persists that Clarence do his work. Several times Chris is almost sure that she may get a "new" Clarence after one of their fights.

For most of the year, Clarence does no homework and fails almost all of his tests. He begins to resort to physical violence against children in his classroom. Sometimes, Chris gets glimpses of the intelligent child Clarence actually is. When he is very angry with Chris, he writes about it in his journal. Chris is shocked by the clarity of his feelings, but she can rarely get him to write without some kind of fight. As the year progresses, Chris spends so much time on Clarence that she is unable to keep up with the progress of the other children in her class. At the school's principle also becomes aware of Clarence's behavior problem. He and the school psychologist insist that Clarence be put



in a special class for developmentally challenged children. Although Clarence does not want to leave the class, it seems to be a better learning environment for the rest of the children in Chris' class.

## **Robert**

Robert is another one of Chris' problem students. Robert is a burly Puerto Rican fifth grader with psychological issues. He refuses to do his homework or try at any other projects that Chris presents him during the year. While Robert often disrupts the class, Chris can usually silence him with a stern look or verbal warning. Robert never hurts other children in her class. Instead, he hits, slaps, and kicks himself. Robert inflicts physical pain on himself not only to hurt his body but also to draw attention to himself. Chris finally notices this about Robert and chooses to isolate the child before he can do anymore damage to himself.

As the school year progresses, Robert does little to improve his education. Chris tries to help him by requesting that his family get free sessions with a psychologist, but Robert's mother does not take advantage of the service. Finally, during the Science Fair, Robert tries to enter a project, but fails to put the entire thing together. Chris is ecstatic. It does not matter that Robert failed. What matters is that he has finally tried something.

## **Judith**

Judith is a beautiful Puerto Rican girl from the Flats. She is one of Chris' favorite students. She is extremely bright for her age and could be in sixth grade instead of fifth. Chris often says that Judith is the reason she became a teacher. Students like Judith strive to better themselves. They may need a teacher to push them to the next level, but most of their ambition is self motivated. After finishing her in-class math problems, Judith expands her mind by reading more of her favorite books. Her thirst for knowledge is never satisfied and this invigorates Chris.

Judith comes from a close-knit family in the Flats. Her father and mother are both hard working people who take an active interest in their children's lives and education. While Judith is interested in bettering herself and not always living in the projects, she never wishes to ignore where she came from. She acknowledges her past and looks forward to her future. When her White friends ask where she lives, Judith will not deny she is from the Flats or act ashamed.

## **Dick**

Dick is an intelligent White student. He tries not to let other students know how smart he is.



## Ashley

Ashley is another one of Chris' students that has been ignored due to Clarence's classroom interruptions. After Clarence leaves, Chris vows to help Ashley.

## Arabella

Arabella is a kind, caring Puerto Rican girl from the Flats. She moves into Chris's class midway through the year. Throughout the second half of the year, they work on Arabella's math and reading skills as well as her ability to speak up for herself in class. Arabella becomes fast friends with Judith.

## Alice

Alice is a wealthy White student in Chris' class. She is very intelligent, but needs to be pushed by Chris so that she does not rest on her laurels. Chris pushes Alice and Judith in hopes that the two girls will get to know each other. She thinks it will help Alice to see that Puerto Rican children can be on her level.

## Claude

Claude is a student in Chris' class. Claude is a very funny child. Chris wishes that he would live up to his potential, but has not had time to concentrate on his problems due to her constant clashes with Clarence. Once Clarence leaves, Chris begins to push Claude more. Trying to show he has become interested in school, he enters a project into the school Science Fair and wins.

## Felipe

Felipe is a smooth talking, sweet Puerto Rican boy. While he is not the best at his studies, he is excited to be in Chris' class and learn.

## Billy

Billy is Chris' husband. He is very supportive of her teaching career. While Chris tries not to bring work home, it is often inevitable. He calmly listens and gives Chris his opinion on many matters.

## **Ms. Hunt**

Ms. Hunt is Chris' student teacher. While she has a passion for teaching children, she has not yet mastered how to discipline them. Under Chris' guidance Ms. Hunt gains some experience, but can never really control the classroom on her own.

## **Al Laudato**

Al Laudato is the principle of Kelly School. He is very dedicated to the children as well as his teachers. Although Al's methods may not seem like the most logical, but he gets things done for Kelly School. While Chris does not always agree with Al, she knows that he would do anything in his power to help the children at Kelley School. Chris will stand behind him as long as he does what is best for the children.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Holyoke, Massachusetts**

Holyoke is an industrial town in Massachusetts where Kelly School is located.

### **The Flats**

The Flats is an older, poorer, more run down section of Holyoke. Many of Chris' students live in the Flats.

### **Kelly School**

Kelly School is a school located in the Flats where Chris teaches.

### **Puerto Rico**

Chris and Billy along with other teachers from Chris' school take a trip to Puerto Rico.

### **Cumes**

Cumes stands for cumulative folders. Cume folders track the school history of each student. Usually, the bigger the cume folder, the more problems the child has.

### **Alpha Class**

A class for problem students. Clarence is moved into this classroom by AI.

### **Sturbridge Village**

Sturbridge Village is a preserved town from the 1800s. Chris and her children go on a field trip to see how people from the past lived their lives.

### **Sacred Heart**

Chris' church in Holyoke. Although the population has become increasingly Hispanic, Chris will not change churches.

## **cores**

Cores are Core Evaluations. Children with troubling background obtain cores which begins with an investigation into the child's background, a meeting of teachers and administrators, and then an action plan is made for each student.

## **Resource Room**

Children who are at a remedial level for their grades, leave their classroom for an hour every day and go to the Resource Room for individual help with their lessons.



# Themes

## The Inequality of Ethnicity

The Flats of Holyoke gave Tracy Kidder an interesting demographic of people and situations to examine in this book. One theme that is clear throughout the entire novel is that of education and ethnicity. While Chris is never prejudice towards any of the children in her class, she recognizes the ill treatment they receive from other Kelly School teachers as well as other people in the Flats and the rest of Holyoke.

Chris' class is largely of Puerto Rican descent. The rest of the class is white and a few children are black. Irish immigrants looking for refuge in America settled Holyoke. After World War II many displaced Puerto Ricans were invited to settle in the United States. While many went to New York City, available jobs in Holyoke drew many Puerto Ricans to the area. As jobs began to dry up, the city (especially the Flats) began to crumble. More affluent whites moves out of the area, while Puerto Ricans stay.

This creates a culture clash in the area. Whites see Puerto Ricans as the reason the city has deteriorated. Graffiti, drug use, and vandalism are all attributed to Puerto Rican youths. While some crimes have been their fault, it is unfair to presume that all crimes have been committed by Puerto Ricans in the Flats and Holyoke community. They are unfairly judged because people of the community have placed a stereotype on them.

Kidder also examines how many of the children in Chris' class do not understand the prejudice or lower expectations of them. As Chris teaches about the Civil War, many of them cannot understand how someone can be made a slave because they were born a certain color. Just as the children cannot understand this, they will have a hard time understanding why people in their neighborhood and school discriminate against them. Unlike the other children, Judith understands that people judge her for her skin color and where she lives. But she will not shame her family or the people of her community. She will not be silent about where she has come from and the fact that she has succeeded.

## Teaching as a Profession

Kidder attempts to briefly give a history to the teaching profession of the United States. He solidly explains that while the United States has always but an emphasis on public education, the training of public educators has been very limited.

In the early twentieth century, the number of public schools that were being opened ballooned. Women were the best options to fill teaching occupations because they could be paid more cheaply than men. It was also thought that a woman's maternal instinct would allow her to be a better teacher than a man. It was also expected that once a woman married, she would no longer teach. Her focus would switch from caring





for other people's children to her own. This tradition has created a lineage of a short-lived profession for women and poor training.

Ms. Hunt is an example of a training system that does not always work. As Ms. Hunt tries to manage the classroom, the children repeatedly disrespect her. Chris acknowledges that many teachers do not know how to control classrooms until they actually have one. Ms. Hunt is lucky because she has someone such as Chris guiding her, but many are not as lucky. Teachers are often thrown into situations they cannot handle threatening their own health as well as the development of the children in their classes. By not receiving the right education or training teachers flounder. They then do not stick around because of the disrespect from parents, children, and superiors, as well as low pay. While Kidder never expressly says that he thinks the teaching system should be reformed, his outside observations show that things within the American public school systems must change.

## Education as an Equalizer

In the novel, Kidder mentions that many great educators assumed public education would become the nation's great equalizer. No matter a person's background or lifestyle, because they are able to receive a free education, all people will be able to better themselves. Kidder points out that while this is a noble aim, the American school system as failed to equalize the playing field for many American youths. Chris' classroom is a perfect example of how the great equalizer is failing to equalize.

While Judith is a self-motivated young girl, she also has the support of her family. If she did not want to do her homework, her father would ensure that Judith eventually did her homework. Other children are not so lucky. If they do not have the drive to push themselves and their parents do not take an interest in their school work, children such as Robert and Clarence never have the same chances as Judith. The children are further handicapped if they do not have a caring teacher like Chris. Although Chris tries her hardest, she has a classroom of twenty children to attend to. Students like Clarence and Robert often take up much of their time. This further causes children to be lost in the shuffle. Education can only do so much. When teachers do not have support from parents, an uninterested student, and problem students, children do not have the chance to be completely equalized.



# Style

## Perspective

The novel is told in a biased third person narrative. Kidder never introduces himself in the book or the fact that he was an observer in the classroom for the last year. This is interesting because the reader may appreciate a context for the novel. How did Kidder's presence affect the children? Did they act differently because there was an extra person in the room? Did Chris alter her teaching to be what Kidder wanted her to be? All these questions go unanswered. Kidder does not assert his own opinions openly.

Although the book is told in third person, it seems that Kidder takes liberties with his stories. It is unclear whether or not Chris, Clarence, Judith and other characters expressly conveyed their feelings to Kidder. Throughout the entire novel Kidder explains situations outside of the classroom: Chris' home, Judith's home, Clarence's thoughts in the Kelly School hallway. It seems as though Kidder would have been granted complete access to Chris' home life as well as the children. Unless there were interviews, some accounts that Kidder adds into the book seem embellished. Kidder may have added them to enliven Chris' story. This is a question that lingers in the readers mind. The third perspective is certainly biased.

## Tone

Kidder uses different tones throughout the book. Many times his tone is disheartened. As he talks about Chris' students and their predicaments in their neighborhoods and chances for improving their lives the tone is very discouraged and sympathetic. This causes the reader to understand that Kidder really sympathizes with the inner city youth. He embraces their failures and communicates it through the language of his descriptions.

On the other hand, Kidder's tone is hopeful. As he speaks of Chris' teaching and Judith's inspirational case, he expresses the successes that can happen in an environment such as Kelly School and Holyoke, MA. Not all is lost. These children and many others like them can still be successful. They can still learn and change their lives. Kidder does not want all of the sad stories that Chris has to deal with to overshadow the successes she has had over the school year. As Chris harps on Clarence's case, she understands that she did not fail. She simply ran out of time. Kidder is not insisting that Chris failed. If anything she brings hope to teachers everywhere who try their hardest each year to change student's lives. As long as teachers try as Chris has, there is hope.

## Structure

The book is structured chronologically by the over arching school year that spans from September to June. There are large sections named September, Awakenings,



Homework, Discipline, Sent Away, Recovery, Isla del Encanto, The Science Fair, and June. Within each of the larger sections are chapters that pertain to the overall theme of the section. The chapters are usually very short and pertain to a certain day or particular situation. The structure allows for the book to be read very easily. The reader can quickly understand what is going on in each of the sections.

Clearly, there are many stories throughout the novel. Thus, it is organized in a way that allows for Kidder's many anecdotes to be clearly told. The reader does not get lost in a novel full of stories that do not connect. Instead, the theme is connected to many stories falling under the theme. The reader can remember each anecdote as it relates to a theme in the book. Furthermore, the reader can think about how the stories relate outside of the sections that they have been placed in as well as the story as a whole.



## Quotes

"She'd try to ignore what she had heard and deal with problems as they came. Clarence's were surfacing quickly. He came to school the second morning without having done his homework. He had not done any work at all so far, except for one math assignment, and for that he'd just written down some numbers at random. She'd try to nip this is the bud." (September, Chapter 1, pg 9)

"Teaching is an anomalous profession. Unlike doctors or lawyers, teachers do not share rules and obligations that they set for themselves. They are hirelings of communities, which have frequently conceived of them as servants and have not always treated them well." (Awakenings, Chapter 3, pg 49)

"Studies suggest that many of the best teachers quit soonest. If they stay in education, they tend to move on to administrative jobs, which represent the only real form of professional advancement in this profession." (Awakenings, Chapter 3, pg 51)

"She could see the face of the child whose paper she corrected, the child's face framed against the blackened panes of the small many-mullioned windows of the dining room." (Homework, Chapter 2, pg 72).

"Judith read a great deal, and she knew a fair amount about politics and geography. Judith said that she did well in school because she chose to do so, and that was because she wanted to get a good job when she grew up. But it sometimes seemed that her world was even smaller than the Flats itself. (Homework, Chapter 2, pg 87).

"Chris knew that confidence is the first prerequisite for discipline. Children obeyed her, she knew, because she expected that they would. But that kind of confidence can't be invented. Pam would have to find it herself. Chris tried to help. For an hour on Wednesday afternoons, during art and music, Chris and Pam would sit down on the brown vinyl sofa in the balcony corridor between Room 205 and the boys' lavatory [...] the elder looking old only in comparison to the neophyte, the rookie teacher eying the veteran respectfully. (Discipline, Chapter 2. pg 123)

"Chris worried about Clarence. She had reason. To send him away was to tell him the same old news: he was a problem; he had failed. And to help Clarence by placing him a special class among a number of other notoriously unruly children- might as well say his behavior would improve if he was made to join a street gang. She couldn't argue for doing that to him. " (Sent Away, Chapter 4, pg 166)

"Most had made normal progress. Normal measures would carry them along. But was it just her imagination or had the problems of the ones with big problems gotten bigger suddenly? With Clarence gone, she did see the others' needs more clearly. She felt sure of that. " (Recovery, Chapter 1, pg 201)



"Chris looked at the project and she saw all at once a Robert slightly different from the one she thought she's known just a minute ago. All year long she had tried to get Robert to take a chance and make an effort. Now he had. He had tried and he had sincerely failed. And she has rewarded him with humiliation. How many times had something like this happened in his life already? Was this the reason Robert behaved as he did?" (The Science Fair, Chapter 2. pg 283)

"What great hopes Americans have placed in formal education. What a stirring faith in children and in the possibility and power of universal intellectual improvement. And what a burden of idealism for the little places where education is actually attempted." (June, Chapter 1, pg 300)

"She belonged among school children. They made her confront sorrow and injustice. They made her feel useful. Again this year, some had needed more help than she could provide. There were many problems that she hadn't solved. But it wasn't for lack of trying. She hadn't given up. She had run out of time." (June, Chapter 6, pg 331)

"Sometimes Clarence seemed intent on destroying the community of her classroom, or on reshaping it to his own liking. Clarence's vigilance over all nonacademic matters in the room had now become a routine of the class. Scold or punish Clarence and he would get even with Chris through the other children, always ones who were weaker and almost always out of Chris' sight." (Homework, Chapter 2, pg 101).



## Topics for Discussion

Did you think the layout of the book was helpful to you as the reader?

Did you feel as though Kidder embellished sections of the novel? Why or Why not? If so, did you think it was ethical for him to take artistic liberty with the retelling of the events in the book?

Do you think that Chris made a mistake in allowing Clarence to leave her classroom? Do you think it was beneficial for the rest of the class? Is it right to sacrifice one child, for the rest of the class?

Should Kidder have explained the context of his classroom visits? Do you think they may have changed how Chris or the children acted towards him?

Do you think that education can be the equalizer between American youths? Why or Why not?

Why do you think it is for hard for young children to understand the concept of prejudice or stereotypes?

Do you agree with Kidder's assertions on the American Public school system? Why or why not? Do you think reform is needed?

Do you think it is more important for teachings to receive proper training in college rather than in the field? Why or why not?