

# **Bluish Study Guide**

**Bluish by Virginia Hamilton**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Bluish Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Journal Part I, and Chapter 1.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 2, and Journal Part II.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 3.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 4.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Journal Part III, and Chapter 5.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 6, and Journal Part IV.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 7, and Journal Part V.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>



# Plot Summary

Set in modern-day New York City, *Bluish* is a novel about a budding friendship between three preteen girls, one of whom is afflicted with a form of blood cancer.

Dreenie is the primary character of the novel. She is made anxious and curious when a new girl is introduced into her fifth-grade class. The girl is confined to a wheelchair, and she is so pale that the blue veins underneath the skin can be seen, giving her a bluish hue. Dreenie and the other children give her the nickname, Bluish. Bluish is made an outsider by her condition, and she frequently has to leave early for doctor's appointments. Dreenie herself is also an outsider, as a new kid in school who is being outshined by her intellectually-gifted younger sister, Willie. Dreenie's sole friend at school is the extroverted and flamboyant Tuli, who speaks with a Hispanic accent and mangles Spanish words in order to impress others and make them laugh.

One day in class, a boy tries to snatch the knit cap from Bluish's head. She becomes so upset that she vomits, and this causes disgust and shock in the students. While other students ridicule Bluish or stay away from her entirely, scared of catching her disease, the more mature Dreenie tries to understand Bluish. She explains her anxiety about Bluish to her mother and father, who teach her to respect Bluish and treat her like Dreenie herself would want to be treated. Dreenie also volunteers to help push Bluish's wheelchair when Bluish needs to exit the building for the doctor, initiating a connection. For her part, Bluish attempts to force the students to confront their fears and treat Bluish like a human being, as when she parks her wheelchair right in front of the classroom door so that students must get very close to her to exit.

Dreenie, Bluish, Tuli, and another girl are put into a group for a school project involving highlighting some aspect of New York City. A friendship blossoms, and Bluish gives the girls caps she personally knit. Bluish later gives hats to all the students in class, who are very grateful and who embrace Bluish as one of their own. Later, Dreenie plans a surprise for Bluish in which the class simultaneously rises and puts on the caps Bluish gifted them, which delights Bluish.

One day, responding to anxiety among the students, the teacher decides to explain the nature of Bluish condition: she has blood cancer and is undergoing chemotherapy. The students understand Bluish more and are more at ease.

Prior to winter vacation, the class goes on a field trip to the history museum, and Bluish is amazed when a large blue butterfly lands on her arm while inside the butterfly sanctuary. For Christmas, Dreenie gets Bluish a model of that same butterfly to hang in her room, the notion being that Bluish is also a beautiful and fragile thing.

By the New Year, Bluish, Tuli, and Dreenie are very good friends, and they make a pact to always look out for each other.



# Journal Part I, and Chapter 1

## Journal Part I, and Chapter 1 Summary

Journal Part I: The narrator of the journal entries is ten-year-old Dreenie. She describes the first time she ever met another girl named Bluish in her class. Her real name is Natalie, but all the kids call her Bluish because her skin is so sickly and pale that you can see the blue veins beneath the skin. Bluish is confined to a wheelchair, and to Dreenie the girl looks tired all the time. Bluish is allowed to bring a puppy to school, which she cradles in her arms.

Another day, Bluish parks her wheelchair right outside the classroom, so that kids have to squeeze around her in order to leave the classroom. Dreenie thinks about asking if Bluish needs help to move, but she does not ask. Bluish exclaims that she has put herself in the way so that the other kids are forced to look at her, as apparently everyone has been nervous around her and have been averting their eyes.

Bluish rides a special short bus to school, which has a lift for her wheelchair. Dreenie makes it clear the act of writing a journal is not about getting a grade at school, but just about wanting to write about Bluish. Dreenie admires Bluish's puppy and choice of hats.

Chapter 1: Dreenie is accompanying her little sister as they navigate the crowded sidewalks of New York City on Amsterdam Avenue. It's holiday time, with decorations on many buildings. Dreenie's annoying little sister is named Willeva or Willie for short. She is eight and in third grade, while Dreenie is in fifth grade. Willie is somewhat of a prodigy, and impresses teachers with her intelligence. Dreenie, by contrast, is "normal", and she is envious of the attention her sister gets and worried that she is a "dumbbell". They both attend Bethune Cookman School.

Dreenie's best friend is named Tuli. Tuli tries to impress people and act smarter than she is by speaking in Spanish, but her Spanish is mangled and frequently incorrect. One day, a girl who really knows Spanish calls Tuli out for her pretension, and Tuli is inconsolable, sobbing in the bathroom.

Dreenie has an argument with Willie, who is boastful about her intelligence. Willie smugly informs Dreenie the definition of "hexagram". All the while as they walk, Dreenie thinks about Bluish and her odd appearance. She compares her skin to moonlight. Dreenie wants to pet Bluish's puppy she brings to school, and Dreenie figures Bluish is spoiled for being allowed to have a puppy in class.

## Journal Part I, and Chapter 1 Analysis

The book begins with a journal entry written by the main character, Dreenie. She discusses Bluish and the dog she is able to keep in class. This technique of "jumping right in" to the characters and concerns of the narrative creates question in the reader

that propels him or her forward. The reader will ask who Bluish is, and what the origin of her unusual nickname is.

The alternation between first-person journal and third-person narrative creates an interesting variety, and it continues to create questions in the reader's mind. Dreenie's journal in particular is disjointed and fragmentary, casually introducing information as if the reader had a familiarity with the characters and events in Dreenie's life. This mild confusion spurs the reader to continue on to obtain clarity.

Dreenie's journal features simple vocabulary along with grammar and usage errors, to the point Dreenie says, "This journal, excuse my mistakes" (p. 10). The author has intentionally inserted these errors to make the journal seem more like the realistic product of an actual ten-year-old girl. Additionally, Dreenie states that the journal is not about getting a grade, but about exploring her feelings about Bluish. The journal is thus an intimate, informal record that the young reader may strongly relate to, considering the young reader might also write in this manner, and might also feel many of the same things Dreenie does around those who are different.

The primary characters of the novel - Dreenie, Tuli, and Bluish - are united in a quest for acceptance and belonging. And they all have doubts about their worth. These initial pages show the characters in the midst of this struggle and acting out in different ways. Dreenie keeps things quiet and introspective, and she is waging an internal battle. Bluish is more confrontational, as when she parks her wheelchair in front of the classroom to force the kids to acknowledge her.



# Chapter 2, and Journal Part II

## Chapter 2, and Journal Part II Summary

Chapter 2: Tuli meets Dreenie and Willie on the street. Tuli is gregarious, loud, and confident, partly a product of being a year and a half older than her fellow fifth-grade classmates. Tuli speaks with occasional Spanish, and it's usually fake and "Spanglish", a combination of Spanish and English. Her catch-phrase is "chica-chica!" which she exclaims often.

Tuli yells at Dreenie and Willie when she sees them, and runs to them. Tuli slips and falls on the ice-slicked sidewalk, causing the other girls concern. But Tuli is okay. Dreenie invites Tuli to her house. Tuli loves to go to Dreenie's house and quickly accepts the invitation. Dreenie emerges as the responsible ward for immature Tuli and Willie.

Dreenie guides the girls to their apartment building, and up to their apartment on the third floor. Dreenie instructs Tuli to take off her wet outer clothes, and she throws them in the dryer. Dreenie then makes sandwiches and hot chocolate for everyone, and afterward can finally get some peace from her rowdy companions. Dreenie longs for the day when she can have her own room, and not have to share with Willie. Dreenie wonders why Tuli feels the need to act out with her obnoxious behavior and fake Spanish. Maybe Tuli is covering up being sad with her behavior. But Dreenie accepts Tuli, especially considering Dreenie is new to school and Tuli is the only friend she has made yet.

Tuli wants to stay for dinner, but Dreenie is tired of her and lets her only stay for twenty minutes more to read a book with Willie. Tuli still stumbles over words and reads slow, and the smarter and younger Willie reads better than her. Dreenie longs for a normal, special friend she could talk to, not the immature Tuli.

Journal Part II: Bluish is absent frequently from school, and Dreenie never knows when to expect her in class. One day, a student named Jamal tries to steal Bluish's hat, and Bluish moans and vomits on the floor, grossing everyone out. Dreenie, along with Tuli and Max the student aide, have to clean up the vomit.

Mostly, Bluish sits in class, distant and alone, playing her Game Boy video games. One day, Bluish asks Dreenie if she wants to play with her. Thinking Bluish is referring to the Game Boy, Dreenie says yes, but in fact Bluish was talking about Dreenie coming over to her house. Dreenie is scared of going to Bluish's house, fearing she might catch whatever disease Bluish has. Dreenie doesn't look at Bluish, and Bluish calls her a "stupid dorkhead". Dreenie feels bad, and afterwards, Dreenie regrets her behavior, figuring it cost her a friend.



## Chapter 2, and Journal Part II Analysis

Chapter two adds a third main character, Tuli. She is a mirror of Dreenie and Tuli in that she is also acting out due to feelings of low self-worth or inadequacy. In this case, Tuli's fake accent and outrageous attitude is her way of trying to belong.

Tuli also functions in the book as comic relief, with her amusing antics relieving the tension of the main story and the gravity of Bluish's serious condition. Comic moments with Tuli are accomplished with her outlandish, silly sayings and also her clumsy mannerisms, as when she intentionally slips on the sidewalk ice to get attention. Tuli provides a stark contrast to serious and introverted Dreenie and Bluish.

In chapter two particularly, Dreenie's maturity begins to surface, which will later be important with respect to Dreenie's earning the respect of Bluish. Dreenie is the disciplinarian, and Tuli and Willie are the rambunctious and immature brats that Dreenie must discipline. Dreenie's maturity is also revealed in her thoughts, which the author has indicated with the use of italics. Dreenie's accurate appraisal of Tuli's need for attention and love demonstrates that Dreenie is quite wise. The reader begins to see that Dreenie's fears about low intelligence are unfounded, given her acumen about Tuli.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Dreenie spends time with her mom, who just got home. Dreenie is uncomfortable, and is trying to bring up the subject of Bluish, because it upsets her. Finally, Dreenie's mom coaxes the uncomfortable subject out of her, and Dreenie discusses how Bluish stands out in class, and how her wheelchair makes kids feel awkward, and how her pale appearance is weird. Dreenie's mom figures that Bluish probably has a form of childhood leukemia, and that Bluish's very presence in class probably means she is getting better. Dreenie thinks the fact that Bluish is bald (presumably from chemotherapy) is "gross", and Dreenie's mom urges Dreenie to treat Bluish like she would any other kid, and not to single her out based on her appearance.

Dreenie doesn't want Tuli to stay for dinner, but her mom doesn't mind. Dreenie is worried about Tuli's grandmother, because Tuli is the one who cooks for the both of them. Tuli getting home late means that Tuli's grandmother will be eating late. Dreenie's mom lightly chastises Dreenie for acting too grown-up and responsible.

Dreenie convinces her mom to let her go downstairs to the lobby in order to wait for her dad to come home. Dreenie does so. She tells the bored doorman, Mr. Palmer, of her plans, and she goes outside to watch out for her father. Her father arrives - surprising Dreenie by coming up behind her - and scolds Dreenie for going outside alone around nighttime. In the elevator, Dreenie confesses her upset feelings about Bluish to her father. Her father is much like her mother, stressing tolerance of the girl. Dreenie expresses her anxiety at Bluish throwing up in class, and her father states that anyone can become sick, and hopefully it was only the flu and not something more serious. Dreenie's father asks the girl what she'd like for Christmas, and Dreenie ruefully thinks that her father can never get her the gift she really wants. The nature of this gift, for now, remains a mystery.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Chapter three introduces Dreenie's mother and father, two grounded and common-sense voices who provide an adult presence and a calming influence. The two are flat characters, virtuous and kind, and possessed of all the answers Dreenie needs to calm her agitation over Bluish. Along with Ms. Baker in a later chapter, mother and father provide the moral lesson of the story: to treat people with kindness and respect, no matter how different they might appear to be.

The author helps to portray Dreenie's fixation on Bluish and her agitated state of mind by inserting frequent one- or two-word sentences, such as "Bluish" or "Scary Bluish", set in italics to let the reader know these are Dreenie's thoughts. The narrative is interrupted





by these short bursts of thought, no doubt mimicking how Dreenie's own daily activities are interrupted when her thoughts return to Bluish.

As a further attempt to portray Dreenie's conflicted mind, Dreenie is unable to properly articulate her concerns to her mother. She stops and starts, stuttering and pausing and going off on tangents about Bluish's lack of eyebrows or fuchsia-colored mittens. But wise as she is, Dreenie's mother is able to cut through the confusion and get to the heart of the matter, sensing exactly what Dreenie is trying to get at.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Two weeks pass. Dreenie arrives for another day of school. Ever the responsible one, she is the first one to get to class, just after the teacher Ms. Baker, and she dutifully plugs in the lights of the classroom's Christmas tree. The tree has been decorated by the students, and Dreenie thinks it is pretty. One decoration includes a menorah for the Jewish holiday Hanukkah, which Bluish had brought. Sitting in the quiet classroom on a couch, Dreenie hears the gradual swell of noise as more and more kids get to the school, talking and opening their lockers.

Dreenie feels more at ease with her class, and less like the "new kid" who doesn't know anybody. Additionally, she has had more positive connections with Bluish. Some days ago, Dreenie and Tuli had been chosen to escort Bluish down the elevator for one of her doctor's appointments. While Tuli behaves awkwardly around Tuli, mature Dreenie seems a natural fit as temporary caretaker of wheelchair-bound Bluish. Dreenie confidently wheels Bluish around, but also knows when to hang back and let Bluish feel in control by guiding her own wheelchair.

Today, the class is starting on a week-long research project in groups. Their mission is to pick one unique aspect of New York City and present it to the class. Dreenie is paired with Tuli, a girl named Paula, and Bluish. While other kids seem fearful of Bluish, Dreenie welcomes the girl to her group.

Each group's initial task is to write up an agreement that states each member's proposed contribution to the group project. Paula has the idea that their project should be about Broadway, and Paula writes the agreement because she has the best handwriting. Tuli is tasked with observing people walking on Broadway and sharing that aspect of Broadway with the class, while Dreenie agrees to snap pictures of different parts of Broadway using her father's camera. Bluish surprises the group by volunteering to help Dreenie when she is out snapping photos. The girls figure Bluish can't be outside, but Bluish says that, yes, she is able to be outside.

Bluish says a few words about how the project should be handled. Her voice is squeaky and very thin, and the girls can tell that just speaking tires Bluish. Paula drafts the project agreement, and all the girls agree to it.

After they sign, Dreenie calls Bluish "Bluish," and Bluish states that her mother doesn't want kids to call her that. However, Bluish doesn't personally mind the nickname, and figures it's just a reflection of her pale skin color than anything derogatory.

Bluish takes time to make a paper sign she hangs around her neck. It reads, "I was born human. I'm named Natalie. But you can call me Blueish". She asks the other girls for their opinion, and Dreenie helps Bluish cross out the "e" in "Blueish."



Shortly before lunch, Tuli inquires as to the bundle of hats sitting in Bluish's lap. Bluish responds that they are knit caps, just like she wears, and that she made them for the girls to wear. Bluish gives caps to Dreenie and Tuli, and Dreenie thinks hers is beautiful. All three girls admire their caps in the mirror. Dreenie realizes that Bluish actually stood to join them at the mirror, a very infrequent event.

Bluish's bright mood changes very quickly, perhaps because of the physical strain of standing and talking that day. She collapses in her wheelchair, and asks Ms. Baker to call for her mom. Soon she is unconscious, and saliva is hanging from her mouth. The students are silent with worry. After some time, Bluish is wheeled out of the room by Max the student aide.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

The beginning of chapter four further cements Dreenie's status as a mature girl when she dutifully arrives in class just after the teacher, and helps to plug in the lights of the Christmas tree. Perhaps she is too mature for her age; in fact, as she is wrestling with questions about life and death (Bluish), doubts about her own intelligence, and a sense of responsibility and stewardship with respect to Tuli and her possible psychological problems. In this way, too, Dreenie is much like Bluish, who has been forced to grow up and face mortality much too young.

The Christmas tree itself is an amalgamation of all the major holidays, with Christmas ornaments, a Jewish menorah, and a Kwanzaa candelabra. Multiculturalism and its associated virtues of tolerance and unity are clearly values the author wishes to celebrate. It is no accident that the story takes place in New York City, with its great "melting pot" of different cultures and peoples. New York is explicitly celebrated with the class project that asks students to examine and praise one aspect of the city.

On the subject of unity, it is also important to note the value of the group dynamic in forging the friendship between the girls. Like a microcosm of the city itself, the girls' group assigns different roles to accomplish a common task, in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

There is a cathartic, joyous moment in which the three girls, wearing Bluish's knit caps, admire themselves in the mirror. The moment is proof that beauty - in this case, Bluish learning to knit beautiful caps during her time in the hospital - can be forged out of ugliness (Bluish's illness). The author's message is that there is always a rainbow after the rain, and that good can be found in even the most unlikely of places.



# Journal Part III, and Chapter 5

## Journal Part III, and Chapter 5 Summary

Journal Part III: This entry is titled, "Bluish: What Bluish Had To Say". Bluish speaks to the class, and says that Bluish and her mom made some hats, just like the ones she gave to Dreenie and Tuli. She made anyone for everyone in the class as a gift. Grateful and excited students line up to get a hat from Bluish and thank her. They give her careful "high fives". Bluish becomes very popular that day.

Another time, Dreenie writes about her time with Tuli and Willie at Bluish's house. Dreenie suspects that Bluish's mom doesn't like her friends. Bluish lives in a very luxurious eight-room apartment called a "classic eight". Dreenie is overwhelmed by its spaciousness and luxury.

Willie is determined to play with Bluish's game boy, but she is tired and falls asleep on the bed. Meanwhile, the girls sort photographs that Dreenie took of Broadway for their school project. Because of Bluish's sickness, she wasn't able to come with them. Tuli showed Paula and Dreenie around Broadway, and introduced them to an Irish bar/Chinese restaurant called Mistery Side by Side, and they took pictures inside of it. The visit to Bluish is ostensibly about reviewing the photographs as a team for school.

While the girls are reviewing the photographs - which have been playfully placed upon the sleeping Willie - Bluish's mom Rita comes in. She has brought little cakes and milk, and the hungry girls dig in. Rita is described as having "creamy" skin, while her dad is described as having a "sorta sweet chocolate color". Dreenie hopes Bluish will one day get her proper color back and get over her illness.

Rita then reveals why she is annoyed with the girls. They don't want them to call Bluish by her nickname. Rita insists they call her Natalie. Rita thinks that Bluish is "derogatory". Bluish defends her friends and says that it is not meant to be derogatory. Dreenie can hardly speak, but eventually summons up a feeble defense of the nickname. The difference in opinion stems from the fact that Rita thinks the girls are calling her daughter "Blewish", as in a derogatory mash-up of Black and Jewish, per her ethnic heritage. Bluish explains to her mother that the nickname is just a reflection of her pale skin.

Chapter 5: Dreenie, Paula, and Tuli are constructing their poster board Broadway project, tacking photographs to the poster board and pasting captions to describe each photograph. As they're doing that, Dreenie reflects on Bluish. Sometimes Bluish feels so bad that she doesn't even want Lucky, her dog, and Dreenie is happy to take care of him and love him. But mostly, to Dreenie it seems that Bluish is neither better nor worse than when she first met her. Bluish has by now been accepted by the classmates, and there is very rarely a smart remark made in her direction.



The girls present their project to the class, along with the other students. Other kids had done Broadway, but the girls feel their photographs and captions are the best. As a reward for a good job, everyone gets cookies and punch, as well as pins to wear on their clothes. While the kids are enjoying their food, Dreenie decides to spring a surprise on Bluish that she had been planning for some time and that the entire class was in on. Dreenie jumps up, giving a signal, and the students as well as Ms. Baker quickly take out the knit caps Bluish had given them and put the caps on. This makes Bluish and the kids happy. Uninhibited with their special hats, the kids dance around the room or admire themselves in the mirror.

Afterward, Bluish presents a very old Jewish dreidel to the class. It was her grandmother's, and is more than a century old. Bluish instructs the kids on how to play a game of spin the dreidel, and the excited and interested kids have fun with the game. Ms. Baker informs the children that the four sides of the dreidel represent the four seasons, and the spinning dreidel itself represents the earth. Dreenie hopes Bluish's own "season" turns and that she gets better soon. At the end of the day, Ms. Baker reminds the kids to turn in their permission slips for the field trip to the history museum.

## Journal Part III, and Chapter 5 Analysis

In part III of the journal, Bluish's mom Rita confronts Dreenie and Tuli about what she perceives as Bluish's derogatory nickname. This episode foregrounds the importance of ethnic and cultural identity, with Rita defending her daughter against what, to her mind, is an attack on her heritage. Indeed, Bluish's extraordinarily pale skin color does pose problems for her ethnic identity. Dreenie takes pains to explain the skin tones of Bluish's mother and father, and how she hopes Bluish will once again return to a blend of those skin tones.

Naturally, the author's intent here is to show that skin color does not matter at all. In this case, the wisdom of the "color-blind" children trumps the wisdom of the parent, who is clearly upset by the threat posed to her and her family's identity by her daughter's unusual skin tone. While Rita instantly assumed the children were insulting Bluish for being different, all the children were doing was innocently commenting on Bluish's true skin color.

In chapter five, Dreenie organizes a surprise for Bluish, paying off the introduction of the knit caps in chapter four by having everyone jump up and don the caps for Bluish. This climactic act is a show of solidarity, an affirmation that the kids are firmly united with Bluish, who must wear the cap to cover her head gone bald from harsh chemotherapy treatments. In essence, the cap wearing is a sign that the children share Bluish's struggle. Bluish, along with Dreenie, have found their sense of place and belonging.

Later, in chapter five, Bluish shows the children how to play a game of dreidel. This continues the multicultural thread that was started with the all-holiday tree in the room that Bluish contributed to with a Jewish menorah.



# Chapter 6, and Journal Part IV

## Chapter 6, and Journal Part IV Summary

Chapter 6: On a Friday at school, Bluish has to leave early for the doctor's office. Everyone is worried about her, which happens every time she has to go to the doctor. Dreenie tells Ms. Baker she wants to know more about what's wrong with Bluish, and the other students say they do, too. Ms. Baker relents and agrees to tell them more. This is a great relief to the students, who couldn't quite articulate their worry and anxiety over Bluish.

Ms. Baker states that Bluish has ALL, or Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia, a cancer of blood cells. Bluish has an eighty-five to ninety percent chance of being cured after taking medicines and undergoing chemotherapy. Ms. Baker explains to the children what "relapse" and "remission" mean in terms of the sickness.

The students then talk about how they feel around Bluish. One girl feels funny, and she also feels sorry for Bluish. One boy is uncertain about whether or not he can catch Bluish's disease, while another boy says he doesn't know how to act around Bluish, because she's different and you can't play rough around her. Ms. Baker states that Bluish is afraid of rough play because her condition makes it hard for the blood to properly clot in terms of cuts or bruises. Dreenie tells the class what Bluish told her about chemotherapy, and how painful it is. Dreenie describes how Bluish must be stuck with a large needle in her hipbone so that bone marrow can be extracted.

Ms. Baker ends the discussion by reminding the students how lucky they are to not have a serious illness. She also tells them that she is proud of the way they have handled themselves around Bluish, and how she has been accepted by them.

That night, Dreenie calls Bluish, being sure to ask for "Natalie" so her mother doesn't get mad. Dreenie and Bluish chat about the day, and Bluish is disappointed but understanding that they spent a session talking about her and her illness. Dreenie invites Bluish to an African Market event that is taking place two days after Christmas. Bluish is hesitant, and says that she doesn't know whether her dad could take the time off to drive her there, seeing as Bluish must travel in a special vehicle for her wheelchair. But Bluish will see if it is possible.

Over the weekend, Dreenie visits Tuli, who lives with her grandmother, Granmom Gilla. Granmom Gilla works as a security guard, and often works odd hours. Granmom Gilla makes the girls a meat and potato soup, which everyone agrees is delicious and filling. Granmom Gilla then sleeps because she is tired. Tuli laments her lack of a large family and her boring home life, but Dreenie encourages her by telling Tuli she also has Dreenie's whole family, and that Tuli is beautiful like a model.



Journal Part IV: The class visits the Natural History Museum, and Bluish gets to go with them on the bus, accompanied by her mom. Dreenie is worried that Bluish won't be able to get up the many steps of the museum, but luckily there is a wheelchair access ramp. The kids get to enter a "vivarium", where many butterflies are housed in a tropical environment. Bluish stands from her wheelchair, and Dreenie supports her arm. Everyone is enchanted with the butterflies.

A very large, blue butterfly called a Blue Morpho lands on Bluish's arm. Bluish is happy and touched at the butterfly as the student aide Max explains its name. Max then states that many butterfly species are toxic, and Bluish's face falls. Dreenie can tell Bluish is thinking that she, like the butterfly, is toxic. Bluish loses energy and must be wheeled out of the vivarium. Dreenie stays to take in all the rest of the butterflies and learn their names.

## Chapter 6, and Journal Part IV Analysis

Chapter six has Ms. Baker continuing the calming, omniscient, adult presence started by Dreenie's mother and father in chapter three. There is little doubt that the author intends the comfort Ms. Baker is offering her students to be extended to the young reader, who might be reading with similar uncertainties and misconceptions about someone who is very sick.

By introducing a gamut of reactions among the students to Bluish - from fear to pity to confusion to anger - the author is indicating that all of these feelings are normal, and that no one should be ashamed to feel what they are feeling around someone who is different like Bluish. Additionally, by touching upon the sensitive subject of cancer - to the point of describing a bone marrow biopsy in some detail - the author is demonstrating to the young reader that it is okay to discuss the issue. In the least, perhaps the book will prompt the young reader to continue the conversation with a parent or teacher.

Bluish is initially disappointed when hearing that she was the subject of the class that day. In keeping with her previous characterization, Bluish simply wants to be treated like everyone else, and not a freak or sideshow. However, she understands that it was important for the children's anxieties to be addressed. In this case, knowledge is power.

Part IV of the journal, in which Bluish and Dreenie share an emotional moment with the Blue Morpho butterfly, continues the notion that beauty can come from ugliness. Just like the lowly caterpillar can undergo a dramatic transformation into a beautiful butterfly, Bluish can emerge from this dark point in her life to "take flight" like the butterfly and emerge stronger and more beautiful than she was prior to the cancer.



# Chapter 7, and Journal Part V

## Chapter 7, and Journal Part V Summary

Chapter 7: Christmas comes. Dreenie gets video games, jeans, and a Barbie doll, but not the thing that she really wants (which is not named yet). Two days after Christmas, Dreenie, Tuli, and Bluish attend the African Market and then later go to Bluish's house to exchange their gifts. Dreenie gets Bluish a model of the Blue Morpho butterfly that had landed on her arm at the museum. Bluish is amazed and delighted. Bluish gets Dreenie a similar model of the Isabella Tiger butterfly that Dreenie personally liked the best. Bluish gets Tuli a makeup compact, and Tuli gets both girls Christmas music CDs. Tuli fears that they don't like her gifts, but they assure her that they like the CDs.

Dreenie admires the leather coat that Tuli got, and thinks that Tuli looks beautiful in it. This causes Bluish to lament her own appearance, and Dreenie must reassure her.

Bluish's parents then drive the girls to Dreenie's house, and the parents stay to have a holiday dinner with Dreenie's parents. On the way over, Bluish complains about her grandmother making such a fuss over her when she visited, while Dreenie complains about having to nanny Tuli all the time, though Dreenie did get a reprieve on Christmas day. Dreenie and Bluish decide they are a lot alike, as they both care about people.

The girls and Bluish's parents get to Dreenie's place. Willie gives them a rowdy introduction. Dreenie's mom explains that, for the first time, they decided to celebrate the African holiday of Kwanzaa in addition to Christmas. Like Hanukkah, Kwanzaa has a special candelabra to light, and Dreenie's mother tells everyone what the candles mean. The first candle, a black one in the center, represents "Umoja", or unity. Unity - of community, and of past, present, and future - is a central concept in Kwanzaa, as Dreenie's mother stresses. They then have a pleasant dinner, and at the end of dinner, the girls retreat to Dreenie's bedroom.

Bluish gets tired, and the girls help her into Dreenie's bed. Bluish cries out of despair at her condition as Dreenie and Tuli comfort her. To make her feel better, Dreenie gets the idea to have all four girls - including Willie - agree to a pact based on what Dreenie's mother said about Kwanzaa. Essentially, the girls agree to be unified and inseparable friends.

Bluish feels better. She sits up, and pulls her cap off. It's the first time they've seen her without a cap. Bluish reveals some reddish peach fuzz for hair. Her hair is growing back. The girls screech in delight and surprise.

Journal Part V: In the last entry, Dreenie explains that she is going to give the journal to Bluish, considering it's been dedicated to Bluish all along. She also reveals that she received a puppy for New Year's, the special gift that she wanted for Christmas. Dreenie vows to write another journal about Tuli, and finally one about herself.





## Chapter 7, and Journal Part V Analysis

The final pages wrap up the novel's thematic material. Long presented as two people who are very much alike, Dreenie and Bluish explicitly agree that they are similar in a drive over to Dreenie's house for a holiday dinner. This is echoed in the gift-giving scene, in which each girl got the other a thoughtful and similar gift, the butterfly models from the museum.

During the holiday dinner, Dreenie's mother explains the candle-lighting ceremony of Kwanzaa and the meaning of the candles, affirming the novel's advocacy of multiculturalism and unity despite any superficial differences.

The last pages promise rebirth and resurrection for the characters and especially for Bluish, and this promise is strongly (and conveniently) linked to the coming New Year and the upcoming spring season. The girls are delighted when Bluish takes off her cap to show some new hair fuzz. Like the Blue Morpho, Bluish is beginning to emerge from her cancerous cocoon. The notion of rebirth and renewed vitality is echoed once more in the last journal entry, in which Dreenie reveals she received a puppy as a gift. Dreenie has also grown, evidenced by the fact that she is giving up her journal to Bluish, who can keep it or throw it away. Dreenie and Bluish have emerged into a brighter world, and Dreenie is literally discarding a reminder of old hardships in order to write a new and happier chapter in her life.



# Characters

## Dreenie

Dreenie is the central character in the novel; the author allies the reader closely with Dreenie's actions, thoughts, and feelings. Dreenie is ten years old, and has just entered fifth grade at a new school. At the outset of the novel, Dreenie has managed to make only a single friend at school, Tuli. Dreenie is anxious about school and also anxious about the level of her intelligence, as teachers heap praise on her smart younger sister, Willie, but don't seem to be giving any to Dreenie.

Dreenie is fascinated with the strange new girl in class, who she deems Bluish. Dreenie is mature for her age, and regards Bluish with wonder and caution rather than the outright fear or ridicule of many of her classmates. Dreenie develops a fixation on Bluish, and the anxiety forces her to bring up Bluish with her mother and father, who urge her to treat Bluish just as she would anyone else.

Dreenie reaches out to Bluish, first by volunteering to push the girl's wheelchair to the building exit, and when the girls are grouped together for a project, Dreenie develops a friendship with Bluish. Again showing maturity, Dreenie seems to know just how to act around Bluish, helping her but stopping short of making Bluish feel helpless. Soon, Dreenie develops care and affection for Bluish, and she hopes that Bluish will soon emerge from her illness to become a normal girl again.

## Bluish

Bluish's real name is Natalie, but all the children in class call her Bluish due to her extremely pale skin that reveals the blue veins underneath. Bluish is suffering from Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia, a cancer of blood cells. She is undergoing chemotherapy treatment, which has resulted in her hair falling out. And because of her frailty and exhaustion, she uses a wheelchair, though she can stand up for brief periods of time.

Bluish is misunderstood and feared by her classmates initially, and she is sometimes ridiculed or avoided entirely. This upsets Bluish, and she tries to force the students to respect her as a human being and not treat her like a contagious monster. Just the act of speaking makes her weak, and Bluish is often withdrawn to a corner of the classroom, playing a Game Boy or petting her dog, which she is allowed to keep on her lap.

During a school project, Bluish befriends Dreenie, and by the time of a trip to the butterfly sanctuary at the history museum, they have become good friends. They exchange gifts at Christmastime, and a couple days after Christmas the two attend an African Market with their fathers.



Bluish does not object to her nickname, as she feels it is simply an accurate reflection of her pale skin tone rather than anything derogatory. During her illness and long periods in bed, Bluish finds that she is good at knitting, and she knits caps for all the kids in class.

## **Tuli**

Tuli is Dreenie's best and (at the beginning) only friend at school. She is a year and a half older than most of the kids in the class. Tuli frequently acts out by adopting a false Hispanic accent and mangling Spanish words. Her catch phrase is "chica-chica!" which she says often. Dreenie figures that Tuli is acting this way due to feelings of inadequacy, and Dreenie tires of having to shepherd the rambunctious Tuli. Dreenie's nickname for Tuli is "Tulifoolie", indicative of Tuli's antics.

## **Willie**

Willie is Dreenie's younger sister by two years. Her real name is Willeva. Willie is the typical annoying younger sister who gives Dreenie fits. Willie is also very intelligent for her age, impressing her teachers.

## **Ms. Baker**

Ms. Baker is the teacher of Dreenie's class. She is kind and very mindful of Bluish's special needs and the impact Bluish has on the rest of the class. She decides to explain the nature of Bluish's condition to the class in order to ease their anxiety and confusion.

## **Rita Winburn**

Mrs. Winburn is Bluish's mother. Mrs. Winburn confronts Dreenie about the nickname "Bluish", misinterpreting it as a derogatory combination of black and Jewish.

## **Paula**

Paula is the fourth girl in the group assembled for the class project, along with Dreenie, Tuli, and Bluish. Paula suggests they make Broadway their topic, and she writes out the project agreement because she has the best handwriting.

## **Jamal**

Jamal is one of the boys in Dreenie's class. Dreenie thinks that Jamal has a crush on her. Jamal tries to snatch the cap off of Bluish's head one day, causing Bluish to become so upset she vomits.



## **Max**

Max is the college intern who aids Ms. Baker in teaching the class.

## **Dreenie's Mother**

Dreenie's mother offers a sympathetic ear when Dreenie has worries and confusion about Bluish. Dreenie's mother preaches patience and tolerance with respect to Bluish's special needs.



# Objects/Places

## New York City

The characters in the novel live in modern-day New York City. All the students in class like the energy and excitement of the city.

## Broadway

Broadway is the famed New York avenue known for its theater district, among other things. The girls decide to make Broadway the subject of their class project, and Dreenie snaps several photographs of the street for their poster.

## Lucky

Lucky is Bluish's puppy dog. Bluish is allowed to take the small dog to class and keep him in her lap. Bluish takes comfort in the dog's warmth and presence.

## Knit Cap

Bluish wears a knit cap to cover her head that has become bald from chemotherapy. While in the hospital, Bluish learned how to knit the caps, and she makes knit caps as gifts for the entire class.

## Classic Eight

Classic eight is the name given to the elegant and expensive apartment Bluish lives in. Dreenie is amazed at how large and luxurious the apartment is when she visits.

## Kwanzaa

Kwanzaa is a holiday celebration of African heritage and culture that is held in America after Christmas. Dreenie's family decides to celebrate Kwanzaa for the first time during the holiday break. Dreenie is inspired by the holiday's message of unity to form a pact with Bluish, Tuli, and Willie.

## Blue Morpho

Blue Morpho is the name given to a species of very large, very blue butterflies. A Blue Morpho lands on Bluish's arm while the class is on a field trip. Later, Dreenie gives Bluish a model of the Blue Morpho as a Christmas gift.

## **Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia**

ALL is the form of leukemia that Bluish has. It has made Bluish extremely frail and pale.

## **Vivarium**

The vivarium is an enclosed area in the history museum where visitors can interact with butterflies in an approximation of their natural habitat. This is where the Blue Morpho butterfly lands on Bluish, touching her emotionally.

## **Dreenie's Journal**

Throughout the time period of the novel, Dreenie keeps a journal of her thoughts and feelings with respect to Bluish. At the end of the book, Dreenie writes that she will give the journal to Bluish.



# Themes

## Treating Others with Respect

A major lesson the author wishes to impart to her young audience is that other people who may be different deserve respect. In this case, of course, the "different" person is Bluish, who is bald, pale-skinned, and confined to a wheelchair because of a potentially fatal cancer of the blood cells. By dealing directly with the uncomfortable feelings of Dreenie and the rest of the class with respect to Bluish's odd appearance and special needs, the author is showing young readers that it is perfectly normal to have such feelings. At the same time, we must acknowledge and then conquer such feelings for the sake of the different person's humanity and dignity. This idea is articulated most obviously by Dreenie's mother and father in chapter three.

One aspect of this lesson of respect is the author's subtle injection into the narrative of strategies young people can use when dealing with those with special needs. While everyone else is frightened of the prospect of handling Bluish's wheelchair, Dreenie takes on the challenge and succeeds. She is steady and firm with the wheelchair, and she defers to Bluish when Bluish wishes to take control of her own locomotion. The matter of the wheelchair shows mature Dreenie striking the right balance between assisting the "disabled" Bluish, and letting Bluish do things on her own in order to preserve her sense of independence.

Additionally, the children learn that Bluish cannot engage in rough play, as she is frail and she bruises easily. This gives several children (especially boys) pause, and often Bluish is left out of play time because of her condition. However, by the end of the novel, the children have learned how to both involve Bluish in their play and not put her in danger with any rough stuff. Again, the children have found a good balance between acknowledging the special needs of Bluish and letting her feel like a normal friend.

## Fitting In

All three girls in the novel - Dreenie, Bluish, and Tuli - are struggling with the ubiquitous challenge of fitting in. For Dreenie, she is the new kid to class and is having difficulty making new friends beyond Tuli. Dreenie is also battling feelings of inferiority with respect to her "genius" younger sister Willie. She is worried about whether or not she is a "dumbbell" and wondering what her place will be in life.

For Tuli, flamboyant behavior and pretend half-Spanish is her way of trying to fit in and carve out an identity for herself in life. Dreenie recognizes Tuli's behavior as a kind of "cry for help," what Dreenie and her mother call a "Tuligram". Tuli feels inferior about her lack of a large family and impoverished home, and she is deflecting these feelings with her antics.



And for Bluish, her struggle is to compel her classmates to recognize that she is simply a normal girl that has been forced to battle a disease that is beyond her control. Bluish resorts to parking her wheelchair right in front of the class door - forcing kids to awkwardly angle around her - in an effort to make the kids confront and overcome their fears of her.

In the end, the girls become good friends by simply being themselves and treating each other kindly. In particular, Bluish is embraced by her class and treated as just another kid. Thus, there is also a strong message of "Be Yourself" that the author is relaying.

## **The Symbolism of the Blue Morpho**

A crucial scene in the novel comes with the fourth part of Dreenie's Journal, in which the class visits the vivarium, or butterfly sanctuary. There, Dreenie and Bluish share an encounter with a Blue Morpho butterfly, a huge exotic butterfly with bright blue wings. The Blue Morpho alights on Bluish's arm, and she is amazed and touched by the sight of it. Max the student aide explains that butterflies with such exotic colorings are often toxic, and this causes Bluish's mood to fall swiftly, as she relates the butterfly's toxicity with her own battle with cancer.

The Blue Morpho is a symbol for Bluish's struggle, and perhaps for Bluish herself. Like the butterfly, Bluish is filled with a poison, of a sort, that makes others fearful of her. But also like the butterfly, Bluish is beautiful and special, no matter the toxicity lurking underneath. As with Max's explanation that the exotic coloring of the Blue Morpho indicates toxicity, the author may imply that it is the very fact of Bluish's toxicity that has made her special, and that Bluish's mighty struggle has resulted in a strong, kind, wise person.

In the final passages of the journal entry, Dreenie goes even further with the association between the butterfly and Bluish. Just as the caterpillar becomes a butterfly through metamorphosis, Bluish's condition is a kind of metamorphosis, after which (Dreenie fervently hopes) Bluish will emerge beautiful and whole again.



# Style

## Point of View

The majority of the novel is written in third-person limited perspective, with "limited" indicating that the action is almost always restricted to Dreenie's own sphere of action. This choice provides a focus for the novel, a restriction to Dreenie's thoughts and feelings. Beyond this third-person narration, several portions of the novel are marked as "Journal", and these passages are presumed to be excerpts from Dreenie's private journal, which she is writing in the first person.

This somewhat disjointed back-and-forth progression gives the reader multiple perspectives on the story, and it also provides a personal and realistic touch (Dreenie's journal) that may resonate with the intended young reader. Dreenie's journal - written with simple vocabulary and sometimes with intentional grammar and usage mistakes - communicates Dreenie's unfiltered and often jumbled thoughts and feelings, and this relative chaos mirrors Dreenie's own ambivalence and confusion about Bluish.

Especially early in the novel, Dreenie's thoughts are dominated by the odd appearance of Bluish and Dreenie's desire to find out more about the girl. The author will often indicate Dreenie's thoughts in italics during the third-person portion of the narration. One example of this is the word "Bluish" frequently being given its own sentence and paragraph, as if Bluish's image impacted Dreenie so powerfully that it interrupts the girl's thoughts and actions.

## Setting

The setting is modern-day, urban New York City, presumably 1999, based upon the book's first publication. The children attend fictional Bethune Cookman School, which is a magnet school, a somewhat exclusive public institution that focuses its coursework and curricula. Bethune Cookman is an apparent reference to Bethune-Cookman University, a historically black college in Florida. Magnet schools were originally created to accelerate desegregation efforts after the civil rights advances of the 1960s. All the primary characters are African American. With all that taken together, and given the urban setting and the socioeconomic conditions sometimes associated with African Americans, it is clear that race is a significant factor that shapes the book.

New York is celebrated in the novel as an exciting meeting place of multicultural and multiethnic elements. All the children in the class seem to love the hustle and bustle of New York, and the important school project Dreenie works with Bluish on involves highlighting famous Broadway Avenue.

Using a metropolis like New York as the setting, the author is able to credibly bring poor Tuli, middle-class Dreenie, and upper-class Bluish together in the same classroom to become friends.



The contemporary time frame is important insofar that Bluish's condition is knowable and likely curable, given modern medical technology.

## Language and Meaning

Language is a highlight in several parts of the book. There is first and most obviously Tuli's butchering of the Spanish language, with her cries of "chica-chica!" and her put-on Hispanic accent. This helps to make Tuli an amusing sidekick to Dreenie, comic relief to counteract the serious main story of Bluish and her cancer. This use of language also reveals Tuli's character, in that she is using another language and accent to help cover her low self-esteem, to help hide who she really is because she is ashamed.

Language is used as a kind of catharsis when Ms. Baker decides to explain the nature of Bluish's condition to her anxious students. Learning words such as "remission", "relapse", and the medical term for Bluish's condition, "Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia", helps the students better understand Bluish, thus releasing the anxiety stemming from a lack of knowledge.

Author Virginia Hamilton also makes use of language differences with Dreenie's Journal. Dreenie's Journal often contains sentence fragments and incorrect usage that might be consistent with a typical ten-year-old girl writing a private journal. This adds to the realism of the journal portions of the novel, as contrasted with the chapters.

Language also serves as a battleground for feuding sisters in Chapter One. Dreenie scolds Willie for using "ain't", which spins them into an argument over whether or not "ain't" is a word. After Dreenie threatens to put a hex on Willie, Willie smugly informs her what the word "hexagram" means. Willie believes she is smarter than Dreenie because of her vocabulary, and even Dreenie doubts herself in the face of Willie's relative affinity for new words.

## Structure

The story alternates between personal journal entries written by Dreenie, and a more traditional narrative divided into seven chapters. Beginning with the title, "The First Time I Saw Her", the initial journal entry begins "in media res", in the middle of things, with Dreenie describing seeing Bluish for the first time in her wheelchair with her puppy. This "jump right in" style creates questions in the reader that propels the reader forward. Who is Bluish? How was she able to bring a puppy to school when puppies aren't allowed at school? These types of questions are asked and then only gradually answered as the narrative continues.

The story proceeds in chronological fashion, and covers roughly a few months in the fall and winter quarters of elementary school, beginning with Bluish joining Dreenie's class for the first time, and ending at the New Year when Bluish and Dreenie are good friends. Ending on the New Year is important as it relates to the theme of Dreenie's hope for

Bluish to emerge from her illness into a new and healthier life of sorts. With the New Year comes new possibilities and hope for Bluish's recovery.

Dreenie's journal features a fragmentary approach to narrative, with Dreenie skipping around and abandoning descriptions of events in favor of other events. This narrative "jumpiness" and lack of discipline might be viewed as representative of what a real ten-year-old girl might write.



## Quotes

"Natalie is this girl's name. But that's not what kids call her. Call her Bluish and grin and look at hard. Bluish fits her. This girl is like moonlight. So pale you see the blue veins all over. You can tell though, once she had some color."

Journal Part I, pp. 7-8

"Dreenie marched them along the avenue, worrying that she, herself, was a dumbbell. Thinking, Dad says some girls just show smarts quicker than others. Telling me, 'You are as good as it gets - even better!' But what if it's not true? Dreenie thought. What if he's wrong?"

Chap. 1, p. 16

"Dreenie was pretty sure Tuli had 'staged' her slide into the slush. She probably hadn't meant to fall down. Still, she'd done what Dreenie and her mom called a 'Tuligram.' It was a message telling them that Tuli needed to be someplace, with somebody in a normal life for a little while."

Chap. 2, p. 32

"When Ms. Baker was gone, the kids got raucous. When they get rowdy they listen to me telling them to quit it, even though I haven't been in school that long - because I'm the biggest girl. Mommy says it's not my size, but that I have the way of a leader. So I told all of them to shut up and sit down. And most did!"

Journal Part II, p. 35

"'Being really sick is no fun for any child, Dreen-boat. And you mustn't be afraid of her because she looks different. You could be nice to her - what's her name? I mean, treat her like you would treat any other school friend.'"

Chap. 3, p. 40

"We've gotten used to her - sort of, Dreenie was thinking. Each day with her around is different. Sometimes good, sometimes bad. What a freaky kid! You can tell she's been sick bad, maybe a long time. And you can't help feeling sorry for her."

Chap. 4, p. 59

"Bluish made me stop and look. She made me care about what was all so scary, so sad, and so hurt with her too. To me she is just Bluish child, Bluish ill serious. Bluish close with us. Someday Bluish just like us. Maybe."

Journal Part III, p. 72

"[The students] sat around the Christmas tree. Some kids had brought little gifts to school. But nobody had to. They were taught in school that the best gifts were the ones they made for one another, like cards, or little things you knit or drew. There wasn't any



special time that you made things to give. You did it when you felt like it, as Bluish had."  
Chap. 5, pp. 76-77

"Kids left their seats. Slowly, they came up to the front; Ms. Baker was the lamplight they were drawn to like moths. Hearing her talk about Bluish made them stop and think about this worry they'd been having. And now they could show it, they could let it out."  
Chap. 6, p. 88

"A big one [butterfly] landed on my shoulder. Then on Bluish, right on her arm. It was humongous!

'Max, Max! Look on Bluish!'

Bluish's eyes got real big. Her face lit up, man! She looked so happy."

Journal Part IV, p. 104

"Bluish turned somewhat on her side. Dreenie and Tuli held her hands, and held Willie's. Suddenly, it came to Dreenie. The proverb her mom had recited sounded in her mind. Dreenie made one for them: 'Bluish is, because we are; we are, because Bluish—is—us!'"

Chap. 7, p. 122

"This journal never was about me. This record of Bluish is YOURS. I'm giving it over to you to keep or throw away. A record from the very first time I saw you. I didn't mean this to be bad. Not for you to be real mad at me—I hope not. We walk right in to the New Year—Dreanne and Natalie. GFF. Good Friends Forever."

Journal Part V, pp. 125-126

## Topics for Discussion

What is the exact nature of Bluish's illness?

How does Dreenie feel about Bluish and her condition? How does the rest of the class respond?

What is Dreenie's theory for why Tuli acts the way she does, with her fake Spanish and flamboyant mannerisms?

What is the importance of the Blue Morpho butterfly? What does it symbolize?

What is the significance of the surprise Dreenie and the class spring on Bluish in which they take out and wear knit caps?

Why does Bluish's mom respond negatively to the nickname "Bluish"?

What can the novel teach children about how to behave around those with disabilities or serious illnesses?