

A Certain Slant of Light Study Guide

A Certain Slant of Light by Laura Whitcomb

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Plot Summary

A Certain Slant of Light by Laura Whitcomb tells the story of a ghost named Helen. Stuck between life and death, she clings to her hosts and immerses herself in literature until one day she discovers that a student can see her. The two bond, and Helen learns there is a lot more to life than what she knows of death.

Helen has been dead for over 100 years, but she doesn't remember much about her life before death. She isn't certain what she did that kept her from heaven. All she knows is that after she died, she heard a woman reading poetry, grasped onto the woman's skirts, and was pulled out of her grave, unbeknownst to the woman. Helen stays with her host until her host dies, and when she feels herself slipping back into the icy clutch of her grave, she latches on to a new host. As this book begins, she is on her fifth host, and all of her hosts are involved with literature as poets, writers, and playwrights. Her current host is a teacher, and to Helen's great shock, she realizes that one of his students can see her.

The boy who can see her is named James. He sees her because he, too, is a spirit. He has taken over the body of a boy who wanted to leave his body empty. James and Helen get to know each other, and James helps Helen find a body that she can occupy. She enters the body of a girl named Jenny.

Jenny is from a strictly religious family. Her parents present the perfect picture, and she is given everything she needs in regards to food, clothes, and housing. However, her life is regimented and she isn't allowed personal expression. If she challenges anything her parents say, she is sent to her room and told to pray.

Living in someone else's body has its own challenges, and Helen tries to get used to life as Jenny. James helps her, and the two become even closer. Their closeness leads to sexual intimacy, which seems very right to them. James and Helen talk together about their lives, and they discuss memories. Helen is getting more glimpses at her past now that she is in Jenny's body.

The household James now lives in is harsh. His brother is always swearing at him, bringing his girlfriend around, and hits him. Jenny finds that her household is cold and rigid. In spite of all the praying and religious talk, there are serious underlying issues. Cathy is unhappy, and Dan leaves the house, coming home smelling like gardenias.

Helen is with James when he finally has the memory of the time of his death. He realizes that he has been holding himself responsible for something that was out of his control. Once he realizes this, he is no longer tethered to the earth. Both he and Helen realize that they need to give the bodies they are using back to the original owners. James moves on, and Helen figures out her own path to salvation, joining her loved ones.



Chapters 1-4

Chapters 1-4 Summary

A Certain Slant of Light by Laura Whitcomb tells the story of a ghost named Helen. Stuck between life and death, she clings to her hosts and immerses herself in literature until one day, she discovers that a student can see her. The two bond, and Helen learns there is a lot more to life than what she knows of death.

Chapter 1 - A dead woman is in the classroom with her teacher, Mr. Brown. She is writing invisible comments on the students' papers. She notes that even though he doesn't know of her existence, the teacher sometimes uses her own words. She wonders if she somehow influences his mind. She gets the feeling that someone is watching her, although she knows that nobody can see her. Looking around, she notices that the eyes belong to a young man who looks just like everybody else in the school. He is around 17 years old, and as she moves around, she realizes that he really does see her. She remembers her early hauntings.

There isn't much that she remembers about her life on earth. She vaguely remembers a man's handsome face, but it's a face that doesn't bring comfort. She also remembers frightened eyes full of tears looking at her. The ghost remembers her name, her age, and the fact that she is a woman. That's all she remembers from her life while she was living. However, her life after death is very memorable. She is inside a cold, smothering grave when she hears a woman's voice reading a poem from Keats. She reaches up and desperately pulls on the skirts of the woman, and she is pulled from her grave.

The woman has no awareness of her, and she clings to her host. One evening, she is distracted, and her host leaves. When she hurries after her, she can't get into the woman's house. She feels the coldness of the grave pulling at her once again, but she claws and scratches her way out, promising never to get so far from a host again. She hopes that when her host dies, she will find her way to heaven, but that doesn't happen. Her host dies and doesn't even look at her. She just leaves. This ghost is saved when someone knocks at the door after the woman's death. He is a widowed, childless writer. One time, while she is haunting him, the ghost almost loses him because she is watching a play at the theater, and she wishes one of the actors was her host. She feels the cold settling in, and quickly takes it back. She is pulled back out of the cold and cleaves to her host.

He dies while in the hospital, and the ghost finds a new host from the room next door. He is very different from her other hosts. He is a playwright who parties all night. Drinking too much, and eating too little, the man dies at a young age at one of his own parties. The ghost cleaves to one of the guests at the party. He is a poet. The poet mentors a young man named Brown, and this is the host that the ghost cleaves to now as the story begins. Over the decades, the ghost has learned how to survive, and she enjoys thinking that she might have some influence on the writing her hosts produce.



Mr. Brown is writing a novel, and she whispers ideas into his ear when he gets stuck. One day, her host meets his bride, and the ghost is jealous. Because she loves him, she leaves the woman alone. She stays out of the room when they kiss, and cherishes her time with Mr. Brown when he is working.

Now that a human, the student, sees her, she realizes that the rules will change once again. The next day, she deliberately stands in the back of the room to test and see whether he really does see her. He does. Disconcerted and angry, she leaves the room.

Chapter 2 - She stays out of the classroom until the class is over and the students leave. As the students file out, she walks behind the young man even though her host is going in a different direction. She speaks to the boy, and he answers her. She asks how he can see her, and he tells her not to be afraid. She tells him not to speak to her and rushes away. For a few days, she stays away from his class when Mr. Brown is teaching. Still, she is curious, and she eventually stays in the room even during the class. The boy isn't there when she looks for him, but then he arrives. He is just late. She sits down at an empty desk next to him. Using a pencil and paper, he writes a note to her asking where she has been. He tells her that he wants to be her friend. She says that she is hiding from him.

He asks to speak to her after class. He walks into a phone booth next to the library and asks her what her name is. It's Helen. She calls him Billy - the student's name, and he tells her that it's not really his name. His name is James. Upon questioning, he tells her that he is like her, in spirit. He is just filling the flesh, but he has been dead for 85 years. He was 29 years old when he died. She wonders if there are others out there like herself, and he says that he can see other spirits now that he is in the human body, but none are like her. She asks how he took the body, and he said that the previous owner vacated it. Billy's spirit chose to leave.

The boy had taken so many drugs that he almost died, and it had taken a while for the body to recover. James had been watching Billy in his body for a while, and eventually the body made a ringing sound, signifying that the soul was leaving. The boy overdosed, and in the emergency room, James slipped in. He tells Helen that he didn't remember how he died, but he remembers more things every day. She haunts people, but he haunted a place. He spent the past 85 years on one acre of land. He shares some memories from when he was a child and asks what she remembers.

She tells him that she only remembers her age, her name, and the fact that she is a female. The rest of her memories are only images and feelings. She asks James what she looks like. He describes her, and she tells him that she was 27 when she died. She asks him what she is wearing, and he tells her that she is wearing a gown. James asks her to be there in class the next day.

Chapter 3 - That night, Helen sits on Mr. Brown's roof thinking of questions to ask James. She finds that she is less jealous of Mrs. Brown now that she has someone else to talk to. She tries to tell Mr. Brown about her new friend the next day, but he can't hear her. James and Helen tease each other in class, and Mr. Brown wonders what is wrong



with James. James writes notes to Helen and asks her how long she has been a ghost. She tells him it has been 131 years.

As they communicate, Helen discovers that she can grip a pencil through James' fingers. She writes that she is attached to Mr. Brown because he is connected to the literature. She asks James if he has seen Billy's spirit since he took over the boy's body. He replied that he saw it once, but it didn't speak to him. Mr. Brown notices that James is distracted and asks him some questions. Helen helps him answer. After class, they go to the library together. James asks her about her hosts, and she helps him with the homework. After a while, she can feel Mr. Brown moving away. She and James are interrupted when some other students come in and talk to him, wondering where he has been. Helen feels Mr. Brown depart, and she begins to feel the cold seep in along with wet mud and the slime of a leaking dirt cellar. She leaves James to cleave to her host.

That night, Mr. and Mrs. Brown discuss baby names. Thinking about their having a child frightens her. None of her past hosts have had children. Something deep inside her tells her that she is a danger to children. She realizes that she is no longer feeling comfortable at Mr. Brown's house. Instead, she is an intruder.

Chapter 4 - The next day Helen wants to watch Mr. Brown write, but she is distracted. James senses that something is wrong. Mr. Brown reads part of a homework assignment aloud to the class. It is the homework that James has written, but Mr. Brown doesn't tell anyone who wrote it. The class analyzes the work. Helen notices that James seems a bit embarrassed, and she goes to whisper in his ear, but her lips brush his temple. She ends up kissing his brow quickly, and he gasps. Helen hides when the students depart to give herself time to think. She clings closely to Mr. Brown and joins him in his car when he leaves for the day. She notices James getting onto a bicycle and catches Mr. Brown's arm, whispering for him to follow the boy.

Mr. Brown follows him until he gets to the driveway of a house. There, he stops and seems puzzled about how he got there. James addresses Mr. Brown, and Mr. Brown tells him that his writing is good. Helen memorizes the address of the house, and she wishes that James were her host.

When they arrive at Mr. Brown's house, Helen realizes that she can't get into the house. She broke a rule by wishing for another host. She begins to feel pain returning as she watches from the outside. Mr. Brown is inside, commenting that he feels like he's losing something or is forgetting something. His wife tries to comfort him.

Helen feels herself in the freezing waters once again, then she sees a figure on the street corner. It is James. She feels herself get sucked into the sky, and she can see nothing until she is smashed into the grass of a small yard. James reaches for her, and he pulls her into the house.

James asks her if she left Mr. Brown. He suggests that she haunt him. The two realize that he is now her host. She says that it is strange because she has never had a host who is aware of her before. James shows her some of his treasures then tells her that



he is afraid he's being selfish. The home must be like a prison to her since she is used to books and libraries. The atmosphere in the house he lives in is not very pleasant. She tells him that it's not a problem.

James' brother talks with James and tells him that he is grounded so he can't go out. James agrees with Mitch, the brother, and says that he already knows. James knows that Helen can't sleep, but he motions her over to his bed so that she can rest. She feels very calm. When she comes to awareness, James is asleep on the floor. She tells him to get into the bed, and she watches him sleep.

Chapters 1-4 Analysis

Chapter 1 - Chapter One introduces the reader to the main character, which happens to be a ghost. This ghost is aware of the fact that she is not living, but she doesn't know what she has done wrong to keep her from heaven. She has an affinity with literature, and she has discovered that her escape from the cold, dark grave comes by cleaving to a host. She is drawn to her first host through literature, and from there on continues to choose hosts who have a connection to literature. Whenever she loses her connection with a host, her body feels as if it is covered with icy water, and she is drawn into a muddy, dirty abyss.

Right from the beginning of the chapter, the ghost has an awareness of her death and the fact that no one has been able to see her since she died. Now she realizes that there is a student in the room with who can see her, and she doesn't know how to deal with this fact. She reflects on her past and realizes that the time before she died is a mystery for the most part. However, she remembers clearly all that has happened since her death.

Chapter 2 - The person who sees her was once named Billy, but she comes to discover that he is now filled with a spirit named James. She has very mixed feelings about the other spirit. She is intrigued by the fact that he can see her, but she is also a bit unnerved. Curiosity fills her, but she is also scared. Her immediate response is to run away, but she doesn't stay away long. When she talked with James, she learns how it becomes possible to take over someone else's body. She struggles with the concept of whether or not it is morally correct, but James is certain that the spirit wasn't going to come back to the body he took over, and he is actually saving the body. As they talk, Helen discovers that there are different types of ghosts and hauntings. When she leaves her own host, she feels as if icy water is crushing her. James is connected to a property rather than a person. Before he took over Billy's body, he discovered that if he started leaving the property, he felt a light that burned and the wind that cut when he tried to leave. Since Helen is in limbo, she doesn't even know what she looks like, and James is able to tell her. She wants to remain with him, but she feels her host going the other way. She has to cleave to her host.

Chapter 3 - Helen is completely obsessed with Mr. Brown. She is jealous of his wife, and she always wants to be with him even though he doesn't know that she exists. The



reader recognizes that some of her obsession might come out of the fact that she is lonely. Now that she has James in her life, she is able to focus away from Mr. Brown a bit. When James is in class, the two tease each other like teens in the flirting stage of a romance. After class, the two go to the library to work on an assignment, and Helen learns about some of the difficulties that occur when a spirit overtakes the human body. James has a very different personality from the one that Billy had, yet he still has to associate with Billy's old friends. He also has to deal with schoolwork as if Billy is completing it.

When Helen is back at Mr. Brown's house, she hears him talk with his wife about babies. The concept of having a child around overwhelms her. The reader knows that Helen knows nothing regarding her past, but some part of her knows that she is a threat to children. Knowing that a child might enter the house puts another roadblock between her and her beloved Mr. Brown.

Chapter 4 - When Mr. Brown leaves school the next day, Helen guides him into following James. There is a part of her that wants to know even more about James and where he lives. She has already shown that she is starting to feel torn between James and Mr. Brown. Now, she wishes that James were her host, and it severs the final tie to Mr. Brown. She can no longer get into his house. As she sinks into the feeling of icy water, James comes to her rescue and becomes her protector. Both of them are very aware of old-school morality, and that bond between the two of them makes them both a bit embarrassed. James now lives in a rough household where his brother swears at him and provocative images adorn the walls. James is embarrassed by the fact that he brought Helen to live in that sort of situation. She helps James realize that she understands that he is not truly part of that situation.



Chapters 5-8

Chapters 5-8 Summary

Chapter 5 - Helen gasps as she experiences a falling feeling. She has apparently been sleeping, and James rolled out of bed right through her. He looks startled. She is stunned. She doesn't understand how she could have fallen asleep that night when she hasn't slept since her death. James thinks maybe it's because she isn't alone any longer. She puts her hand on his shoulder, and he takes a sharp breath. She wonders if that hurts him, and he tells her that it feels wonderful. Helen questions why they can touch, and James suggests that it's because she isn't touching Billy, she is really touching him inside Billy.

Helen wonders about the ghosts that James has seen, and he tells her that there are two different kinds. Some ghosts know they are dead, and some ghosts don't know that they are dead. She is the only one he has ever met who knows that she is Light. James asks her how she claimed each of her hosts, and she tells him. After telling him, she says that she needs to be alone for a little while. Helen wanders through the house and looks at pictures. She listens to Mitch yelling. James showers and gets dressed, and Helen can't keep herself from looking as he gets dressed.

As James breakfasts, Helen wishes that she could eat. She hasn't tasted an apple in 130 years. When they leave the house, James asks her how fast she can travel. They have a race, and she easily wins. As they talk with each other, James tells her that he is getting more attached to her, and his feelings are changing. She tells him that she cares for him as well.

He asks her what she wants, and she says that she wants to taste an apple. James asks her if she would consider taking over someone's body like he did. She tells him that she needs to think about it.

Chapter 6 - Helen stays on the roof until she sees Mitch's car. She drops through the ceiling to find James lying on his bed. He is impressed with the way she passes through objects. She knows that she is graceful because she has been practicing for years. Mitch comes into the room, swearing and asking James where he has been. He says he called when he got to work and no one answered. Mitch warns James that he won't tolerate problems.

James goes out with Mitch later, and a girl tries to hit on James. In the car, James finds an envelope then a police car pulls them over. James asks Helen to let him know when the police are distracted. She does so, and he gets rid of the envelope. Later, when they talk about it, James says that it's frightening not knowing what Billy has done in the past and having to deal with the problems that arise from Billy's actions.



They go to a movie theater, and Helen is embarrassed by some of the scenes on the screen. She looks down. She misses silent movies, thinking the music was more integral, like a sound painting. James is uncomfortable with the images and sounds emanating from the screen as well.

Later, when they are home, James asks Helen if she had a true love when she was alive. She tells him she just had a husband. Helen wonders why he didn't get all his memories back when he went into Billy's body, and James speculates that maybe it takes time. She confesses that she doesn't think she will know how to take a body, and he tells her that tomorrow they will start looking for someone who needs saving. She believes him when he says that she will love being in flesh once again.

Chapter 7 - Helen wanders around the house while James is showering. She looks in on Mitch who is having a nightmare. At breakfast, Mitch asks James if he is ready. They are heading out for a monthly ritual, visiting their mother. They had been visiting their mother every 3rd Sunday for four years. Aunt Verna, their mother's best friend, comes along with them.

Instead of going to the cemetery as Helen and James expected, Mitch turns into a building with a sign that reads "St. Jude's." As they sign in, Helen sees a girl hiding a book under a file folder. She gets a flash memory of a time when she was taking a small blue book out of brown paper. They look into a bedroom where a woman stays. She is unresponsive. They stay for an hour before the nurse tells them that their visiting session is over. In the car, when the radio is on, James whispers to Helen that the woman's body wasn't ringing. The mother is still in the body.

When they get home, James tells Helen that they will continue looking for an empty body at the mall. Near the entrance of a large store, James finds an empty woman. He tells Helen to cleave to the woman, and when she is alone, Helen should go into her. Helen is nervous, wondering what she should do if there is evil that isn't afraid of her. James reassures her.

The woman goes into the ladies room, and Helen follows. Helen tries to go into her, but she feels darkness. Helen is stuck, and she is frightened. James tries to break into the bathroom, and the creature inside the woman flings Helen away. James apologizes. Then, he points out a girl on a bench. He tells Helen that she is empty. He recognizes her from Billy's school. Helen hears a faint ringing sound as well. She sits down next to the girl and links to her. They get into a car together.

Chapter 8 - The girl's name is Jenny. Helen is terrified. She has never cleaved to a host that she would never want to choose, and she is wondering if she made a mistake. The girl moves like a sleepwalker when they arrive at the girl's home, and she responds like a machine when her mother talks with her. The girl lies down, but Helen is nervous about going into her, fearing another monster. She follows the girl around. Jenny and her mother drive to a grass field where other people are gathering. It's a religious gathering, and they eat together then a preacher begins to talk. As they pray, Helen decides to make her move and enters into Jenny. The ringing stops, and she hears a



popping sound. When she opens her eyes, people are all around her. She is shaking. Some think she has had a vision.

Helen realizes that she is speaking. She asks for some food, and is overwhelmed by the taste of the food when she gets it. As they leave, Jenny's mother asks her if she had a vision. She says that she doesn't remember having one. Back at the house, she goes to Jenny's room and looks in the mirror. She feels strange, adjusting to her new body. Jenny's mother reads a religious piece with her then tucks her in.

Chapters 5-8 Analysis

Chapter 5 - There is still a major difference between Helen and James even though they are both spirits. James has a body, and Helen does not. When she questions him, he reminds her of what it is like to feel alive. As she wanders through the house looking at photographs, Helen sees images of Billy when he was younger. He is a very different person from the one James has described—a drug addict whose soul no longer wants to stay with his body. A laughing child in the picture fills the frame. Parts of a woman's body appear in the picture, a symbol of a woman waiting in the wings ready to help children that need saving.

Helen is distracted by the sound of yelling, and she discovers that Mitch has hurt James. This shows that Billy lives in a difficult situation. James introduces the idea of finding a body for Helen to occupy. When she first met James, her first reaction was fear. She reacts the same way to the thought of occupying someone else's body. Similar to the previous occasion, however, she is also very curious so she asks more about it. After she met James for the first time, she was overwhelmed and ran away for a few days. Now, she asks for time to think.

Chapter 6 - James is impressed with the way Helen passes through objects. She has been a ghost for so long that it comes as second nature to her. Helen has been thinking about her situation, and she is seriously considering entering someone else's body. James is going out with his brother that evening, and the dating situation now is very different from 100 years prior. He knows he is going to be embarrassed by his companions, but there is nothing he can do about it except for to apologize in advance to Helen for whatever they might encounter. While they are out, he discovers an envelope tucked into part of the car. He needs to get rid of it before the policeman find it, and once again the reader and Helen understand how difficult it is for him to take over a body when he doesn't know enough about the previous owner of the body. He never knows what kind of trouble he's going to get into because of Billy's actions.

After they get home, James and Helen discuss the fact that she was able to sleep the night before. It is the first time she has slept since she died. Ghosts, according to myth and legend, wander because they are restless. Helen has an attraction to James, and she is drawn to him in a way she was never drawn to her husband. This seems to be giving her a sense of security and is perhaps the reason that she is able to sleep. Some of her restlessness is leaving.



The chapter ends with the two discussing what it's like to live in the flesh. They demonstrate a picture of innocence as they blush and become embarrassed by the fact that they are sharing a bed. In the last sentence of the chapter, James whispers that maybe the next day, she will taste an apple. This seems symbolic of the story of the Garden of Eden where Eve reportedly bit into a fruit then realized she was flesh.

Chapter 7 - The next day as James showers, Helen once again wanders to the house. She hears Mitch talking through a nightmare, which shows that he faces his own battles. James once again struggles to assimilate into Billy's life as he prepares for a regular outing he knows nothing about. This is the day he and Helen are going to begin looking for a body for her to take over. They find that Billy's mother is still alive, but she seems lifeless, and she doesn't communicate with anyone. Still, Helen can't take her body because the mother is still in her body according to James.

They go to the mall to find an empty body, and there is a woman who seems perfectly empty to James. Helen has some reservations, but she is willing to try entering the body. As she tries to enter the woman, she finds that there is evil inside the woman, and it almost overtakes her. This makes her extra nervous about finding a body to occupy. Still, James persists, and he finds a body that seems perfect. This one has no evil in it. It's a girl whom James knows from Billy's school, and even Helen can hear the empty tone in the girl's body.

Chapter 8 - Although she has family, a nice house, and seems well cared for, the girl's body seems to lack life. Helen follows her around, learning about the girl and her home. When the girl lies down, Helen knows that it's a good time for her to enter her, but she is afraid. Instead, she continues to follow the girl. Then, when the girl is at a gathering and is praying, Helen takes her own step of faith and enters the body. It's like a rebirth as she suddenly realizes that she can feel and taste.



Chapters 9-12

Chapters 9-12 Summary

Chapter 9 - Helen is very excited and can't wait until the others fall asleep so that she can explore. She reads Jenny's history book and finds it interesting because she lived before some of this history existed. Once everyone is asleep, she goes downstairs to the kitchen, noticing how everything is wrapped perfectly and set in place. She doesn't recognize herself when she sees her reflection. As she wanders to the house, Helen notices that everything is extremely neat. At first she doesn't see any books. When she finds the study, she is happy to note that there is an entire wall of books arranged by category.

The next morning Helen has to take a shower, and she is not used to it. The experience scares her a bit. She compares the lives of children from her time with the children of today. After she grabs her breakfast, Helen heads over to the Prayer Corner at Jenny's mother's prodding. She picks up a diary and notices that half the pages are missing. The diary contains comments from the Bible. Jenny's father begins to read, preach, and pray in a very loud voice that startles her. The mother asks her to take notes in the diary as he speaks. When they are done, Jenny's father has her stand up so that he can measure the length of her skirt, making sure that she is dressed appropriately.

As Helen is driven to school, she realizes that she is out of her element. She doesn't know what sports Jenny plays or even what classes she takes. Helen goes into the office to ask for a school schedule, telling them that she needs it for a project for church. While she's in the office, Mr. Brown comes in. She looks through a window and sees James then rushes out to join him. By the time she gets there, James is gone. As Helen begins walking to class, she sees James up ahead. He turns around and comes back to her. When he realizes that it is she, they grasp each other. Helen is jolted by a memory of wheat colored hair and a bristly neck with a tiny half-moon scar. She pushes the memory away to focus on James.

She and James arrange to meet, and she heads off to class. Helen is distracted from learning as she thinks about James. She's delighted to discover that she can check out books at the library, so she checks out 20 books. When she and James meet, they go to the auditorium. James tells her that he doesn't want to take advantage of her, and she tells him that they are the only ones of their kind in the world so who could possibly be more mated? They have sex backstage, and Helen tells James how she took over Jenny's body.

The two have lunch together, and James helps Helen sort out some of the puzzle of Jenny's life. Helen is overwhelmed by the taste of food, although some of it tastes different from what she remembers. James tells her that it's because the food is processed differently now. Later in the day, a girl comes up to Helen and asks if she is going out with Billy. She warns her to stay away.



The next time Helen sees James, she asks about Billy's friends, and James says that they have disowned him because he won't participate in some of their activities. Jenny's mother comes to pick her up, and she sees James. She isn't happy about the fact that James and her daughter are together.

Chapter 10 - Back at Jenny's house, Helen takes a bath. Her mother asks her why she is bathing then tells her daughter that she needs to do her homework. When she is done, she goes to her room and tries to call James. Mitch answers the phone. After asking some questions, he puts James on the line. James wants to take her on a date, and she says that she will ask her parents at dinner.

She is asked to set the table, and she's nervous because she has a feeling that it won't be something significant that betrays the fact that she isn't their daughter. It will be something tiny. At dinner, her parents talk with her about the boy she met at school. They are concerned about the fact that he doesn't go to church. She challenges them, asking if that means he is a bad person, and they send her to her room without dinner.

Looking through Jenny's belongings, Helen learns more about the girl. She sits down to write a love letter to James. Her mother is upset with her and when she comes in before bedtime she asks Helen if she is right with God. Cathy tells Helen that she doesn't want to go through another dinner like that one. Helen says she has something to read to her mother. It's a poem about heaven. Her mother tells her that she needs to go to God with a contrite heart.

Helen is feeling lonely, and she decides to call James once again. The line is busy so she makes another call, this time to Mr. Brown's house. When he answers, she hangs up. She doesn't say anything.

Chapter 11 - The next morning, the focus of Prayer Corner is on the dangers of disobeying God's will. Her mother barely talks with her as they drive to school, and when she does speak, she warns her daughter not to be chased by the devil. Helen doesn't see James at school initially, but she sees Mr. Brown. Later in the day, she goes to Mr. Brown during his free period. She tells him that she has written something. She shares a piece called "A Letter From a Muse to her Poet." Helen is overwhelmed by her emotions as she reads to him that she begins crying. He asks her if she needs to go to a counselor, but she says that she is all right. She feels free when she leaves him.

At 11:15 Helen meets with James. He shows her how to ride a bicycle, and they go to his house. His brother is there with a girlfriend, and he is not happy to see James. James asks Helen to marry him, and she says yes. They go out to the garage, and James begins to teach her about driving. He tells her not to be afraid because the car hasn't changed that much over the years. She points out that the car hadn't been invented when she existed. They talk about getting together once again, and she knows they have a half-day of school the next day. When Jenny's father comes to pick her up from school, she calls him by the wrong name - first she calls him Dan then Father. Covering for herself, she tells him that she is changing a lot. He seems impressed.



Chapter 12 - As they head home, Dan asks if she wants to practice, but she comes up with an excuse to get out of whatever she is supposed to be practicing. She realizes that he wants to teach her how to drive the car. Back at home, she drops a book in her bedroom, and a button James gave her rolls under the dresser. As she retrieves it, Helen is intrigued by a hollow sound, realizing that there is a false bottom in the dresser drawer. She discovers a Manila envelope and a sachet, which contain a camera, a package of film, and some money. The envelope holds a stack of photographs.

Helen hears Cathy coming in and hastily puts the items away. Cathy questions her about her recent behavior then tells her to get ready for dinner. They are having a family game night. Jenny's father gets a phone call and leaves early, and it makes the mother upset. Helen makes a conscious decision to try to be nicer to Cathy. The woman becomes upset a bit later because she is doing bills and find a discrepancy. She makes a phone call, but doesn't get any answer. She takes out some sewing. Her husband's shirt smells like gardenias. Helen reads some poetry to Cathy then she calls James, and he talks about the troubles involved with taking over someone else's body. After Cathy comes to tuck her in, Helen stays up reading Jane Eyre until 1:37 AM when she hears Dan come home. She smells gardenias.

Chapters 9-12 Analysis

Chapter 9 - Chapter Nine contrasts the life Helen was used from her past to with the new life she has taken on. It also offers insight into why Jenny has left her body. Helen's new home is almost like a perfect prison. She is well cared for in regards to food, clothing, and a nice place to live. However, she is offered no freedom. The perfection around her induces flashes of her previous life such as when she is walking through the orderly kitchen in Jenny's house and gets a flash of another kitchen with baskets of unwrapped, fresh vegetables. James had told her that once she latched onto a body, memories would come back to her.

Jenny's parents seem affectionate, tucking her in and spending time with her, but the household is extremely regimented and Jenny has her personal interests taken away by her parents who are extremely conservative, judgmental Christians.

At school, Helen has to deal with the finer details of taking over some else's life. She connects with James, who helps her figure out the details. They also become intimate, strengthening their bond.

Chapter 10 - Helen continues to try to get along with Jenny's parents, knowing she can't be her true self around them. She is constantly on edge, wondering what she will do that will betray the fact that she isn't really Jenny. Helen shows that she has a respect for God, but she doesn't take all her parents say at face value. When they talk about her dating a non-Christian, she challenges them. Instead of listening to her point of view, they punish her and worry for her own soul. Helen tries to reach out to Jenny's mother using poetry, but the woman doesn't want to listen to the meaning behind the words.



Chapter 11 - Communication is a key issue in Chapter 11. Jenny's father communicates his disappointment in his daughter's attitude by preaching about disobeying God's will. Jenny's mother withholds communication as a means of portraying her disappointment with her daughter. At school, Jenny connects with Mr. Brown. She is finally able to use their mutual love of literature to communicate with him. He doesn't remember her, and he views her as a student. The poem she reads to him purges her and frees her. He, too, is affected, but aside from the message of the poem, he is concerned about the emotional well-being of the student, Jenny.

When James and Helen get together, they learn more about each other. The reader is reminded of the way time is relevant to each individual as James tries to teach Helen how to drive, and she reminds him that when she was alive, cars didn't exist.

Chapter 12 - Helen learns more about Jenny in Chapter 12 when she discovers the cameras and photographs. The girl wasn't blindly following in her parents' footsteps. She used photography as a way to express herself, and had talent in the area. The fact that the camera and photographs are hidden shows once again that she does not feel accepted for who she is in the household. Cathy comes in to talk with her daughter, and Helen realizes that Jenny had been showing signs of trouble before she left.

During the family game night, the reader discovers that there is even more amiss in the perfect household. Dan leaves after receiving a phone call, and Cathy can't reach him where he is supposed to be. There is a scent of gardenias on his clothing, which hints that he is involved with another woman. Helen sees the pain in Cathy and feels a bond. She decides to try to help the woman by being kinder to her.



Chapters 13-16

Chapters 13-16 Summary

Chapter 13 - The next morning in the Prayer Corner, Dan focuses on purifying Jennifer. Helen speaks out and says that she is not his child, shocking the parents. She wants to explain, but realizes that she is frightening Cathy so she stops. As she walks to class, she sees a penny on the ground and bends down to pick it up. Everything goes gray for a moment, and she hears an echoey sound as if she is underwater.

Later, she meets up with James and makes plans for the day. They are walking to his house when a dog runs into the road, and he cries out, "Diggs!" When Helen asks James if it was his dog, he tells her that he doesn't have a dog. He doesn't know why he called out the name.

They talk about Mitch and how Mitch really does love Billy even though his actions don't always show that he does. Mitch is away at work so they have several hours alone. Helen uses the camera she found to take a photograph of herself with James. They talk about their past and their present, wondering why they are haunting this life. Helen says that she did something dreadful, but she doesn't remember what it is. James suggests that if they can discover why they are marooned there, they could be free together. He asks her what she remembers about her time before death. She sees dark water rushing past a broken plank, but doesn't tell him about it. His last memory is of a tree. He knows he made a mistake, and he tells her that they all died. She tries to comfort him as he goes white, and his eyes fill with fear. He holds his hand to her ribs and stomach as if there is a wound there.

Helen sees a flash of white and finds that she is Light again. She is floating beside a man that she knows is James. She realizes that she is observing his memory. James is on a battlefield joking with his friend Diggs. They see a nest in a tree, and James goes after it. It's a trap, and James inadvertently ends up killing his friend. His last memory is a wall of uniforms coming at them and his friend bleeding to death next to him.

They are still on Billy's bed, and Helen tries to comfort James by telling him that they have all moved on. James talks with her and tells her that Diggs has been trying to tell him that everything is all right. Now James can feel that he is changed, and he seems untethered. He tells her to walk up to her own hell give it a push, running through it. He will wait for her on the other side. They are interrupted as Mitch comes home yelling at them.

As they walk away from the house, Helen realizes that things are different. They have to give their bodies back. James tells Helen that he will see her the next day, and she should go home now. She gets on a bus. As he leaves, Helen watches as police officers stop him and arrest him for rape. She can't get off the bus.



Chapter 14 - Helen gets back to school and finds Cathy waiting for her in the car. She has been crying, and she is upset that her daughter didn't tell her that there was a half day of school. Back at the house, Helen takes a bath and tries to persuade herself that everything is all right with James, but she knows that it's different. While she is in the bath, the phone rings. At dinner that evening, Cathy tries to get her daughter to talk with her. She asks if she has been intimate with anyone at school. Helen says that she is, but she won't give out the name. Her mother sends her to her room.

Helen tries to call James, but the line is busy. She notices that her mother has been going through her bag and has found the camera. Cathy says they will talk with her father later then tells her to go to bed. She tells Helen to ask God to forgive her.

The next morning, Dan and Cathy argue before breakfast, and Helen feels that the atmosphere in the car is oppressive as she rides to school. Her mother barely remembers to say goodbye to her. Helen look for James, but he isn't there. She goes to the loft in the auditorium to think, and she sees a woman in a long dress reading a book.

Helen tries calling James from the school, and she is told that Billy is out on bail. Helen is called to the principal's office where she finds Cathy and Dan waiting. They think that the person she has been intimate with is the teacher, Mr. Brown. One of the members of the church is a police officer, and they discovered that she called the teacher's home. They call Mr. Brown in. He admits that he knows the student and that they had talked together about writing. Dan says that he will be moving his daughter out of the school and will be pressing criminal charges.

Her parents take her home. She realizes that her father is furious. Her mother gives her some Valium to take. Wanting to be with James, she climbs out the window. Mitch won't let her into the house, but James sneaks out to see her. James says that he has to get Billy back in his body. She tells James about her day, and he tells her to tell her parents that the boy she is intimate with is him.

Chapter 15 - James and Helen go to the hospital, and she realizes that she has forgotten to write Jenny's name down on the sign-in paper. Instead, she has written Helen Lamb. They find Verna in the room with Billy's mother, and James asks Verna what happened to his mother. She says that his father was drinking, Mitch was at work, and he and his mother were at home. The father hit the mother repetitively with a book end. He threw the 12-year-old Billy out the window.

James tries to speak to the mother, Sarah. He asks her how to get Billy back into his own body. Her left hand twitches, an overhead light flashes off the wedding band on her ring finger, and James thanks her. He and Helen catch a bus. James is holding Helen's hand, and she sees a double image of him in the window reflection, but only a single image of herself. He whispers that it is Billy. They are on their way to visit Billy's father. They get to the prison, go inside and run into Mitch. He is upset that they are there. One of the policemen recognizes Jenny. It's her father's friend from church who investigated Mr. Brown. He offers to take her home.



Both her parents are home, and they question her about where she has been. They tell her that they are going to homeschool her. She tells them that she is seeing a boy named Billy Blake. Cathy tells her that she's not going to let the girl out of her sight and takes her to a woman's group.

At the gathering, the women are discussing a person who died but was going to hell because he didn't accept the Lord into his heart before he died. Helen asks how they know. She questions what God can and cannot do, startling the women. Helen recognizes the scent of gardenias in the room. She announces that someone in the room is committing adultery. After they leave, she whispers for God to come into her heart. She doesn't hear God's voice, but she does hear a baby crying. It is the cry of a 2-year-old child.

She sees water mixed with mud rushing down dark steps in front of her. The wind howls, and she can feel a girl on her hip. The sound of a car honking and Cathy yelling at her pulls her out of the vision. Helen tries to get out of the car to walk, and Cathy gets upset at her. Helen is angry, and she tells Cathy that she crushed the life out of her daughter. When they get home, Cathy sends her to her room.

Dan and Cathy talk with her a bit later. Dan says that he called Billy, but Billy says he never dated her. Dan tells Helen to kneel and pray for forgiveness and guidance. Cathy is very distressed, and Helen knows that she is trying to save her girl, but she's going about it wrong.

Helen prays for James, and she smells wet hay and warm milk. She is overwhelmed by the smell in the room. Along with a lavender sachet, she smells the sweet breath of an infant. Much later Dan comes in to tell her to go to bed, and after the house is quiet she uses the phone to call James. When Billy answers the phone, he says that there is no James there.

Chapter 16 - Cathy thinks that Helen is trembling because she is cold and sends her back into the house to get her sweater the next morning. She overhears Dan talking on the phone. She startles him. Cathy and Helen go to the church so Helen can get some counseling. They are told that the pastor had an emergency but a lay counselor will see them. The counselor tries to talk with her about the situation that occurred at school, but Helen recognizes the smell of her. She talks to the woman about temptations and mentions that at least her boyfriend doesn't have a girlfriend they have to sneak around to see. The counselor says that perhaps the pastor should meet with the girl.

Helen walks over to Billy's house, and when she sees him, she realizes that he is different. She asks if he remembers her, but all he remembers is that she goes to his school. She said she needed to see if he was okay because they used to be close. When she gets back to Jenny's house, Cathy is running through the house tearing up pictures. Cathy tells her to go to her room. Helen asks where Dan is, and Cathy asks her why she always has to fight her, asking why the girl can't help her. Helen picks up a book her mother is trying to tear and breaks it in two. They are both allies against the father at this point. She tells Helen that Dan is gone. He's divorcing her to marry Judy.



Helen points out that it's possible that he's a hypocrite. Cathy apologizes for being so rigid with her. Helen shows Cathy Jenny's pictures. Helen knows that the only way she can help Cathy is to give her her daughter back.

She fills the bathtub and finds a bunch of pills. Helen feels as if she is being watched, and then she notices that something has happened to call Jenny back. She tells the girl's spirit to come in since she is leaving. She also feels an evil darkness trying to get in from the other side of her, and she is worried that Jenny won't get into her in time.

Helen feels icy, black water trickle down cellar walls and steps. She is calling to her daughter who is not yet two. She tries to protect the baby, but there is a storm and the water keeps rising. She knows she needs to get the baby out of the cellar, and she lifts her up and tells her to run to Fanny's house. Helen speaks out aloud, saying that she killed her baby. She moves so Jenny can take over the body and feels the darkness coming closer. Jenny's spirit moves down to take the body, and Helen sees her eyelids drift shut. A bubble rises from the face, and she tries to yell for Jenny to wake up, but the girl isn't breathing. Now, in a state of Light once again, Helen cries to God to help her. She ducks into the water and yells in the girl's ear to wake up. She tells her to fight, and Jenny sits up. The evil disappears.

The doorbell rings, and Jenny's mother knocks at the door of the bathroom. She says someone is there to see her. It's Billy. He has found the image with the two of them together in his bedroom. They tell each other that they're having problems remembering things, and they both agree that they look happy in the picture.

Helen feels herself being drawn to heaven, but then realizes that the hole she sees above her is a cellar door, and there is a icy cold all around her. She hears James calling to her, telling her to break open the walls that she built. She looks up and sees her daughter's face looking down at her, frightened. When she looks up again, she sees that her baby girl now has the face of an older woman with gray hair. She says that she has been waiting for her mama. Helen takes hold of her and climbs up out of the cellar. She realizes that her baby lives. Her previous hosts are also there to greet her. James is there as well, and she steps into his arms.

Chapters 13-16 Analysis

Chapter 13 - At Prayer Corner in the morning, Dan is focused on purifying his daughter. Knowing that he is most likely cheating, the reader understands that he is a hypocrite that is projecting his own transgressions on his daughter. Helen begins to lash back at him, and the reader remembers that she is an almost-30-year-old woman with a mind of her own. There is a problem this time, though. She has an empathetic link with Cathy and doesn't want to hurt her. She backs down on her arguments.

Helen begins to have more flashes of memory, and they always involve water. James has memories coming back to him as well. As they talk about last memories, Helen becomes an onlooker for the memory as James goes back in time and sees the



sequence of events that lead to his own death. He realizes that he had been holding himself responsible for the death of his friend Diggs for many years, but he was wrong. His friend never blamed him and had been trying to tell him that it was all right. Once James pushes through the memory, he is no longer tethered to the earth, and Helen knows that things are different. Still, he has to find a way to get out of Billy's body.

When Helen is on the bus, she sees James get arrested for Billy's actions. The situation is out of her control, and she can't go back and help.

Chapter 14 - Helen is very upset about what has happened to James, and she goes home to take a bath while she tries to persuade herself that everything is fine. Throughout the book, the memories she attempts to avoid include icy water crashing down on her. However, she goes to a warm bath for solace. This time, even the warm waters of the bath aren't enough to calm her. She is reminded that she has no control of the situation with James. She feels the same lack of control when Mr. Brown is accused of having relations with her. Her parents refuse to listen when she professes his innocence.

Chapter 15 - Helen and James go to visit Billy's mother to find out how to get his spirit back in his body. Although she has been unresponsive for years, her spirit is ready to help her son, and she lets James know what he should do.

When they get to the prison, they meet Mitch, who is upset that his brother has come. The reader realizes that all along he has been trying to protect the younger Billy. Helen recognizes a police officer from church, and she knows that it's the one who did the research on Mr. Brown. He takes her back to her parents, like a true Judas.

After she gets home, Helen tries to explain the situation, but her parents still won't listen. Her mother takes her to a meeting where she recognizes the smell of one of the women. It's the same scent from Dan's shirt. In a room full of woman preaching to each other, Helen is very aware that one of them is a hypocrite.

Although she lashes out at the woman, questioning God, Helen demonstrates the fact that she is upset with the hypocrisy and judgment of the woman, not with God himself. She shows this by asking God to come into her heart after she leaves. Instead of hearing his voice, she hears the cry of a child, which is a foreshadowing of her impending salvation.

She gets a detailed vision of water rushing past her and a child on her hip. Helen is yanked out of the vision, and as she is still reeling from it, she lashes out at Kathy. Just as Dan projected his sins on Jenny, Helen is taking the guilt she feels about the child she couldn't save and projecting it onto Cathy.

Chapter 16 - In Chapter 16, many truths come to light. Dan leaves with his lover, and Cathy comes to terms with the idea of what Christianity really is. It's not what her hypocritical husband has forced on their household for many years. Helen learns that James has moved on. This gives her hope that she can do it as well, but it also means she has to find out how to do it on her own.



The only way she can survive to go to heaven is to empty the body so Jenny can come back in. She does this in her haven, the bath tub. As she overdoses and begins to drown, memories rush back. She sees loved ones calling to her and realizes her hell is of her own making. With her determination and the encouragement of her loved ones, she breaks through the walls. Back in Jenny's house, events move forward, hinting at salvation for Billy and Jenny as well, as their wounded souls connect in a hope of finding something better together.



Characters

Helen Lamb

Helen is a ghost who has been dead for over 100 years. She is a woman in her late 20s who has an intense fondness for literature. She doesn't remember very much about her past, before she died. She is drawn to writers, and she whispers suggestions to help them with their writing even though she knows that they don't hear her. She feels as if she is a threat to children, and she doesn't want to be around them. Helen is timid and cautious, but she is also curious and willing to try things after she has thought them through. This is demonstrated by the way she runs away from James when she first meets him and in the way she stalls when considering taking over a body. However, in both cases, she eventually embraces the ideas. This is demonstrated as she gets to know James and is again when she enters Jenny's body.

James Deardon

James is a spirit who has entered the body of a boy named Billy. He has been dead for nearly a century. After his death, he couldn't leave the plot of land where he lived without feeling burning light and a biting wind. Since he is still a spirit in human form, he can see other ghosts, and he is able to communicate with Helen. Billy's home is rough, and this embarrasses James, but he accepts that. He is innocent, as is shown by his embarrassment when Helen shares a bed with him and when they go to the movie theaters together. He's embarrassed by what he sees on the screen. James is persuasive, and he is able to get Helen to talk with him after class, and he also persuades her to occupy Jenny's body.

Michael Brown

Michael Brown was once Helen's host. He had no knowledge of her existence, but when she left him, he felt like his muse was gone. He was accused of intimate relations with Jenny.

Cathleen Thomson

Cathleen Thomson tries to understand her daughter while coping with her husband's strict religious demands.

Jennifer Ann Thomson

Jennifer Ann Thomson is a 15-year-old girl who leaves her body when she feels her life has no meaning.



Mitch Blake

Mitch Blake is Billy's older brother. He is a crass individual who hits his brother, but also cares deeply for him.

Billy Blake

Billy Blake abused his body with drugs then left it. He lived in an abusive household.

Dan Thomson

Dan Thomson is a hypocritical, deeply religious individual who drives his daughter away.

Verna

Verna is the best friend of Billy's mother. She visits her friend regularly, hoping for recovery.

Diggs

Diggs was James friend in his original life. James thinks he caused Diggs' death.

Sarah

Sarah is Billy's mother. She inhabits an unresponsive body.

Judy Morgan

Judy Morgan is a lay counselor in the church. Her counseling session with Helen does not go well.



Objects/Places

Grave

Helen felt herself pulled into a grave if her hosts were too far away.

Classroom

Helen first felt herself being watched by James in a classroom.

Mr. Brown's House

Helen enjoyed living at Mr. Brown's house until she wished that someone else was her host. After that, she could no longer enter.

Icy Water

Helen felt icy water when she was pulled back to her grave. When she began to have memories, this is what was in her memory.

Bathtub

Helen went to the bathtub to sort things out. It's also where she gave the body back to Jenny.

Cars

Cars Helen to and from school, and she didn't mind riding in them, but she didn't know how to drive them. They were invented after her time on Earth.

Bicycle

James taught Helen to ride a bicycle.

Field

Helen slipped into Jenny's body at a gathering in a field.



Stage

James and Helen first met to have sex on the school's stage.

Nest

James tried to get a nest before his death. It ended up not being what he initially thought.

Park

James haunted the park while he was a spirit.

Pills

Helen took pills before Jenny came back into her body.

Drugs

Billy took drugs before his spirit left. They were destroying his body.

Prayer Corner

In Jenny's house, the family gathers after breakfast in a prayer corner to read the Bible and pray.



Themes

What Happens in Life After Death

The primary theme in this book is dealing with life after death. The main characters are ghosts and spirits. James is a ghost in a human's body. He is able to see other ghosts and recognizes that there are two different kinds of spirits. Some are the ghosts of people who realize that they are dead, and other ghosts wander around not realizing that they have died. He notes that Helen is unique. She sees herself as Light.

After burial, Helen is brought out of her grave through a passion for literature as she clings to a woman reading poetry. She realizes that she can latch onto a host to stay out of her grave. Helen tries to help the writers with whom she works by whispering ideas in their ears. They never really know that she is with them, yet her ideas come through on paper and in their actions. This is shown when Mr. Brown drives his car after James' bicycle upon her whispered suggestion.

When Helen takes over a human form, she begins to have memories of her past. It is in her acceptance of her past and of her own death that she finally finds her own salvation. This holds true for James as well. He is left haunting a specific area. When he is feeling safe, conversing with Helen, he allows his mind to go to his last memory. Upon realizing that he has been blaming himself for something that wasn't his fault, he is finally untethered and able to move on to heaven.

The Past and the Present

Both James and Helen have the unique ability to live in different eras. The eras merge as they get to know each other during modern times. When they meet in Mr. Brown's classroom, Billy is in the body of a teenager. However, they were both nearly 30 in the time they lived. Helen lived long before James, and he has experiences she has never had a chance to try. She knows nothing about driving cars because they didn't exist while she was alive. James also teaches her how to ride a bicycle.

The two are able to cope with the modern world because they have both been haunting for over a century so they are familiar with changes in dress, transportation, and language. When they date each other, they do it with a mix of formalities of all their eras. They are both embarrassed by sexual images and sounds such as the images on the walls in Billy's house and at the movie theater as well as on television. Yet, when they realize how close they are to each other, they grasp onto the modern norm and have no problem having sex with each other even outside of marriage. Still, they don't treat their intimacy with disrespect. They are respectful toward each other and each other's feelings and use sex as a tool to bring further connection between the two.

There are other parts of the story that show a contrast between the time when Helen lived on earth and the time where she is living within Jenny's body. She's used to fresh



fruits and vegetables in her kitchen, but now everything is packaged. Even the milk and food in the cafeteria tastes different to her, and James tells her it's because food is processed differently in the modern world.

The Importance of Literature

Literature is a major part of Helen's existence. Listening to a woman reading from the works of Keats pulls her out of her grave enough so that she can stay with the woman, enjoying literature for as long as the woman lived. After the woman's death, she escapes from the grave once again through another individual who has a passion for literature. This one is a writer. When he dies, she finds another writer, and this continues until she finds Mr. Brown, who is writing his own novel. He doesn't know she is there, but when he is stuck, she whispers suggestions in his ear, and Helen enjoys seeing him follow her suggestions on paper. When she leaves him, he comments that he feels as if his muse is gone. When Helen is in Jenny's body and meets Mr. Brown, he doesn't recognize her, but she is able to use her own writing to let him know how she felt when she was his muse.

James enjoys literature as well, although he isn't as passionate about it as she is. She helps him with his homework, and he says that he wishes he could bring more books into his household, but it doesn't fit with Billy's character. Helen has a hard time finding decent books in Jenny's house as well. She enjoys reading Jenny's history book to discover what had happened in America since her own death.



Style

Point of View

A Certain Slant of Light by Laura Whitcomb is written in a first person subjective point-of-view. This allows the reader to really get to know the main character, a spirit named Helen. Since it's subjective, the reader gets an inside look at her thoughts and emotions, feeling her confusions and fears. Helen can't remember her past, and since this is first person subjective, the reader learns about her past as she does. The reader is a participant as the story unfolds.

Setting

This novel takes place in the modern day world. As the novel begins, Helen is cleaving to a man who is a teacher. Since she haunts people rather than places, she has observed the changing of the times. This makes it easier for her to adjust when she takes over Jenny's body. James haunts a place rather than a person, but it is a public area so he, too, can observe changes.

When they aren't in school, the main characters are generally in Jenny's house or in Billy's house. The houses are very different from each other, but both are harsh environments. Billy's home is cluttered with indecent pictures, and his brother yells at him and hits him. Jenny's home is too perfect. Nothing is out of place. Both places make Helen and James feel as if they have to hide books they might want to read.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is very simple. There are few difficult words, and although the main character is fond of literature, her speech isn't lofty. She is from a different era, and once she enters Jenny's body, she has to get used to talking in a more current vernacular. This isn't too difficult for her since she has been observing students for a while. There are some spectral terms with which a reader might be unfamiliar. For example, she refers to her own spirit as "Light." However, because of the usage of the words, it's very easy to understand and remember what the word refers to.

Structure

A Certain Slant of Light by Laura Whitcomb is comprised of 16 chapters. They are labeled by number, without name. The chapters run between 15 and 20 pages on average. At the beginning of the book, the main character is alone in her situation, then she finds a companion. The book draws to a close with her on her own once again until the final pages where she is reunited with all she was close to in her past.



Quotes

"When you are Light, it is only your emotions that can send a ripple into the tangible world."

Chapter 1, A Certain Slant of Light, p. 3

"'Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird...'" As she read aloud the familiar words, I knew what I was."

Chapter 1, A Certain Slant of Light, p. 5

"It was only that I felt confused. I had taught myself so carefully how to be the contented voyeur, and now there was this person watching me."

Chapter 2, A Certain Slant of Light, p. 16

"'...But the library is a sacred place, and I sit with the patron saint of readers.' Mr. Brown paused as he stared at the page, and then read, 'Pulsing goddess light moves through me for one moment like—' Here Mr. Brown paused again. 'Like a glimpse of eternity instantly forgotten...'"

Chapter 4, A Certain Slant of Light, p. 48

"He had broken the illusion that she was his muse. She knew that he was smitten with her, but now she feared that she was not enough."

Chapter 4, A Certain Slant of Light, p. 53

"'I don't know much at all about anything,' said James. 'But I know we should be together, you and I. That's all I can be sure of.'"

Chapter 4, A Certain Slant of Light, p. 57

"'Did you have a True Love?' 'No,' I said. 'Just a husband.'"

Chapter 6, A Certain Slant of Light, p. 92

"The Bacchanalian abandon with which modern young people explored each other still shocked me at times—the dance of mating without courtship. Boys and girls hid in the library stacks or behind the gym and flew at each other with no promise of love or even kindness, tasting one another in clumsy attempts to steal pleasure before they could be hurt or hated."

Chapter 9, A Certain Slant of Light, p. 143

"It seemed as if humans had lost the ability to make their own fun. The more they were gifted with inventions, the less they needed one another."

Chapter 12, A Certain Slant of Light, p. 180



"They didn't sing or play fiddle at the hearth; they turned on the stereo. They didn't tell stories on the porch; they watched television."

Chapter 12, A Certain Slant of Light, p. 180

"Just walk up to your hell and give it a push. Run through it, and I'll be waiting on the other side."

Chapter 13, A Certain Slant of Light, p. 210

"I knew that she was trying to save her little girl, but sometimes mothers with the best intentions kill their daughters all the same."

Chapter 15, A Certain Slant of Light, p. 254

Topics for Discussion

List the different types of ghosts mentioned in the book. What makes them different from each other?

What type of ghost is Helen, and why is she unique?

Both Jenny and Billy had troubled lives. What led to their desertion of their bodies?

Discuss the role of religion in this novel as well as its effect on Helen.

How do you think the story would have been different if Helen and James were actually teens like the bodies they claimed?

Salvation is a key element of this story. How are Helen and James redeemed?

Discuss what the author hints might happen to Billy and Jenny later in the novel. Does this seem realistic to you? Why or why not?