

Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret Study Guide

Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret by Judy Blume

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Plot Summary

Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret is a young adult fiction book written by Judy Blume. First published in 1970, the book has faced censorship over the past four decades for its frank discussion of puberty and the pitfalls of organized religion. As a result, the book has found itself on numerous lists of banned books. Judy Blume maintains that the book is meant to encourage open discussions about sexuality, religion, and relationships between parents and kids.

Margaret Ann Simon is an eleven year old who is entering sixth grade. Though she has been raised with no organized religion, she talks to God on a regular basis. Her family moves from New York City to Farbrook, New Jersey, the week before Margaret begins school. Margaret's first friend is Nancy Wheeler, another sixth grader who lives six houses away. Nancy immediately recruits Margaret to join her secret club that includes two other girls, Gretchen Potter and Janie Loomis. The club decides to call itself the Pre-Teen Sensations and makes rules about always meeting on Mondays, wearing bras and writing weekly entries in the "boy book" of crushes.

Margaret likes Farbrook but misses her grandmother, Sylvia Simon. Though Sylvia does not own a car or like to take public transportation, she finds ways to visit and spend time with her only grandchild. Margaret believes that part of the reason her parents moved to New Jersey is to get away from Sylvia and her influence on Margaret.

Margaret starts sixth grade at Delano Elementary School and her teacher is Mr. Miles J. Benedict Jr., a first-year teacher who is nervous around the kids. Margaret quickly becomes acquainted with the role of the students in her class: Philip Leroy, the cute guy; Norman Fishbein, the class drip; Freddy "Lobster" Barnett, the class bully; and Laura Danker, the tall, beautiful, developed girl who is the source of bad-reputation rumors. Mr. Benedict assigns the class a yearlong project to research any topic they would like, as long as it is meaningful to them. Margaret decides to do her project about finding a religion, since she has been raised without one and wants to decide if she should join the YMCA or the Jewish Community Center.

Over the course of the school year, Margaret attends Jewish temple with her grandmother and three different Christian churches. In each spot, Margaret has trouble finding God. She becomes increasingly frustrated in her search. When Margaret's estranged grandparents pay a visit, her disdain for organized religion grows. Her grandparents, whom Margaret has never met before, are focused only on Margaret being a Christian and attending Sunday school. The rift the argument causes in Margaret's family puts distaste in her mouth toward aligning herself with any religion, so she gives up her search. Despite ditching her efforts to join a religion, Margaret continues to talk to God on a personal level and confide in him the details, struggles, and triumphs of her life.

Margaret also deals with understanding her pre-teen sexuality and individual voice in the book. Like her friends, Margaret is desperate to start her period and develop



breasts. She musters up the courage to ask her mother for a bra and even purchases sanitary pads for herself at the drugstore without shame. Margaret learns a valuable lesson about forming her own opinions about people when rumors about Laura Danker that Margaret believes turn out to be lies. The relationship that Margaret has with Nancy Wheeler is reassessed when Margaret discovers Nancy has been deceitful about being the second in the group to start her period.

By the end of the school year, Margaret has emerged a more confident, self-assured twelve-year-old with excitement about starting junior high school. In the final pages of the book, Margaret gets her period. First she tells her mother. Then she goes to God with the good news, saying that she knows he was there because he wouldn't have missed it.



Chapters 1 – 5

Summary

Chapter 1: Margaret prays to God that moving to New Jersey from New York won't be "too horrible." She is surprised that her family has decided to buy a house in Farbrook, New Jersey. They move the Tuesday before Labor Day, just in time for the start of the new school year.

Margaret suspects that the move has to do with her parents wanting to get her away from her grandmother, Sylvia Simon. Sylvia spoils Margaret, pays for her private school education, and sends her to summer camp in New Hampshire. In New Jersey, Margaret will go to a public school and she doubts that her grandmother will visit because Sylvia doesn't have a car and hates public transportation. Margaret says that her grandmother is a lot of fun, despite being sixty years old, and that she is always asking Margaret if she has a boyfriend.

Margaret says that her new house is on Morningbird Lane and looks just like all the other houses on the street. She says that the house is seven years old, and the trees lining the street are too. Margaret is an only child, a fact that does not bother her because she doesn't have "anybody around to fight."

Chapter 2: About an hour after Margaret arrives at her new house, there is a knock at the front door. It is a girl Margaret's age named Nancy Wheeler. She lives six houses away and asks if Margaret wants to run through the sprinkler at her house. Margaret says that she does not have any idea where her bathing suit is packed and Nancy offers for Margaret to borrow one of hers. Margaret's mother says that she can go and the girls walk to Nancy's house.

The girls discover that they are going to be in the same class at school. Nancy watches Margaret change into her bathing suit and comments that Margaret does not seem to be developing any breasts yet. Nancy believes that hers are going to be the size of a Playboy model's in a few years and goes on to show Margaret how she practices kissing – with a pillow. The vanity in Nancy's room has a drawer full of cosmetics, so she puts on some pink lipstick and asks for Margaret's opinion. Margaret tells her that it's too bright, and then the girls head outside.

Margaret meets Nancy's mom, who is suntanned and reading a book outside. Mrs. Wheeler asks Margaret a lot of questions about her family before the girls head to the sprinkler. Nancy's brother, Evan, and his friend Moose show up. They are fourteen-years-old and "disgusting," according to Nancy. The boys turn up the sprinkler and drench the girls. Nancy apologizes and walks Margaret home. She tells Margaret to keep the bathing suit, since it is one of her "old" suits anyway. Nancy tells Margaret to be sure to not wear socks the first day of school and that she wants her to join her secret club.



At dinner, Margaret tells her dad about how Moose cuts lawns for five dollars. Mr. Simon remarks that he is looking forward to cutting the grass himself and that gardening is good for the soul. Margaret wonders when her parents became so in love with nature. That night Margaret has trouble falling asleep and is not used to the quiet in the house. She talks to God, telling him that she wants to be grown up like Nancy Wheeler.

Chapter 3: The next day, Mr. Simon buys a lawn mower. While he is trying to empty the grass clippings, he hurts his hand in the lawnmower blade. On the ride to the hospital, Margaret asks God to save her father's hand, even though he does not believe in God the way that she does. Dr. Potter tells Margaret that his daughter Gretchen is her age and will be attending the same school. He says that he will tell his daughter to keep an eye out for Margaret. Mr. Simon's hand is fine after some stitches and he decides to call Moose Freed to mow the lawn in the future.

The morning of Labor Day, Margaret gets up early to organize her school supplies and desk. She hears a knock at the front door and discovers that it is her grandmother, Sylvia Simon. Despite hating public transportation, Sylvia took a train from New York to visit Margaret. Sylvia brings in several bags of "real" food from New York. Margaret goes upstairs to tell her parents, who are both shocked and a little uneasy. In Margaret's bedroom, Sylvia tells Margaret that she will call her every evening at 7:30 p.m. so the two can keep in touch about their lives. She tells Margaret not to mention the arrangement to her parents.

The four Simons spend the day out in the yard and eat the food that Sylvia brought for dinner. Margaret and her parents drive Sylvia to the train station. She says that she promises to only visit once or twice per month to spend time with Margaret.

Chapter 4: Margaret gets ready for her first day of school. Her mother sets her hair in rollers and helps her get ready in the morning. Mrs. Simon argues with Margaret about not wearing socks, but allows her daughter to go to school without them. In her classroom, Margaret sees a tall girl whom she mistakes for the teacher. She can see the outline of the girl's bra through her shirt and wonders if it's possible this girl is the same age as Margaret. The teacher arrives and writes his name on the board: Miles J. Benedict Jr. He introduces himself as a first-year teacher and has the kids fill out a few sentences about themselves. Margaret stops at home to change her clothes before a meeting of the secret club at Nancy's house and her mother asks her how school went. Margaret tells her about Mr. Benedict and her mother is annoyed that Margaret has a first-year teacher.

Chapter 5: The secret club meets at Nancy's and it consists of Margaret, Nancy, Janie Loomis and Gretchen Potter. The girls confirm to Margaret that the developed girl she saw is Laura Danker. The other girls start to make fun of Laura and Margaret comments that she thinks Laura is pretty. The other girls accuse Laura of being promiscuous and say that Laura already gets her period. None of the girls in the secret club have started their periods yet and Margaret is relieved. They discuss a name for the secret club and decide on the PTS's, Pre-Teen Sensations. Each girl has to come up with a rule for the club. Nancy's rule is that they all have to wear bras; Gretchen's is that whoever started



her period first had to tell the others all about it; Janie's is that the group had to keep a "boy book" with their latest crushes; and Margaret's is that the club had to meet every Monday.

Janie asks Nancy where she is going to attend Sunday school, which prompts Margaret to share that she herself is not a part of any religion. The girls in the club are very interested in hearing more about it and Margaret explains that her parents don't have a religion either. That night, Margaret is nervous about asking her mother about getting a bra. To Margaret's surprise, her mother agrees. She says that the two will go shopping over the weekend to buy bras. Margaret talks to God and asks him again to help her develop in womanly ways. She also asks God to help her know which to join: the Jewish Community Center or the YMCA.

Analysis

Margaret Simon is introduced as a pre-teen in the middle of many life changes. In addition to the normal angst of the pre-teen years, Margaret is adjusting to a new community, new friends, and a new school. Though she is not a member of a particular religion, Margaret talks to God and prays for things to go right in her life. God is Margaret's confidant, and readers are given more insight into Margaret's thoughts through this medium.

The girls of Margaret's neighborhood all seem to follow the lead of Nancy Wheeler. Nancy is the "queen bee" of the clique and the others do her bidding. When Margaret challenges the group's opinion of Laura Danker, Nancy makes Margaret feel ignorant and simple-minded for her belief that Laura can't help that she is tall and developed. While Margaret clearly wants to be included in Nancy's group, there are already signs that Margaret disagrees with Nancy's opinions and attitudes.

Aside from God, Sylvia Simon appears to be Margaret's closest friend. Margaret is thrilled when her grandmother shows up at the new house, though her parents seem unenthused. Margaret mentions that part of the reason her family moved was to get away from her grandmother and Margaret's parents seem threatened by the presence and influence of Sylvia. The revelation that Sylvia was against Margaret's parents getting married shows the origin of the dissonance within the family; Sylvia's insistence that Margaret get a Jewish boyfriend shows readers why Margaret's parents might dislike Sylvia's influence.

Vocabulary

inconvenient, unlikely, fanatic, overjoyed, underdeveloped, organdy, sensation, Hebrew, uneasy, taxi, delicatessen, reinforcements, limb, stitches, YMCA, Jewish



Chapters 6 – 10

Summary

Chapter 6: The next day, Mr. Benedict calls Margaret up to his desk and asks her to explain one of the answers she gave on her “getting to know you” form. Margaret had said that she hated religious holidays. She explains to the teacher that she does not like religious holidays because she isn’t part of any religion. Mr. Benedict asks her about her parents. Margaret says that they aren’t religious either but that she can pick out her own religion when she grows up if she wants. Mr. Benedict seems pleased with Margaret’s honesty.

Sylvia calls Margaret that night and tells her that she purchased a subscription to the Lincoln Center in New York. She wants Margaret to come spend one Saturday each month with her in New York to use the subscription and go to lunch. Margaret knows that her parents will approve because they will like the cultural aspect of the idea.

On Saturday, Moose Freed comes to mow the Simons’ grass. Margaret sits outside while he does it and decides that he is really cute. She wonders if she should write his name in the “boy book” of crushes but then remembers that Nancy would disapprove because she hates Moose. Margaret and her mom go to a shopping center to buy bras. In the lingerie section, the woman sends them to the teen section instead. The saleslady determines that Margaret is not quite ready for a double A bra and suggests a “gro-bra” instead. After trying on a few options, Margaret picks her favorite and her mom buys three of them. Margaret sees Janie Loomis and her mother picking out bras at the counter and the two girls tell each other that they are there shopping for winter pajamas.

Chapter 7: Margaret tries her bra on immediately after getting home from the store. She is disappointed that her chest looks the same, even with the bra on, and puts two pairs of socks in the cups. She likes the look and returns the socks to her drawer. At dinner, Margaret’s father congratulates her on taking a step toward growing up.

At school on Monday, Margaret tries to think of boys’ names to write in her boy book before the secret club meeting after school. She decides on Philip Leroy, because he is the most good looking, and Jay Hassler, because he has soft eyes and clean fingernails. Mr. Benedict tells the class about a yearlong project he would like the kids to do. He explains that it can be about any subject. The kids groan and Margaret notices that Mr. Benedict seems disappointed that his idea didn’t go over well.

The PTS’s meet after school. They check to be sure that they are all wearing bras, and Nancy brags that hers is a 32AA while the other girls all have “gro-bras.” Nancy shows the other girls an exercise to help increase their chest size and the four pre-teens pump their arms and say, “We must, we must, we must increase our bust!” The girls then pass around their boy books and everyone has listed Philip Leroy as their number one crush. Nancy has listed eighteen names and giggles when she sees that Margaret has put



down Jay Hassler. The girls find Moose and Evan eavesdropping outside Nancy's door and the boys begin taunting them by loudly repeating the "we must increase our bust" mantra. Margaret hopes that they laugh so hard they pee their pants.

In class on Tuesday, the kids pull a prank on Mr. Benedict by taking turns "peeping" like a bird. By the time Mr. Benedict looks at the source of the sound, another kid peeps. Margaret finds the game stupid but peeps when it is her turn. The next day, all of the desks are rearranged and there is a seating chart. Margaret is sandwiched between the class bully, Freddy Barnett, and Laura Danker. The PTS's are all separated from each other.

In gym class, the boys play baseball with Mr. Benedict and the girls spend time with Miss Abbott, who tells them all to stand up straight and be proud of their height. Miss Abbott tells the girls that throughout the year the class will be talking about private subjects, just for girls. Margaret wonders what the point is of waiting until sixth grade to talk about sensitive topics for girls, especially since girls already know everything by then. That night, Margaret does her bust exercise thirty-five times before going to bed. She asks God again to consider giving her more in the breast area and to help her do well on her test the next day.

During the test, Freddy Barnett whispers to Margaret not to put her name on it. He says that if no one puts their name on their tests, Mr. Benedict will have no way to grade them. Margaret goes along with the prank but feels cheated because she studied hard for the test.

Chapter 8: The next day, every test in the class was sitting on the desk of the proper student with a grade at the top. Margaret was thrilled that she got a ninety-eight percent. Freddy Barnett got a fifty-three. Mr. Benedict reminds the class not to wait until the last minute to come up with an idea for their yearlong project. He says that by the end of the week, students should have a subject and begin taking notes on it. Margaret wonders what in her life is meaningful enough to discuss with Mr. Benedict and decides that searching for her own religion may be a good way to do the project.

On Saturday, Mrs. Simon drives Margaret to the bus stop for her trip to New York. Mrs. Simon is nervous and tells Margaret to sit either alone or next to a nice old lady. To Margaret's embarrassment, her mother yells to the bus driver that it is Margaret's first time taking a trip alone. When Margaret arrives at the bus station, her grandmother is waiting for her and looks very dressed up. The two enjoy the concert at the Lincoln Center then wander around outside near the fountain—Margaret's favorite thing about the Lincoln Center. On the cab ride back to the station, Margaret asks Sylvia if she can go with her to Jewish temple sometime to see what it's all about. Sylvia is overjoyed and tells Margaret that they will go together to celebrate Rosh Hashanah.

Margaret's parents are surprised and upset that she wants to go to temple. Margaret reminds them that they told her she can pick her own religion, and so her parents allow her to go to temple. Talking to God the morning before temple, Margaret asks him to



help her find the right religion. She tells God that it will be her first time in a temple or church and that she will look for him.

Chapter 9: Margaret wears a new suit and hat for the Jewish holiday. Her white gloves get dirty on the bus ride into the city so she takes them off. Sylvia picks Margaret up at the station and the women share a taxi to the temple. The service is different than Margaret had envisioned it, with a lot of sitting down, standing up, and recitation. After the sermon, Sylvia insists that Margaret meet the rabbi. Rabbi Kellerman is young, like Mr. Benedict, and tells Margaret that he hopes she will return to learn more about God. At home, Margaret's parents ask her a lot of questions. Mr. Simon asks if she learned anything and Margaret says that she counted the colors of hats. He laughs and says that he used to count the feathers in hats when he went to temple as a kid. Margaret asks God to keep helping her learn about religion so she can pick one before junior high school.

Chapter 10: Margaret tells the reader about three things that happened the first week of November. The first was that Laura Danker wore a sweater to school and supposedly Mr. Benedict's eyes "bugged out." The second was that Margaret went to church with Janie Loomis. Though it was a Presbyterian church, Margaret thought it seemed a lot like the temple she had gone to with her grandmother. Margaret tells God that she still hasn't found him, despite going to two religious places, but that the next time she will try harder.

Margaret and Nancy become closer friends, spending a lot of time on the phone every night doing math homework. The third thing that happened the first week in November was that the school principal announced that there would be a Thanksgiving dance for the three sixth-grade classes. Mr. Benedict teaches the class how to square dance and Margaret notices that most of the boys just want to step on the girls' feet.

The day of the dance, the parent chaperones decorate the gym to look like a barn. Margaret is happy that her mother isn't a chaperone because she would be embarrassed if her mom dressed up like a farmer. A genuine square-dance caller heads up the festivities and Margaret gets to dance with Philip Leroy, who deliberately steps on her feet. She also dances with Jay Hassler who is polite and does not try to step on her feet. After the dance, Margaret's mother picks her up in a new car.

Analysis

Margaret begins her personal journey toward finding a religion in this section of the book. In New York, she never missed having a religious affiliation but in New Jersey it makes her feel like an outsider. Mr. Benedict, an outsider himself, is the only person in Farbrook who accepts without further questions Margaret's explanation that she has no religion. Though Margaret has practical reasons for wanting to belong to a religion—like knowing whether to join the Jewish Community Center or the YMCA—she also mentions wanting to "see" God more clearly. At the age of eleven Margaret believes that she knows enough of the world and of herself to start exploring the right religion for her.



While Margaret's parents do not give their daughter their full support, everyone else who learns of the religious exploration is encouraging. Sylvia, Margaret's grandmother, nearly cries with excitement when Margaret asks to go to Jewish temple. Janie tells Margaret to come to Presbyterian church with her family the same week that Margaret asks to go sometime. Both the rabbi and minister are enthusiastic about Margaret visiting their places of worship and encourage her to return and learn more about God. Margaret notices that the temple and church have more similarities than differences and tells God that she will try harder to find him and understand religion.

Margaret's reactions to boys are heavily influenced by the way her peers act and feel about the opposite sex. Though Margaret really wants to write Moose Freed's name in her boy book, she writes more obvious names, like Philip Leroy, to avoid drawing attention to herself or scrutiny for her choices. She is embarrassed to talk to or sit by Norman Fishbein even though she doesn't know much about him. Margaret only knows that Norman is the "class drip." Since Margaret is still unfamiliar with her budding sexuality, she watches those around her for clues as to how she is supposed to feel.

Vocabulary

subscription, sulked, lingerie, Dacron, flannel, eavesdropping, arithmetic, posture, reputation, meaningful, fidget, intermission, hanky, dabbed, beamed, rabbi, Rosh Hashanah, hysterical, yarmulke, sermon, Presbyterian, magician, square dance, chaperone, dungarees, Chevy



Chapters 11 – 15

Summary

Chapter 11: The PTS's meet at Margaret's house to look through an anatomy book that Gretchen snuck away from her dad. The girls look at the drawings and pictures of the male body and reproductive system. Janie says that her aunt spent three weeks at a nudist colony and found it very peaceful. Janie also says that she will never let anyone see her naked, even when she gets married. Nancy asks her if she has ever seen an issue of Playboy magazine. Janie says she hasn't and Margaret agrees to go sneak her dad's copy. The girls look at the centerfold girl and are surprised to learn that she's only eighteen. Janie is amazed at how big the woman's breasts are and wonders if Laura Danker's are that big too. Nancy says that Laura's breasts aren't that big but probably will be by the time she is eighteen. The girls end the club with fifty repetitions of "we must increase our bust."

Chapter 12: On December 11, Sylvia leaves for a two-week cruise to the Caribbean. Margaret and her parents give her a proper send off. Mrs. Simon starts frantically putting together Christmas cards—or Holiday Greetings, as she calls them. In the pile of cards set to go out, Margaret sees one addressed to her mother's parents in Ohio. She is surprised but does not mention it to her mother, since she figures that it was not meant to be seen by her.

Mr. Benedict's class is chosen to be the choir for the school Christmas-Hanukkah pageant and Margaret really likes the green robes and pencil flashlights the class gets to use. After a few students complain about singing Christmas or Hanukkah songs because of religious conflict, Margaret tells God that she is spending a lot of time focusing on both holidays in the attempt to find the one for her.

Chapter 13: Margaret receives an invitation from Norman Fishbein to a holiday supper party. Mrs. Simon says that she can go and Nancy calls soon after to see if Margaret is going. Mrs. Wheeler calls Mrs. Fishbein to ask what the girls should wear to the party and learns that the entire class is invited.

The day of the party, Margaret and the other PTS's make several phone calls to each other in preparation. Mrs. Simon sets Margaret's hair in rollers and files her nails. While Margaret is supposed to be resting in her room, she takes off her robe and examines her body in the mirror. She is disappointed that her breasts still look as flat as they did a few months prior, so she takes six cotton balls from the bathroom and stuffs three into each bra cup. She is pleased that it looks like she has grown. Margaret tells God how good her breasts look with a "little help." She pleads for real growth, telling God that if he can grant that, she will be really helpful around the house.

Chapter 14: Margaret finishes getting ready for Norman's party and her parents smile as she waits for her ride. The Fishbein house is large and a maid takes the girls' coats



when they arrive. The kids are left unattended in the basement and some of the boys squirt mustard on the ceiling. Freddy Barnett rips the pocket of Nancy's dress and Mrs. Fishbein threatens to call everyone's parents if they don't straighten up. To keep everyone out of trouble, Norman Fishbein suggests that they start playing games. The group starts with the game "spin the bottle" but quickly grows bored with it. Jay Hassler suggests playing "two minutes in the closet." Since there is no closet, Norman says they can play using the bathroom in the basement.

Philip Leroy calls Margaret's number and she goes into the bathroom with him. He kisses her twice, quickly, on the lips. Margaret feels lightheaded, like she is in a dream. She calls Norman's number next and in the bathroom he tells her that he really likes her. She tells him to kiss her on the cheek quickly. Later that night, Nancy presses for details about the kiss with Philip. Margaret lies and says that she and Philip kissed about five times. Both girls declare that they each like Philip Leroy.

Chapter 15: Margaret attends a Christmas Eve service at Nancy's Methodist church. She is relieved when Nancy tells her the pastor will be too busy to meet her. Instead of a sermon, the choir sings for forty-five minutes. Back at home, Margaret tells God that she is more confused than ever about finding a religion and that she wishes she had just been born with one.

In the second week of January, the girls in Margaret's class watch a special movie called "What Every Girl Should Know." The film is about menstruation and is sponsored by a feminine sanitary supply company. Margaret tells her mother that it's stupid for her to have to watch it since she already knows about menstruation. Mrs. Simon says that the film is for girls whose mothers may not have talked to them about it yet.

A week after the special film viewing, Gretchen calls a special meeting of the PTS's because she gets her period. All the girls are jealous, especially Nancy, who believed that she would be the first one. Gretchen tells the other girls what it feels like and says that her mother wants her to start watching what she eats and wash her face with soap. The next month, Nancy's family takes a trip to Washington. Margaret receives a postcard from Nancy that says, "I got it!" Margaret rips the postcard up and cries. She tells God that she does not want to be the last one in her group to get her period, just like she is the only one without a religion. She pleads with God to let her be like everybody else.

Analysis

Interest in sexual and reproductive matters arises among Margaret and her friends in this section of the book. The discussion the PTS's have about naked bodies reflects their innocence toward such matters, especially Janie. The fact that they sneak the anatomy textbook and Playboy magazine shows that the girls are not comfortable enough with sexuality issues to discuss them with their parents. The only place the girls feel comfortable discussing their budding sexual bodies is amongst each other.



The party at Norman's shows parallel feelings of attraction and repulsion between the boys and girls in Margaret's class. They separate instinctively into a boy group and a girl group when the party begins and only the boys participate in squirting mustard on the ceiling. Despite the tendency to separate, the kids are all on board to play "spin the bottle" and "two minutes in the closet." While Norman tries to relay his attraction to Margaret, she is too busy focusing on her attraction to Philip Leroy to notice.

The PTS's obsession with beginning menstruation shows their haste in growing up—a common characteristic of pre-teen girls. Instead of being thankful to not have cramps or bleeding like Gretchen, the other girls are jealous that she is the first to start her period. Margaret dreads that she will be the last one in her group to start her period and even cries about it. Her desire to not be an outsider again, like she is with religion, is strong and she pleads with God to make her just like everybody else.

Vocabulary

anatomy, reproductive, nudist, prude, proportion, Caribbean, bon voyage, Hanukkah, frantically, advertisement, emery, sterile, calamine, rubies, mimicked, abominable, squealed, cling, Methodist, menstruation, ovaries



Chapters 16 – 20

Summary

Chapter 16: Margaret and her mother make two visits to the Lincoln Center to use Sylvia's subscription while she is in Florida. Margaret says the trips are not as fun because she doesn't get to ride the bus alone and her mother does not like to people-watch like she and Sylvia do. Margaret writes a letter to her grandmother, telling her that she misses her and that the snow in New Jersey is more fun than in New York.

Sylvia writes back and tells Margaret that she hopes her parents will let her visit Florida for spring vacation. She writes to Margaret about a man she has been dating, named Mr. Binamin. Margaret writes back that her parents say it's too soon to make spring vacation plans but that it will probably be okay for Margaret to fly to see Sylvia. She tells her grandmother that she wants to hear more about Mr. Binamin and that her two friends both got their periods.

Chapter 17: The Wheeler family invites Margaret to go with them to New York for the day. Margaret is excited because Moose Freed is going too, as Evan Wheeler's guest. She hopes to sit next to him during the show at Radio City Music Hall, but the boys find seats by themselves. During dinner at the Steak House, Margaret bumps hands with Moose a few times because he is left-handed. She tells herself that Moose is number one in her boy book, even if no one else knows it.

Margaret and Nancy excuse themselves to the restroom. From inside the stall, Nancy begins to sob. Margaret gets Mrs. Wheeler because she fears that Nancy is sick. Mrs. Wheeler asks Margaret to buy a sanitary pad from the dispenser in the bathroom because Nancy is menstruating and it is her first time. When Mrs. Wheeler goes back to the table, Nancy tells Margaret that she wasn't lying when she said she started her period before. She says that she really thought that she had started. That night, Margaret tells God that Nancy is a liar and that she no longer wants to get her period so badly. Margaret says that she will be more patient and asks that God just not let her start menstruating at school because she doesn't want to have to tell Mr. Benedict.

Chapter 18: Margaret's birthday is on March 8. She wakes up and decides that since she is twelve, she should put on deodorant. Margaret tells her mother at breakfast that she used her deodorant and Mrs. Simon says that she will be happy to buy Margaret her own roll. Margaret gets a \$100 savings bond from her grandmother, three sweaters, a bathing suit and a round-trip airline ticket for spring vacation in Florida. At school, the other PTS's give Margaret a music album and Nancy gives her a separate card with the words, "To the best friend a girl could ever have."

In the afternoon, Mr. Benedict announces that over the next few weeks, the class will be working in groups to complete committee projects. Margaret is put in a group with Laura Danker, Norman Fishbein and Philip Leroy. Right away Philip insults Margaret, pinches



her and implies that her breasts need to grow. Margaret decides that Nancy can have Philip if she wants him. Being in a group with Laura Danker upsets Margaret because she hates how beautiful and confident Laura is. Margaret concludes that she is having a rotten birthday.

Chapter 19: The next three weeks, Margaret is in a foul mood because of her school committee project. The group chooses to write about Belgium, even though Margaret wanted to work on Spain or France. Margaret discovers that Philip is a terrible student and doesn't work. Norman works too slowly. Laura is actually a good group member, but Margaret would never tell her so. One afternoon, Laura and Margaret stay after school at the library to work on their project. Margaret is so wrapped up in thinking about Laura that she doesn't realize she is writing the information on Belgium word for word from the reference book. Laura points this out to her, and Margaret gets angry. She tells Laura that she knows all about what Laura does behind the A&P with the older boys. Laura is visibly upset and storms out of the library.

Margaret feels awful about her actions, so she follows Laura out of the school. Laura asks Margaret how she would feel if she were the biggest kid in class—if she had to wear a bra since fourth grade and cross her arms over her chest when talking to boys. Margaret tries to apologize but Laura is still upset. Laura tells Margaret that she would gladly change places with her then goes into her Catholic church to attend Confession. Margaret follows Laura in and sees her emerge from a small wooden booth a few minutes later. Laura does not see Margaret and leaves the church. Margaret goes into the booth and hears a voice say, "Yes, my child." At first she thinks that it is the voice of God, but then she realizes it's the voice of the priest on the other side of the wall in the booth. She rushes out of the church.

When Mrs. Simon picks Margaret up from school, Margaret tells her that she is ill. All night Margaret feels terrible about what happened with Laura. She talks to God and confesses to doing something awful to Laura that day. Margaret expresses frustration that she is having so much trouble finding God's voice in the religious establishments she has attended. She asks why she only feels him when she is alone.

Chapter 20: A week before spring vacation, the Simons receive a letter from Margaret's other set of grandparents in Ohio. It says that they regret the way they behaved fourteen years earlier and are planning a trip to the East Coast. They say that they would love to see their daughter and meet their granddaughter Margaret. Mr. Simon is angry at first but tells Margaret that he thinks it will be best if she meets them. He tells her that her trip to Florida to visit Sylvia will have to be cancelled.

Margaret is outraged and begins crying. Mrs. Simon calls Sylvia to tell her the news and Sylvia wants to hear it from Margaret, whom she believes must be ill. Sylvia takes the news well and Margaret hands the phone back to her parents. In her room, Margaret asks God if this is her punishment for the way she treated Laura. She pleads with God to make something happen so that she can go to Florida anyway.



Analysis

Margaret begins to break away from Nancy's control and see that her dominating friend is very manipulative. The first sign Margaret receives is the discovery that Nancy lied to her and the other girls about starting her period. Margaret feels bad that Nancy is so jealous of Gretchen that she feels she needs to lie. Though Margaret does not reveal Nancy's secret, the power dynamic shifts as Margaret relies less on what Nancy says.

Worse than Nancy's deceit about starting her period are the lies that she tells Margaret about Laura Danker. Margaret realizes that the negative opinion she has formed about her tall, developed classmate is based on non-truths. The clarity hits Margaret and her conscience hard—so hard that she becomes physically ill. Margaret immediately feels remorseful toward her misunderstood classmate and believes that not being allowed to go to Florida is the penance she must pay for the sin.

Vocabulary

station wagon, dispenser, savings bond, committee, Confession, disowned, sentimental, christened



Chapters 21 – 25

Summary

Chapter 21: Mrs. Simon spends the next week frantically cleaning the house for her parents' visit. Though Margaret and her father are not very enthusiastic about the guests, they promise to try their best to be hospitable. Margaret goes with her mother to the airport to pick up her grandparents. Margaret immediately notices how old her grandparents look and also the sparkly, large cross necklace that her grandmother wears.

Mr. Simon greets his in-laws when they arrive at the house. Everyone eats dinner and makes small talk. After the meal, they all retire to the den and the conversation continues. Margaret just listens as the adults have a conversation. When her mother leaves the room, Margaret's grandmother asks her about her grades in school. She asks Margaret how she fares in Sunday school and Margaret explains that she doesn't attend Sunday school. The adults in the room begin arguing about whether or not Margaret needs an assigned religion. Grandma Hutchins declares that Margaret was born a Christian because her mother was baptized a Christian. Mrs. Simon points out that Margaret can just as easily be Jewish if she wishes.

Margaret yells at the adults to stop discussing it. She says that she does not need religion or God then runs from the room. In her room, Margaret decides that she is done talking to God and that she is never going to set foot in the Jewish Community Center or the YMCA.

Chapter 22: The next day, Margaret stays in her room, too angry to face her family. In the afternoon she asks her mother to drive to her to the movies with Janie. Before the movie starts, the girls go into the drug store. Margaret tells Janie that they should just be brave and each buy a box of Teenage Softies sanitary pads. Janie hesitates but Margaret takes a box for each girl up to the front and purchases them. When she gets home, Margaret tells her mother that the bag has school supplies in it.

At home, Margaret goes into her closet and puts a pad in her underwear. She pulls her underwear up and feels the way the pad fits. She takes it back out and hides it in her bottom desk drawer.

The next day, Margaret's grandparents announce that they are going to a hotel in New York. Mrs. Simon protests, saying that they told her they would stay for a week. They say they think it is best to leave instead. Mr. Simon smiles behind his newspaper. When her grandparents leave, Margaret declares that they ruined her vacation.

Chapter 23: That night the doorbell rings and Margaret is astonished to see her grandma Sylvia. She has flown to visit Margaret and has brought her boyfriend, Morris Binamin. Sylvia asks where the other grandparents are and Margaret explains that they



already left. Sylvia says that was part of the reason that they came to visit, to provide Margaret with support. She asks if the other grandparents tried any religious business and Margaret admits that they did. Sylvia declares that Margaret is a Jewish girl and Margaret argues that she is no such thing. Margaret acts tired and goes up to bed to avoid spending any more time with the adults. She is annoyed that Sylvia seems just as obsessed with giving Margaret a religion as the other grandparents.

Chapter 24: The yearlong projects are due in Mr. Benedict's class. Margaret writes a letter explaining that she has spent the whole year trying to find the right religion for her. She lists the churches and temple that she visited, and she explains that she went to Confession but had to leave because she didn't know what to do. She says that she did not try Islam or Buddhism because she does not know anyone of those faiths. At the end of the letter she concludes that she is not any closer to picking a religion and that when she has children, she will assign them a religion at birth to make it easier.

Margaret sees that all of her classmates turn in colorful booklets and is embarrassed about her one-page letter. She apologizes as she hands it to Mr. Benedict, who reads it on the spot. Margaret runs from the room before she bursts into tears. She wonders what is happening to her; when she was eleven, she never cried or had outbursts like she has been having since turning twelve.

Chapter 25: On the last day of the school year, Margaret's school holds a farewell party for the sixth graders. The class presents Mr. Benedict with a pair of silver cufflinks, and after the party the PTS's go downtown to have lunch together. That afternoon, Mrs. Simon starts packing Margaret's trunk for summer camp. Moose Freed shows up to mow the grass and Margaret decides to confront him about his lies about Laura Danker.

When Margaret tells Moose that he's a dirty liar for what he has said about going behind the A&P with Laura, Moose is confused. He says he doesn't know what Margaret is talking about and that she really shouldn't listen to what other people say. Margaret feels better that Moose is not a liar after all.

She goes to the bathroom and sees blood in her underpants. Margaret calls for her mother who confirms that her daughter has started her period. Mrs. Simon gives Margaret a sanitary pad and leaves to let Margaret put it on properly. Margaret feels bad for Janie, who will be the last of the PTS's to get her period.

Excitedly Margaret prays to God, though she has been avoiding him, to tell him thank you.

Analysis

Margaret gives up her quest to find religion in the final chapters of the book. She is fed up with the way adults—particularly her three grandparents—act in regards to religion. She is frustrated that though she has sought God in churches and temple, she has had no sign of his presence. In her final paper for Mr. Benedict's class, Margaret concludes



that religion is best determined for kids at birth by their parents. She tearfully gives up the quest for a religion to call her own.

Once the constraints of religion are lifted, Margaret is free to explore her direct relationship with God. She begins to question God and gets angry with his apparent absence in her life. Margaret responds to God like she would a good human friend. Yet, when Margaret starts her period, she tells God “thank you” right away. Despite having no established religion, Margaret feels connected to God in an emotional and highly personal way.

Vocabulary

overjoyed, stiffened, philosophical, frantically, defiantly, baptized, Mohammed, marvelous, bawling



Characters

Margaret Ann Simon

Margaret is the protagonist of the book and it is written from her point of view. Her interactions with friends, family, and God give readers the information needed to understand Margaret's life and trials. Margaret is eleven years old when book starts and has just moved to Farbrook, New Jersey from New York, where she has lived her whole life. An only child, Margaret has a good relationship with her parents and has no problem with her family not having a religious affiliation. After she moves to Farbrook, however, Margaret is bothered by being an outsider for having no religion. She begins a quest to find a religious group she likes so that she will know what to answer when people ask her if she is going to join the Jewish Community Center or the YMCA. Though she eventually gives up trying to find a denomination, Margaret continues to talk to God and confide in him the worries of her life.

In addition to religious angst, Margaret faces a lot of common pre-teen anxiety in the book. She is accepted into a secret club of girls in her neighborhood and does her best to fit in and not make any waves. Margaret starts wearing a bra, discusses her school crushes, and becomes obsessed with getting her period, in part because those are the things her friends do. At a low point in the book Margaret asks God to just make her like everyone else.

Margaret is a "good kid," demonstrated by her close relationship with her grandmother and her desire to get high marks in school. When she offends a tall, developed classmate, Margaret gets physically ill because she feels so remorseful. She admits to God that she feels like some of her requests are selfish in nature and she gives her estranged grandparents a chance when her mother requests that she try. Margaret lacks the vicious tendencies of the other girls in her group, though she is not always brave enough to take a stand.

Sylvia Simon

Sylvia is Margaret's Jewish grandmother. She is a fashionable sixty-year-old who loves living in New York City and misses Margaret when the family moves to New Jersey. Margaret mentions that her parents don't really like how close she and her grandmother are and that she thinks it is the reason they moved to New Jersey. Sylvia spoils Margaret with gifts, trips, and hand-knitted sweaters that say "made expressly for you by grandma" on the tag. She buys a subscription to the Lincoln Center in New York City so that Margaret's parents will have no choice but to let her visit often.

When Margaret asks to go with her grandmother to temple, Sylvia is overjoyed, hoping that her only grandchild will convert to Judaism. Margaret's adoration of her grandmother is tainted when Sylvia insists that Margaret is already Jewish. By the end



of the book, Sylvia has a boyfriend and lives in Florida for some of the year but visits and calls often.

Barbara Simon

Barbara is Margaret's mom. She grew up as a Christian and has been estranged from her parents since marrying Margaret's Jewish father. Barbara does not have a full-time job and uses her time to paint still life pictures. Though Margaret is terrified to ask her mother to go with her to buy a bra, Barbara takes her with no questions asked. At first Barbara is against Margaret's exploration of religion but quickly provides her support to her daughter.

Herb Simon

Herb is Margaret's dad. He grew up Jewish and his family was upset when he married Margaret's Christian mother. Herb and his mother Sylvia have since smoothed things over but Herb dislikes the way his wife's family still treats her. Herb works in Manhattan and is clearly fond of his two girls at home. Margaret mentions that her mother can talk her father into doing anything and Herb often mentions how proud he is of his "grown-up" daughter.

Nancy Wheeler

Nancy is a sixth-grader in Margaret's class who lives six houses away. She is Margaret's first friend in Farbrook and invites her to join her secret club. Nancy has an upturned nose and is boy crazy, gossipy and the queen bee of the PTS's, Pre-Teen Sensations. If Nancy feels threatened, she quickly cuts down the source of the threat, many times the girls in her own group. She is obsessed with growing up, focusing on things like wearing a bra and using cosmetics, or practicing kissing with a pillow. For much of the book, Margaret seems grateful that Nancy has included her in the group; however, when Margaret discovers that Nancy has lied about both the start of her period and the rumors about Laura Danker, Margaret puts less stock in what Nancy has to say.

Janie Loomis

Janie is part of the Pre-Teen Sensations club and is a good friend of Margaret's. When the other two girls in the group get their periods, Margaret and Janie are both afraid that they will be the last girl to get it. Along with Margaret, Janie seems to think that Nancy isn't always right. Janie declares that no one will even see her naked, not even her husband.



Gretchen Potter

Gretchen is the fourth member of the Pre-Teen Sensations club. She is the first of the girls to get her period and becomes the object of the others' jealousy, especially Nancy's. Gretchen steals her father's anatomy book so that the girls can look at the male reproductive system. It is implied a few times that Gretchen struggles with weight issues.

Miles J. Benedict Jr

Mr. Benedict is a first-year teacher in Margaret's sixth grade class. He struggles with confidence at the beginning of the year but gains some respect from his class as the year progresses. After Margaret notes on a school assignment that she hates religious holidays, Mr. Benedict asks her to explain herself. While Margaret thinks that she is in trouble for the answer, Mr. Benedict seems to approve of her lack of religion.

Mary and Paul Hutchins

Mary and Paul are Margaret's grandparents from Toledo, Ohio. At the start of the book, Margaret and her parents are estranged from these grandparents but they later arrange a visit. Margaret notes that her mother's parents both look very elderly, with white hair and slow moves. Mary Hutchins wears a large, shiny cross necklace. Their visit to New Jersey is cut short when the family argues over which religion Margaret should belong to.

Laura Danker

Laura is a tall, voluptuous girl in Margaret's class. Laura is often teased and is the center of rumors because she looks older than she is. Margaret believes gossip that Nancy tells her about Laura being promiscuous with older boys until she confronts Laura and can tell it isn't true. Laura tells Margaret that she would trade places with her, just to be normal. Laura despises having a developed body and looking grown up, two things that Margaret wishes she had.

Philip Leroy

Philip is the cutest guy from Margaret's sixth grade class. All of the girls in the PTS club put him at the top of their boy book crush lists. Margaret becomes the object of her friends' envy when Philip kisses her twice during a game. Despite Philip's good looks, his attitude is immature and abrasive at times. He taunts Margaret on her birthday and she determines that even though he is cute, her other friends can have him.



Norman Fishbein

Norman is a Jewish boy in Margaret's class that she refers to as the "class drip." Norman hosts a holiday supper party and admits to Margaret that he really likes her—a fact that she ignores.

Jay Hassler

Jay is a classmate of Margaret's who she puts in her boy book because he has nice brown eyes and clean fingernails. When the class rehearses square dancing, Jay is one of the only boys who do not step on Margaret's feet.

Freddy Barnett

Freddy is the class clown of Margaret's class. Everyone calls him the "lobster" because of bad sunburn he had on the first day of school. He also turns really red when he is embarrassed.

Moose Freed

Moose is a 14-year-old who is best friends with Nancy Wheeler's brother, Evan. Margaret has a crush on Moose that she is afraid to admit because she knows that Nancy will make fun of her. Moose mows lawns in the neighborhood, including the Simons' yard.

Evan Wheeler

Evan is Nancy's 14-year-old brother, who likes to tease the PTS girls. Nancy refers to him as being "disgusting."

Morris Binamin

Morris is Sylvia Simon's boyfriend from Florida. He is tanned and has a mustache. Sylvia hints to Margaret that she and Morris may get married.



Objects/Places

Farbrook, New Jersey

Farbrook is the town where Margaret moves at the age of eleven. It is a suburban area with houses that resemble each other and residents that have similar lives. Farbrook is far different from the area in New York City where Margaret grew up.

Delano Elementary School

Margaret is in sixth grade at Delano Elementary and is one of twenty-eight kids in her class. Her classroom is the setting for much interaction with her peers as well as the rebellion of the class toward their first-year teacher Mr. Benedict.

New York City

Margaret grew up in New York City, where no one ever minded that her family had no religion. She still visits the big city often, usually to visit her grandmother or with her friends' families.

Jewish Community Center/YMCA

Part of the reason that Margaret wants to find her own religion is so that she can decide whether to join the Jewish Community Center or the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association). All of Margaret's friends insist that every family in the neighborhood must join one.

Temple

Margaret attends temple with her grandmother Sylvia on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. Margaret does not "find" God on her visit and spends most of the service categorizing the hats of the congregation by color.

Church

Margaret goes to three Christian churches in search of the right religion. She attends a Presbyterian church with Janie Loomis, a Methodist church on Christmas Eve with Nancy Wheeler, and a Catholic church whilst following Laura Danker. Like with temple, Margaret tells God that she did not feel his presence in any of the Christian places of worship.



Bras

The girls of the Pre-Teen Sensations club make a rule that they all have to wear bras. Margaret, Janie, and Gretchen all buy “Gro-bras” but Nancy wears a 32AA. Margaret stuffs cotton balls in her bra to see what she would look like with breasts and asks God to please help her develop more quickly. Laura Danker mentions the embarrassment of having to wear a bra since fourth grade.

Boy Book

Janie Loomis makes a club rule that all the girls have to keep a boy book containing names of crushes. Each week, they update the names and rank them in order of whom they like the best. All of the girls regularly have Philip Leroy, the cutest guy in sixth grade, at the top of their lists. Margaret wants to write Moose Freed’s name in her boy book, but is worried the other girls will make fun of her.

Lincoln Center

Margaret’s grandmother Sylvia buys an annual subscription to the Lincoln Center in New York City, a venue that hosts cultural events like operas, plays and music concerts. Sylvia knows that taking Margaret to the Lincoln Center is a good way to spend time with her, since her parents will not want to pass up the chance at Margaret experiencing culture.

Teenage Softies

When Gretchen Potter starts her period, her mother buys Teenage Softies sanitary pads for her to use. In a moment of bravery, Margaret and Janie buy two boxes of Teenage Softies from the drugstore to keep at home, just in case. Margaret practices putting the pads in her underwear for months before her period starts.

Lawn Mower

Margaret’s father Herb buys a lawn mower a few days after the family moves to New Jersey. He is proud that he will be able to cut his own lawn and says that it will be good for his soul. On his first attempt, however, Herb’s finger is cut by a blade and he requires stitches. From then on, Moose Freed cuts the Simons’ lawn for \$5 per week, much to Margaret’s delight.

Bus

The only way that Margaret can get to New York City is by riding a bus alone. Her mother is nervous about Margaret’s “first time” traveling without her parents but

Margaret enjoys the independence. She is disappointed when her mother takes her to New York for a concert because they ride in the car together.



Themes

Pre-teen Sexuality

The anticipation of sexual development and puberty plays a big role in Margaret's sixth grade year. Margaret prays most often that God will help her breasts develop faster so that she will not be so flat. Nancy Wheeler is perhaps the character in the biggest hurry to transform into a sexual being. She insists on wearing a 32AA bra when all her friends are still in no-size training bras. Nancy has a drawer full of cosmetics that she is not allowed to wear yet, but has ready for when she turns thirteen. Nancy is also the most boy crazy of the group and practices kissing a pillow. When Gretchen is the first to get her period, Nancy is devastated and stoops to lying that she starts hers a week later. Though Margaret internally questions Nancy's haste toward growing up, she also feels inadequate in comparison to Nancy's sophistication.

Margaret keeps most of her true feelings toward the opposite sex private. To prove that she is "normal," Margaret writes the name of Philip Leroy in her boy book because everyone else thinks that he is cute. She feels an attraction toward fourteen-year-old Moose Freed but is embarrassed by it, knowing that her friends would disapprove if they knew. When Philip Leroy kisses Margaret at a party, she exaggerates the tale to make herself look more grown up to Nancy Wheeler. Toward the end of the book, Margaret is starting to gain confidence in her feelings toward boys, specifically when she decides that Philip Leroy is a jerk and she could care less if one of her friends became his girlfriend.

Religion vs. Spirituality

From the start of the book, Margaret has a personal relationship with God. Though she has been raised in a home with no religious affiliation, Margaret confides in God on a very individual, genuine level. She compares the prayers and activities of temple and church services to her own prayer life and determines that she cannot "find God" in the organized religious practices. With no regimented religious outline for the way that God should be addressed, Margaret finds an intimacy with the higher being that she feels is lacking in the lives of religious people around her.

Margaret also sees religion as more of a divider than a unifying factor. Margaret's own parents do not subscribe to a religion, because they have been shunned by their family members who do not approve of their interfaith marriage. When Margaret meets her mother's parents for the first time, they are more interested in how Margaret performs in Sunday school more than her regular academics or extracurricular life. They declare that Margaret is obviously a Christian because her mother was baptized as one and a child should always be the religion of the mother; even at eleven, Margaret can see the error in that line of thinking. Margaret even feels resentment toward her grandmother Sylvia, whom she has a close relationship with, because of Sylvia's insistence that



Margaret be Jewish. Margaret wonders why loving each other is not enough for Sylvia. Even the most pious readers can see the purity and profoundness of Margaret's statements about religion, prayer, and a spiritual relationship with God.

Youth and Independence

Margaret enjoys budding freedom in her sixth grade year. She is able to go shopping and go to movies with friends and also to class parties. The holiday supper party at Norman Fishbein's is an example of the precarious position parents are in when dealing with pre-teen freedom. Mrs. Fishbein leaves the kids to eat dinner alone and returns to find that there is mustard on her ceiling. Despite this, she leaves the kids alone again and they wind up playing kissing games that would likely be considered inappropriate to their parents. Mrs. Fishbein's faith in her son and his classmates' judgment is ill-founded but common in parents of the pre-teen age group.

Margaret relishes her independence. She is not nervous at all when she rides the bus for the first time to meet her grandmother in New York City. She is ecstatic to learn that for spring break she will be flying alone to Florida to visit her grandmother. Using her own money, Margaret buys Teenage Softies sanitary pads and undertakes teaching herself how to apply them in her underwear. In the final scene of the book, Margaret is packing her suitcase to go to summer camp. She reflects on the school year but is excited to be starting seventh grade when she returns.

Style

Point of View

The book is written in the first-person point of view of Margaret Simon, the story's protagonist. Margaret's conversations with God and her observations about the relationships around her provide readers the most insight into her life. Though Margaret asks God to make her "normal," readers can relate to Margaret the most out of all of the characters. Her self-consciousness next to her peers, angst about her sexuality, and confusion about the role of religion in her life are feelings with which readers can relate.

Another sympathetic character is the first-year teacher Mr. Benedict. He is new, just like Margaret, and though he is in a position of authority, it takes some time for him to gain confidence in his abilities. Mr. Benedict's acceptance of Margaret's lack of religion further shows a parallel between the two characters; readers wonder if Mr. Benedict is also a man without religious affiliation. By the end of the book, Mr. Benedict has adapted to his new surroundings and found his voice as a teacher, similar to Margaret adapting to Farbrook and forming her own opinions that are separate from her peers.

Setting

The book is set mainly in Farbrook, New Jersey, a suburban area where the houses are seven years old and so are the trees. Margaret attends Delano Elementary School where she is one of twenty-eight students in her sixth grade class. She walks to her friends' houses on Morningbird Lane and is able to attend movies without her parents. The Simons refer to Farbrook as "country living" compared to their old lifestyle in New York City.

New York City provides a secondary setting in the book. Margaret tastes independence when she is allowed to ride the bus to visit her grandmother in New York. Though Margaret likes the culture of the Lincoln Center performances, she especially likes people-watching near the fountain outside. People from Farbrook view visits to New York City as a big event and visit special places like Radio City Music Hall or famous restaurants when they go. New York City is viewed by the suburbanites of Farbrook as a fun place to visit but not a good place to live.

Language and Meaning

The book is written simply, in the conversational style of an eleven-year-old girl. No part of Margaret's life is off limits to readers, not even her prayers. Conversations between Margaret and her friends, parents, grandparents and teachers are written in a dialogue format. By using the words of each character alongside Margaret's observations, readers are given a more accurate portrayal of what significance other characters have in Margaret's life.



The simplicity of the book's writing is deceptive. Complex ideas like religion, being "normal," and family dynamics are explored through the eyes of a child, stripping each subject to its core. Readers are invited to revisit their own introduction to these ideas—or in the case of young readers, address how they are feeling about the same things. Using basic language reminds readers that relationships, God, friends, and sexuality are all simple concepts that are often unnecessarily complicated as people get older.

Structure

The book is written in twenty-five chapters, none of which are more than eight pages in length. Some chapters are only two to three pages. The basic timeline of the book is one school year—the sixth grade for Margaret Simon—and events happen chronologically. Important holidays like Labor Day, Christmas, and Easter are mentioned to show readers the progression of time. Margaret celebrates her twelfth birthday in March.

Within the plot of Margaret's school year lie several subplots in her life. The first is her exploration of religion and quest to find one to call her own. The second is her desire to get her period—an event that doesn't occur until the final pages of the book. The third is less obvious and it is Margaret's growth as an individual, independent of her friends' opinions and parents'/grandparents' literal and figurative control.



Quotes

So Farbrook, New Jersey it was, where my father could commute to his job in Manhattan, where I could go to public school, and where my mother could have all the grass, trees and flowers she ever wanted. Except I never knew she wanted that stuff in the first place. (Chapter 1)

But if you aren't any religion, how are you going to know if you should join the Y or the Jewish Community Center?' Janie asked. (Chapter 5)

My mother says God is a nice idea. He belongs to everybody. (Chapter 2)

Once I saw a model having her picture taken by the fountain. It was freezing cold and she was wearing a summer dress. That's when I decided not to be a model. Even if I did get beautiful some day. (Chapter 8)

I've never been inside a temple or a church. I'll look for you God. (Chapter 8)

My mother gives away a whole bunch of pictures every Christmas. My father thinks they wind up in other people's attics. (Chapter 10)

I wondered, did they list Philip Leroy because they really liked him or were they doing what I did – making him number one because he was so good-looking. Maybe they were ashamed to write who they really liked too. (Chapter 11)

I stood up knowing I'd never be able to make it across the recreation room to the bathroom, where Philip Leroy was waiting to kiss me. I saw Janie, Gretchen and Nancy smiling at me. But I couldn't smile back. I don't know how I got to the bathroom. All I know is I stepped in and Philip shut the door. (Chapter 14)

I've been looking for you God. I looked in temple. I looked in church. And today, I looked for you when I wanted to confess. But you weren't there. I didn't feel you at all. Not the way I do when I talk to you at night. Why God? Why do I only feel you when I'm alone? (Chapter 19)

Sometimes Grandma is almost as bad as everybody else. As long as she loves me and I love her, what difference does religion make? (Chapter 23)

Are you still there God? It's me, Margaret. I know you're there God. I know you wouldn't have missed this for anything! (Chapter 25)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Who is Margaret Ann Simon? What are her feelings about being an only child? What city did she grow up in? Why does she think her parents decided to move to Farbrook, New Jersey? What does Margaret most often ask God to do for her? Describe how Margaret's feelings about Laura Danker change during the book. What is Margaret's club name in the Pre-Teen Sensations? What does Margaret chose to do her yearlong school project about? Describe Margaret's relationship with her grandmother, Sylvia Simon. What boy does Margaret have a secret crush on? How does Margaret react to the attitude of her grandparents who visit from Ohio? What "good thing" happens to Margaret in the final pages of the book?

Topic 2

Who is Nancy Wheeler? What does Nancy look like? Describe how Nancy tends to make her friends feel bad about themselves. In what ways does Margaret believe that Nancy is more "grown up" than she is? What size bra does Nancy wear? What does Nancy tell Margaret about Laura Danker? Why does Nancy say that she is jealous of Gretchen Potter? What lie does Nancy tell Margaret? Why do you think Margaret keeps Nancy's secret safe?

Topic 3

Who is Gretchen Potter? What does Gretchen sneak out of her house? How does Nancy usually criticize Gretchen? Who is Janie Loomis? What church does Janie belong to? How does Janie feel about being naked? What is the name Nancy gives to the secret club? What are the club rules? What do the girls chant during their club meetings? What name is always at the top of each girl's "boy book" list?

Topic 4

Describe Mr. Miles J. Benedict Jr. How do the students torment him? What is his reaction to Margaret saying that she hates religious holidays? What is the assignment he gives his class at the beginning of the school year? What gift do the kids give Mr. Benedict at the end of the school year? In what ways are Margaret and Mr. Benedict alike?



Topic 5

What kind of bra does Margaret wear? What does she do before Norman Fishbein's party to make her chest look bigger? Which of Margaret's friends starts her period first? When does Nancy start her period? What do Margaret and Janie buy from the drugstore? Who does Margaret tell first when her period starts? What does Margaret say to God about starting her period? Explain how Margaret's feelings about Philip Leroy change during the book. How does Margaret feel when she is "wrong" about Laura Danker?

Topic 6

Why does Margaret decide that she needs to look for a religion? How do her parents react to her request to go to temple with her grandmother? During what holiday does Margaret go to temple? List the three Christian denominations that Margaret explores. What similarities does Margaret see between all the places of worship? How does Margaret sum up her yearlong religious experiment to Mr. Benedict? Explain how Margaret is a spiritual person, despite having no organized religion.