

# **Caucasia Study Guide**

## **Caucasia by Danzy Senna**

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## Plot Summary

Caucasia is Danzy Senna's first novel, which was published in 1998. It was a national bestseller and won the Stephen Crane Award for Best New Fiction and the American Library Association's Alex Award. The book describes the personal story of Birdie Lee, a young girl growing up in Boston in the mid-70s to early 80s. Birdie's father is black and her mother is white; her father is an intellectual who has risen from tough circumstances and is obsessed with his theories about the origins and effects of racism; her mother is a blueblood-turned-revolutionary who is more concerned with direct action against racism than in theory; Birdie's sister Cole has dark skin and Birdie has light skin. This play of opposites is the source of much of the novel's conflict: Birdie's parents can't accept one another as authentic, and this causes the family to break apart. Birdie and Cole are thus forced to choose a racial identity on the basis of their looks alone. The novel's main plot follows Birdie's struggles—to assume a false identity her mother has devised for her, to live in isolation from her father and sister, not knowing where they are or whether she will see them again, and finally, to take matters into her own hands by finding her lost family and returning to herself.

In the opening chapters, Birdie's and Cole's lives are innocent and largely untouched by the racial strife that is still rampant in society. The girls spend much of their time playing together in their attic room, even inventing their own language, which continues to be their unique connection throughout the story. But domestic life takes a bad turn when their parents Sandy and Deck, who frequently argue, finally split up for good. Sandy is frustrated with Deck's intellectualism, which never translates to action, while Deck sees Sandy's secret revolutionary actions as risky and out of step with the times.

After being taught at home by Sandy during their first school-aged years, the girls are now sent to a public school that is predominantly black. In this setting, they experience their first taste of the racism that their mother has been shielding them from and their father has been warning them about. Although Cole is accepted easily by the other students, Birdie must try hard to fit in to make up for the lighter color of her skin, which keeps the other students from believing that she is the same race as they are.



# Chapter 1

## Summary

### Foreword

The setting is Boston. The author recalls disappearing—changing from a schoolgirl to a “body without a name.”

### Chapter 1. Face

Birdie and her sister, Cole, share their own language called Elemenó, made up by Cole. It is 1975 in Boston, and the girls’ white mother and their black father can often be overheard fighting. Their mother spends many hours in the family’s basement participating in secret meetings that the girls are strictly forbidden to enter.

The girls are taken by their father and his friend Ronnie Parkman to visit their Aunt Dot, and to say goodbye to her. Dot is leaving the country to move to India. During the going-away party, Birdie enters one of the rooms in Dot’s house and sees some men huddled around something. One of the men, named Redbone, recognizes her and takes her to the center of the huddle to see that there are two rifles there. Birdie’s father, Deck, enters the room and is angry with Redbone for exposing his daughter to this situation. An argument follows between the two men, with Deck accusing Redbone of being a “phony revolutionary” and Redbone criticizing Deck for his “high-falutin’ theories.”

Back at home, the girls’ parents have their worst fight ever. Deck disapproves of Sandy’s using their home as a base for revolutionary activities. Before he leaves for good, Deck suggests to Sandy that people can’t escape their origins, and says she should go back to Cambridge, where she grew up. They also argue about where the girls should live and where they should go to school. They’ve been homeschooled, and Sandy now reluctantly agrees to send them to a predominantly black school in Roxbury. Before driving away, Deck advises Sandy to re-read his book *Wonders of the Visible World*, which is his exploration of the consequences for blacks of living in a racially integrated society.

## Analysis

The foreword and first chapter set some themes for the book: the idea of disappearing, the social upheaval of the times, and racial tensions between blacks and whites and between those who approach social problems at the intellectual level and those who want to take action—even violent action—as the solution. The setting is Boston, 1975. The social unrest of the 60s is still alive in the lives of Sandra and Deck Lee. The story, told from the point of view of their daughter Birdie, unfolds as she describes feeling invisible, like an eavesdropper on her own life. There are frequent arguments between her parents, and they all seem to revolve around a basic issue of race: Deck is black



and Sandy is white. Their older daughter, Cole, looks more stereotypically black whereas her sister Birdie is relatively light-skinned.

Deck is an intellectual who finds fault with Sandy's involvement in high-risk and (to his mind) outdated modes of fighting the system. Sandy sees Deck as living too much in his mind and not acting on his beliefs. Deck's sister, Dot, is a favorite of Cole and Birdie and their mother. Her free spirit and happy-go-lucky embrace of life stand in sharp contrast to Deck's tight and cynical view of the world; unsurprisingly, Deck does not approve of Dot's lifestyle nor her planned move to study with a guru in India. Deck's and Sandy's lives have developed in nearly opposite directions: Deck has come from economic disadvantage and become an intellectual who seems to dislike getting his hands dirty, and Sandy has gone from a socialite family upbringing to working in the trenches for social justice. The two cannot seem to find common ground.

## Vocabulary

miscegenation, insistent, stifle, sidekick, dyslexic, mesmerized, folly, motley, venomous



## Chapter 2

### Summary

Sandy tells the girls her version of the story of meeting their father. Having just graduated from a private high school, she often met to talk with her own father (a university professor) about her future. One night, while her father sat in a café talking with a few of his students about their projects, Sandy waited quietly, reading Camus' diary. One of the students (Deck), who had been ignoring her all evening, asked her a question that she later realized was a direct quote from the book she was reading.

Back in the present time, the girls' mother decides they will go to a public school, rather than the private, Afrocentric one their father chose in Roxbury. They are initially assigned to two different districts: Cole to a south Boston Irish school and Birdie to a mostly black school. Their mother flatly refuses this decision and the girls are both sent to the black school. On their first bus ride to school, the bus never reaches its destination because of an incident, captured on film, in which a black man is pulled from his car and beaten by whites. The bus takes them to a high school where Birdie is shaken by seeing the incident on the television news. She notices that their mother and Redbone are enthusiastically discussing something.

Shortly after this incident, the girls' mother changes her mind and enrolls them at the black school in Roxbury, called Nkrumah. Birdie is teased by some children who think she's white. Cole, who is making friends easily, steps in to intervene, telling the other children that Birdie is her sister and that she's also black. But Cole begins to resent her mother for not being able to raise them as black children.

Meanwhile, Sandy agrees to be part of a plot with some of her revolutionary friends. Her exact role is not known. Deck comes for regular visitation with the girls, and Birdie speculates that Deck prefers Cole to her because Cole is darker. On one of his visits, Cole is sick and so Birdie goes alone with her father. While they are in a public park, two police officers approach them and begin asking questions about their relationship. They don't believe that Birdie is Deck's daughter, but after much quizzing, they finally allow Birdie and her father to go on their way.

### Analysis

This chapter focuses on the ways in which racism invades the girls' own lives, and on the ways they interpret the events that happen to them. Cole, teased for her ashy knees and embarrassed at her mother's inability to raise the girls as blacks, takes every action in her power to find out how to be black so she can fit in.

Their father, confronted by the police when he goes out in public for the first time with Birdie alone, feels once again the sting of prejudice and is angry, but not surprised, as the incident confirms his theories about whites' racism.

## Vocabulary

gingerly, tenements, restrained, profound, pondering, obscure, asinine, vaguely





# Chapter 3

## Summary

To avoid losing Cole, who has become a very popular girl, Birdie learns to perfect the act of blending in by changing her hair, clothes, and way of talking. Another girl, Maria, invites Birdie to go steady with a particular boy, and by agreeing, Birdie gains admission to a clique of girls and becomes more popular.

Birdie bears a resemblance to a murdered girl named Luce Rivera, whose violated body was found in the neighborhood of their school. Birdie's mother warns her (but not Cole) to be careful of perverted men who seek out girls like her.

Birdie is invited to spend the night at Maria's house, where she tries hard to be a perfect friend. She is impressed with the matching furniture in Maria's house, Maria's wealth of stylish clothes, and the abundant food in the kitchen. When Maria curls Birdie's hair, Birdie can almost imagine that she looks like Cole.

Deck's visits with the girls increasingly become lectures on oppression of the black race. Sandy spends more time in secret activist meetings and is starting to exhibit unusual behavior. She tells the girls she is convinced that someone is out to get her. One day, she keeps the girls out of school to take them on a tour of Concord. Later, they shop for groceries and Sandy fills their shopping cart with junk foods they don't usually buy, explaining that now they are poor and should eat accordingly. She also steals some candy bars. Her mood swings are becoming increasingly erratic, and Birdie is concerned.

## Analysis

The many references in this chapter to the family's strained relationships with one another, and Sandy's more frequent secret meetings and her ever stranger behavior, suggest that the story is building to some kind of climax, though the reader doesn't know what it will be. Birdie is feeling like a chameleon—getting better and better at changing her colors to match the environment, while Cole is caught in the turmoil of young adulthood. Birdie is the glue that holds the family together: she worries about each member and tries her best to be whatever is needed for that person at the time. But Birdie's capacity to keep things going smoothly is rapidly becoming overwhelmed by situations she can't control and expectations she can't meet.

## Vocabulary

mammoth, escalated, Lamaze, fiasco, devoid, impending, inquisitively, gingerly, languid, astute



# Chapter 4

## Summary

Cole visits her father alone. A snowstorm blankets the city and keeps the sisters isolated all week. By phone, Birdie learns that their father has a new girlfriend named Carmen. Cole is excited about Carmen, especially the fact that Carmen has talked to her about sex.

Birdie and her mother are watching a news story about a bomb that had gone off in a police car in Berkeley. Sandy tells Birdie that sometimes such things are necessary, and then mysteriously says that if anything happens to her, Birdie should remember that she loves her and Cole and that she did it for them.

Once the snow is cleared, the girls go with Deck and Carmen to Deck's favorite restaurant. As soon as Carmen sees Birdie, her attitude toward the girl becomes cool, and she mostly avoids looking at Birdie for the rest of the visit. Seeing Cole's devotion to Carmen just makes Birdie feel worse. But on Cole's birthday, she enjoys a special dinner prepared by Sandy. Birdie is happy to see Cole and their mother enjoying each other's company again.

Late one night, Birdie sees some men in a green van unloading duffels into the family's basement, with their mother anxiously supervising. The next morning, Sandy informs the girls that they will again stay out of school, this time to visit her mother. She instructs the girls not to mention the school they attend or their father's leaving, but when later pressed, Birdie lets it slip that they are attending a black school. Sandy's mother is upset by this, but instead of arguing back, Sandy is unusually quiet in response to her mother's scolding. The visit ends when Sandy's mother writes a check and gives it to Sandy. Birdie is shocked when Sandy hugs her mother before leaving.

Sandy's mother is proud of a kinship with Cotton Mather, and she likes reminding the girls that they are from "good stock." She proudly displays one of his books, called *Wonders of the Invisible World*, in her library. The book is a guide for and a defense of witch-hunting, and Deck used a modification of the title (to Sandy's mother's scorn) for his own book.

Birdie recalls one Christmas when their grandmother gave Cole a black doll that Deck considered racist in its appearance. The doll's name was Golliwog, and Birdie secretly admired it.

Deck's mother is described as a poor but highly intelligent woman adopted by a Creole family. She performed well in school and had a strong interest in Russian literature, but ended up pursuing work as a nurse. Although she dreamed of traveling to Russia some day, she never achieved that goal and died poor.



Redbone appears outside the school playground one day and takes Birdie's photo. When Birdie tells her mother, Sandy is clearly upset by the incident and tells Birdie to scream loudly if she sees him again.

Deck and Carmen come to pick up the girls, but Birdie says she'll stay behind. She is surprised that her father is insistent and attentive. He also finally notices that Carmen doesn't seem to like Birdie.

Sandy spends a lot of time behind closed doors talking to her revolutionary friend Jane as well as nervously ranting about getting caught and about Brazil. Birdie doesn't understand the connection. Over a banana split, Birdie tells Sandy about Carmen, and Sandy rants again, calling Carmen "Miss Black and Beautiful," then, in a too-loud voice, exclaims mysteriously, "...it's my white ass that's going to end up in prison!"

## Analysis

The chapter portrays the increasing separation between Cole, who seems to prefer the company of Deck and Carmen, and Birdie, who remains with her mother during the snowstorm. In this chapter, the suspense of Sandy's secret activities in the basement continues to increase, as men are seen unloading mysterious bundles in the night. Finally, the chapter contrasts the girls' maternal and paternal grandmothers, who seem as different as Deck and Sandy themselves.

Deck's new girlfriend, Carmen, is introduced and it is implied that her distaste for Birdie when the two first meet stems from a sudden and unpleasant realization that the girl's mother must have been white.

## Vocabulary

aesthetic, ditty, pungent, simultaneously, indigo, sanctuary, methodically, piqued, translucent, crescent, obscenities, genocide, agape, octoroon



# Chapter 5

## Summary

Deck, Sandy, and the girls visit a Polynesian restaurant where Deck has taken the girls many times. Sandy confides in Deck that things have gotten out of control with her involvement in the revolutionary movement, but Deck is not consoling. Birdie realizes that the restaurant is tacky, although it seemed exotic to her previously. Birdie is surprised after Deck drives them all back home and she is told that Cole is going on a trip with her father and Carmen to Brazil. After the two pull away in Deck's car, Birdie realizes how serious the change is. She runs inside to seek comfort from her mother, but Sandy is incapacitated with grief on the floor.

That night, while Birdie sleeps, she is visited by Cole, who leaves Golliwog in the bed. The next morning, Sandy wakes Birdie before dawn. Birdie tells her that Cole came to visit in the night, but Sandy denies that Cole was there. Sandy has colored her hair red to disguise her appearance. She commands Birdie to quickly pack a few pieces of clothing and seems very anxious to leave quickly. Birdie grabs Golliwog and a box that Sandy says her father left for her, and the two head north in Sandy's Pinto.

## Analysis

The family fully breaks apart in this chapter—Deck, Carmen, and Cole to Brazil; Sandy and Birdie to parts unknown. Each parent seems to be trying to escape something, but we don't know exactly what. Birdie is portrayed as a helpless child caught in the middle, struggling to understand how things could have changed so enormously and so quickly. She clings tightly to the remnants of her family: the Golliwog doll and the package her father has left for her. Sandy seems mentally unstable and also caught off guard by the gravity of whatever situation that is causing her to leave so suddenly.

## Vocabulary

disintegration, bastardized, gaudiness, melancholy, blackface, gingerly



# Chapter 6

## Summary

Birdie sorts through the box her father left her, which he has labeled “Negrobilia.” It contains some items that seem to have been collected at the last minute, including a black Barbie head, an Egyptian necklace Deck had bought Birdie some time back, a James Brown eight-track tape, and a hair pick with a handle shaped like a fist. On the road, Sandy explains little to Birdie about why they have left or where they’re going; she only reveals that the FBI is after them, and she’s a bit disappointed that no wanted poster appears in the newspapers. By leaving Deck and Cole behind and changing her hair color, she explains to Birdie, she won’t stand out, and the two of them can be different people. She also announces that they will need new names. Birdie becomes Jesse, a girl with a Jewish father and a white mother. When Sandy says she also needs a new name, Birdie looks through the society wedding page of the newspaper and sees a woman who might have been Sandy, if everything in Sandy’s life had been different. Sandy sees the newspaper story and adopts the bride’s name (Sheila) at once. Sandy sets about making up a new history for them, which includes Birdie being Jewish and her father being a professor of classics, as Sandy’s own father was.

## Analysis

The box of items left by Deck for Birdie is analogous to the relationship Deck has forged with his daughter: many references to black pride, but nothing that adds up to a real effort. With just a few threads of her past left, Birdie is pulled relentlessly into a new future—one that includes a new identity for her and her mother. Sandy’s mood seems to lighten as she invents a history for Birdie as the half-Jewish Jesse, and concocts details about her father. Birdie notices the change in her mother as soon as she assumes the identity of Sheila. It’s as if Sandy takes a certain delight in fabricating the story of this made-up family, and that she almost believes it herself.

## Vocabulary

phenotypic, incognito, buoyancy, Sapphic, murkier



# Chapter 7

## Summary

The narrator describes moving from place to place for four years with her mother, among women who—like themselves—were martyrs to the revolution. Sandy has a relationship with another woman, which keeps her and Birdie in one place for almost a year, but they otherwise live more transiently. Birdie feels incomplete, like a “half-girl,” but finds the frequent relocations somehow comforting because the impermanence suggests that things might return to what they once were.

When she needs to, Sandy works to earn money to keep them afloat. She also tutors Birdie, although her competence as a teacher and her interest fall short in math and science. Sandy promises Birdie that their false identities and roaming lifestyles will end when Cole and Deck return, which she assures Birdie will happen when the time is right. Sandy loses a lot of weight, takes a new interest in religion, and practices a mix-and-match version of several religions combined.

Birdie is not allowed to ask any questions about why they are running away, nor about what was in the basement, but Sandy will answer questions about the past, and Birdie uses every bit of information she can glean to try to make sense of their present lives.

One day, after four years in exile, Sandy announces that she wants to stop running and make a real home in rural New Hampshire.

## Analysis

The reader is surprised to learn, at the beginning of this chapter, that Sandy and Birdie spend four years in exile, moving from one place to another. The chapter consists mainly of Birdie’s fragmented remembrances of this time as a “gray blur.” Few things stand out. Birdie comforts herself by revisiting the box of memories her father has left, and wondering what Cole is doing at any given moment. Sandy’s thoughts and emotions are, as ever, difficult to read and her actions difficult to predict. For this reason, the reader is not particularly taken aback when she announces, at the conclusion of the chapter, that she’s decided to settle down in New Hampshire.

## Vocabulary

disillusioned, haphazard, speculums, perpetual, fictive, eccentricity, converge, mantra, relish, unadulterated



## Chapter 8

### Summary

Sandy finds a house in a small country town and bluffs her way expertly through the interview with the landlords, Walter and Libby Marsh. Walter is a professor of English at the nearby university. Sandy is posing as the recent widow of Professor David Goldman who needs a change of location. Mother and daughter settle into their life in New Hampshire, but when Birdie tries to fall asleep at night or when she awakes in the morning, she often speaks to herself in Elemeno and thinks of the past, trying to remember as much of it as she can.

Sandy feels a pang of sadness whenever she becomes aware of some milestone in Cole's life that she is missing. This time, it's Cole getting her first menstrual period. Birdie, not wanting to stay around as Sandy's mood darkens, takes Mr. Pleasure, one of the Marshes' horses, for a ride, but gets lost and ends up at the Marsh house. Alerted by the family dog, the Marshes send their teenage son Nicholas to investigate. He finds Birdie at the back of the house, sheepishly sitting on Mr. Pleasure, unable to get her to move. It's beginning to get dark, and Nicholas mounts Mr. Pleasure in order to escort Birdie home so she won't get lost again.

When Birdie comes inside the house, Sandy blows up at her for being out later than she should have been and making Sandy worry. She blurts out that "the Feds" have taken her friend Jane after finding her hiding in Oregon, and says she was worried that the Feds had also taken Birdie to use her as bait. As Sandy's anger fades and is replaced by sadness, she tells Birdie that she loves her, and Birdie, interpreting this as an apology, replies that she loves her too.

### Analysis

Sandy puts her and Birdie's false identities to the ultimate test when the two appear for an interview to rent the Marshes' country cottage, and her skills at reinventing the two of them pay off. They settle into something like normal life, with Birdie learning to ride Mr. Pleasure, one of the family's horses. Any comfort Birdie might have developed about their secret life evaporates, however, when Mr. Pleasure wanders onto his own route and causes Birdie to come home late. Sandy's reaction to Birdie's lateness shows just how close to the surface her mother's anxiety still is: Sandy has imagined the worst-case scenario of Birdie being abducted by the FBI and held for ransom. But Birdie also recognizes that just under the anger is a sadness that is more general and that relates to her separation from Cole, along with a fear that Cole will hate and blame her for everything.



## Vocabulary

savoring, grainy, listless, bungled, lurch, primed, familial, tattered, gangly, shoddy, vivacious, sullen, elitist, inconsequential, desperation, glowering, aristocratic, demeanor, precariously, blatantly, oblivious, clandestine, anguish, canter, tumultuous, exhilarated, reluctantly, tentatively





## Chapter 9

### Summary

Birdie, feeling lonely when her mother is working, walks into town to window shop, but she is taunted by a group of girls and runs home again. On the way, she's picked up by Nicholas in the Marsh family's Saab. He's smoking something and chatting enthusiastically with Birdie all the way to her house. Birdie is enchanted.

Sandy announces that in order for Birdie to graduate from her home-schooled seventh grade, she must write a novel. Birdie invents a Mexican family as the subject of the novel, and develops a crush on the wayward teenage son, Richie Rodriguez, who is a physically abusive high school dropout. She masturbates while fantasizing about Richie and his girlfriend, but can't decide which of the two characters she identifies with.

Sandy continues to have bouts of optimism mixed with periods of deep sadness. One evening, she tells Birdie that it was Redbone who turned them in and caused all their trouble. A man named Jim Campbell starts coming to the bar regularly when Sandy and Birdie are there. Against all her own rules, Sandy flirts with the man and the two exchange telephone numbers. When Birdie expresses her concern, Sandy passes it off, insisting that the man can't be a Fed because he wears clogs.

One day, while Sandy, Jim, and Birdie are at the lakeside beach, Birdie gets bored and wanders away. She meets some younger children and spins a story for them about her history, telling them she's a princess from India who is being enslaved and beaten by the two crazy adults (Sandy and Jim) who have been entrusted to care for her while a war rages in her homeland. Jim suddenly appears and angrily insists that she take back the lies she's been telling. Sandy seems uncomfortable but doesn't intervene, and Birdie reiterates that the two are crazy, then runs away down the beach.

### Analysis

The relationship between Sandy and Jim, and Birdie's reactions to it, are the focus of this chapter. Birdie, well schooled by her mother in the importance of not trusting anyone, can't believe that Sandy has taken up with a new man. Birdie wonders aloud what will happen when Deck and Cole return and find Sandy with a new boyfriend. Sandy dashes Birdie's false hope of her parents' getting back together when she reminds Birdie that her father decided to leave with Carmen. Increasingly left out of the interactions between Sandy and Jim, Birdie spontaneously invents an altogether different life when she tells the children on the beach that she is an Indian princess. When confronted by Jim, and feeling angry and alone, Birdie can't bring herself to take back what she's invented. In an ironic twist, Jim reproaches Sandy for not making Birdie tell the truth, saying that "allowing her to lie like she does just isn't good for her. You know that." At this point in the story, the lies are becoming so thick and complicated that



there is a mounting sense that the characters' false lives must come tumbling down sooner or later.

## Vocabulary

dappled, giddy, vigor, hostile, nonchalance, bourgeois, grisly, bemused, brawny, oblivious, emanated, bulbous, surly, boisterous, chauvinist, emitting, brute, benign, dictatorial, suffused, perplexed, insurmountable, meritocracy, mediocrity, swaddling, meandered, siblings, rapt, coterie, akimbo, incredulous



# Chapter 10

## Summary

Birdie realizes that much of her past life, including memories of her father and the language of Elemeno, are disappearing. Birdie grows closer to Walter and Libby Marsh, and she fantasizes sometimes about being the daughter they never had. One day, the Marshes start asking questions about Birdie's grandparents, and she panics and makes up some information on the spot, but it doesn't fit with what Walter Marsh remembers hearing from Sandy. Birdie hopes this won't be their downfall.

Later, Birdie and Nicholas go riding and Nicholas asks whether Birdie is a virgin. She says she is, although she secretly remembers a game she and her friend Alexis used to play in which they would rub their bodies together, and recalls the "melting" sensations she felt. Nicholas says he'd had sex in Amsterdam with a black prostitute, and remembers that it was "okay," although he doesn't remember the woman's face.

Nicholas invites Birdie to go up to his bedroom to see his riding trophies, and she accepts. He asks whether she wants to smoke some pot, and she agrees, although she's never smoked before. They lie down together and start touching each other. Birdie feels Nicholas's erection and notices that again, she feels the same sensations she felt with Alexis before. When he asks for oral sex, she backs away. They smoke some more and laugh at pictures of Congolese natives in a comic book called *Tintin in the Congo*. Birdie, through her laughter, exclaims, "They've made us look like animals." Nicholas notices that she says "us," and makes a couple of racist jokes, and Birdie begins to feel sick. Nicholas falls asleep, and Birdie sneaks down the stairs. Before she leaves the house, she overhears Walter and Libby discussing the mismatch between Birdie's story about her grandparents and Sandy's version. Birdie slips out and runs home.

## Analysis

For the first time, Birdie realizes that she is a black girl "passing" as a white girl, and when she feels the sting of racism from Nicholas's remarks, she understands the warnings she's heard before about white boys. Things seem to be closing in on Birdie: her story to the Marshes about her grandparents has been exposed as false; her made-up identity as a half-Jewish girl is fooling everyone but herself; memories of her past are fading, and even the refuge of Elemeno is hard to maintain; the boy she'd been attracted to has revealed himself as racist and isn't even worldly enough to realize it; and even her sexuality is in question as she recalls the passionate feelings that were aroused when she and Alexis played their pretend-sex games. Like her mother, Birdie responds to trouble by running, but there are fewer and fewer places to which she can run.

## Vocabulary

candid, gesticulating, detachment, dusky, bunions, loping, fuddled, putrid, aneurysm, ilk, swelter, cloistered, diminishing, bicker



# Chapter 11

## Summary

Birdie works up the courage to tell Sandy about the contradictory story she's fed the Marshes about her grandparents. She's surprised when Sandy both takes the news in stride and makes up a new lie they can use to explain the contradiction.

Birdie can't sleep the night before her first day at a real school. Her mother comes into her room and lies down with her, reminding her to keep the secrets about her real life from everyone. Birdie loses her temper and blurts out how she will forget she ever knew her father or her sister, and her mother strikes her on the mouth and clamps her hand there to keep Birdie quiet. Before long, however, this serious moment turns to laughter as the two imagine the melodramatic worst-case scenario of Birdie being placed for adoption and Sandy back to her obese weight and in a striped prison uniform.

At school, Birdie keenly feels the difference between her old life, in which it was comfortable and acceptable to be "invisible," and this new environment—more visible, more real. She feels like an outsider and wants to belong. She's surprised when some of the popular girls at school, led by a girl named Mona, take her under their wing, but her happiness quickly fades when the girls make racist remarks about another girl, Samantha, whom Birdie has easily recognized as mixed race like herself. Mona resents the fact that Samantha beat her out of a chance to be on the baton squad. Samantha is also very smart. Birdie is fascinated by Samantha's ashy skin and nappy hair, and wonders why Samantha doesn't know how to address these issues.

Mona lives with her mother in a trailer. The two share a bed, their makeup, and their jewelry, and they generally have a relationship more like sisters. When the girls are alone, Mona teaches Birdie many lessons she's missed about being a girl. Mona even demonstrates for Birdie "how a real woman gets off" by inserting a bathtub plug into her vagina. Birdie tries it. She doesn't think it feels good, but tells Mona it feels great.

While searching in vain for evidence that Jim is really a Fed, Birdie uncovers a postcard from Dot, which was clearly sent sometime since Dot left for India. She takes the postcard and adds it to her box of negrobilia, feeling betrayed by her mother's failure to tell her about Dot's message. She tries to look up Dot's number at her old address in Boston, but there's no such person listed on the records.

Mona and Birdie become inseparable, but Birdie stiffens whenever she hears Mona and others make racist comments and jokes. She reassures herself that the real Birdie Lee is still safe inside her and will come out when the time is right.

Mona and Birdie accompany Jim and Sandy to the grocery store, where they run into Samantha and her white mother. Sandy is stunned, and asks Birdie why she doesn't say hello to Samantha. Birdie replies that Samantha is a "loser." Sandy, upset, corrects



Birdie by saying that Samantha is just like her, and Birdie reacts without thinking by saying, “You mean, we’re both black?” Mona interprets this as a joke.

## **Analysis**

Spending time with Mona, Birdie recognizes that although Mona’s life is not ideal, it is genuine and exciting. She relishes the chance to at least experience Mona’s life from the sidelines. In a continuation from the last chapter, the web of lies that Sandy and Birdie have been weaving is quickly coming unraveled. It is clear that by inventing the false identities and forcing Birdie to live as someone she is not, Sandy is reinforcing some of the very behaviors she’s dedicated her life to fighting. Now, like Birdie, Sandy must not only ignore racism when it occurs, but actually participate in it or risk blowing her and Birdie’s cover.

## **Vocabulary**

ruse, jovial, hesitation, scrutinized, scoliosis, wary, conspiratorially, relented, disdain, averted, pallid



# Chapter 12

## Summary

Birdie awakens from a nightmare she often has about a Volvo like her father's, owned by a sinister man who is coming to take Birdie away. She has been adding items to her box of negrobilia, including a piece of Samantha's hair, a photo of Jim standing next to a black woman in Jamaica, a friendship bracelet she took from him, and a page from a library book about a religion practiced in Brazil called Candomblé. She wonders whether Cole practices this religion. She tries to imagine what Cole, now 17, looks like, and whether the two sisters would recognize one another.

While standing with her friends outside the swimming pool, Birdie is insulted by a carful of boys about being a Jew. Mona yells at the boys to stop, but later asks Birdie whether she's "really Jewish." Birdie says she can't be, because only one of her parents is Jewish. At home, Birdie removes and hides the Star of David necklace she's been wearing.

At Mona's house, Mona and the girls discuss the new black boy who will be attending their high school. Their chatter is full of racial stereotypes and slurs, and Birdie has to excuse herself because she finds it hard to breathe. While in Mona's bathroom, she recalls something her parents used to do when driving through a tough, mostly white neighborhood in Boston. Their mother would drive and their father would hide under a plaid blanket. They made a game of it, telling the girls their father was a monster and that he wouldn't come out of hiding until Sandy said that it was safe. She puts these thoughts aside and goes to the Dairy Queen with her friends.

Samantha, who's been away all summer, enters the Dairy Queen looking much more stylish and developed than before. As the school year goes on, Samantha takes up with a white boy named Matthew, who treats her badly. Mona delights in making up outrageous rumors about Samantha's wild sex life, and when she looks to Birdie for confirmation, Birdie laughs and turns away.

## Analysis

Birdie's collection of "negrobilia" is growing, but it's becoming no less random and scattered than when Deck first gave it to her. The contents of the box can be seen to represent Birdie's own confusion about her racial identity, which remains out of sight but will soon grow to the point where it cannot be contained. The memory that Birdie has in Mona's bathroom is a sign that Birdie is coming to understand, at some level, how much she is covering up. With the addition of another non-white student at the high school, the opportunities to look the other way in the face of her friends' racism seem to be increasing. The reader wonders how long Birdie can keep up the act of "passing."

## Vocabulary

audacity, ceremoniously, unfazed, blandly, camouflage, dejected, deflected, flak, proximity, combust, ambivalence





# Chapter 13

## Summary

Jim works hard to win Birdie's affection, but the harder he tries, the sadder Birdie feels about her own father's lack of attention to her and the more distant her memory of him becomes. Sandy is dismayed by Birdie's poor treatment of Jim. They plan a trip to New York City, which Birdie pretends not to be excited about. She insists that Mona come along, and Mona, who has never visited the city, is enchanted. Birdie feels that some deep hunger is being satisfied by going to the city and seeing the variety of people and styles. Sandy seems to have the same reaction as they both drink in the sights. For the first time since she and her mother went on the lam, Birdie feels like running away and staying in New York.

While Jim and Sandy wander through a museum, Mona and Birdie wait outside, where a group of black and Puerto Rican teenagers have set up music and are starting to break dance. Mona is frightened of everything around her, but Birdie is drawn to the dancers and cheers them on, moving to the rhythm of the music. The next thing she knows, her mother and Jim are behind her, scolding her for not staying closer to the museum. They coax Birdie away, and she secretly wishes she didn't even know them.

Jim gets the group lost in a run-down neighborhood in New Haven, where someone in a group of youths throws a rock at their car. Jim confronts the youths and gets knocked to the ground. Mona shrieks that "those niggers are gonna kill him," and before Birdie realizes she's doing it, she punches Mona in the shoulder and yells at her. Sandy takes charge, sweeping Jim into the car and driving away. Afterwards, Birdie worries how Mona will treat her at school the next day, but Mona takes delight in retelling the story, complete with racial slurs and exaggerations of Jim's bravery.

On Christmas Eve, Sandy tells Jim all of her secrets. On Christmas morning, Jim approaches Birdie and tells her he knows about everything and wants to support both of them, but Birdie just becomes upset that Sandy has betrayed her again. Birdie asks Sandy directly why they have gone on the run. Sandy answers that she did something "very illegal," although it didn't harm anyone, and that she had to split the family up to protect Cole. Birdie, unaware of the feeling arising in her until she speaks about it, accuses Sandy and Deck of favoring Cole. She bursts into sobs and allows Sandy to comfort her.

## Analysis

Birdie is afraid of what she's become. With all her efforts focused on "passing" as white, she can't come to terms with the fact that the behavior of white people often leaves her feeling detached, even embarrassed, toward them. This uneasy feeling explodes into anger and physical violence against Mona during the incident in New Haven, when



Mona refers to the youths Jim confronts as “niggers.” But as quickly as Birdie’s outrage erupts, she looks for ways to hide it or explain it away so that she can go back to pretending again. By the next day at school, she’s able to sit and listen to the slurs without any visible reaction.

Deck’s words to Birdie and Cole about whites’ fear and loathing of blacks seem to ring true with Birdie, but she doesn’t allow herself to dwell on her feelings or her values, or how they fit with her identity; she copes by reminding herself again and again that this is all a game, that she is a spy and not her real self.

In the conversation Birdie has with her mother in the barn, things come to a head when Birdie demands to know why they have been running away. This conversation, seemingly unrelated to Birdie’s self-image, takes a turn when Birdie blurts out that Sandy and Deck have always preferred Cole to her. The outburst gives Sandy a chance to get a bit closer to Birdie again by reassuring her that this is not the case. With this interaction, and the knowledge that another person (Jim) knows their secret, a small crack in Birdie’s armor may have been created.

## Vocabulary

billowy, compassion, cowering, exaggerated



# Chapter 14

## Summary

Birdie finds out that Nicholas has been expelled from the private school he's been attending for the past two years. She eagerly awaits his return. Sometime later, Mona and Birdie go to a party. Nicholas is also there, and he and Birdie pick up where they left off two years before. But they are interrupted by Mona, who is very drunk and upset that Samantha is at the party.

Birdie goes into the woods to pee. She surprises Samantha, who's there for the same reason. Birdie wonders whether she could trust Samantha with her secret, but remembers Sandy's words to trust no one, and thinks better of it, asking instead what color Samantha thinks Birdie is. Samantha replies that she's heard Birdie is Jewish. When Birdie asks what color Samantha is, Samantha's answer, barely loud enough to be heard, is, "I'm black. Like you." After this happens, Birdie immediately feels differently about her life. She goes home, quickly packs a few things, takes some cash from the kitchen drawer, and disappears into the night.

## Analysis

Birdie's motivation to finish what she and Nicholas started two years previously is thwarted again, initially by her failure to feel aroused by their kissing, and finally by an interruption from Mona. Whenever she is close to having a sexual experience, Birdie compares the situation to her time in Aurora with Alexis. She still wrestles with every aspect of her identity, including her sexual orientation.

A seemingly chance meeting with Samantha in the forest turns into a pivotal moment for Birdie in this final chapter of Part 2. In the natural setting of the forest, and with a cleansing rain falling on them, Samantha speaks a few words to Birdie that change her life, catalyzing Birdie to finally abandon her false identity, "killing one girl in order to let the other one free."

On her way out of town, Birdie happens to witness Mona's mother and the local bartender having sex in a car. Her response, now familiar to the reader, is a feeling of detachment and invisibility, as if the acts have no relevance to anything about her. She feels some sense of grief at leaving, and at the "killing" of Jesse, but also finds strength at this crucial moment by summoning some words in Elemeno, which she repeats to herself as she turns her back on her past life.

## Vocabulary

ghoulish, intoxicated, grimaced, hovered, teetered, projectile, leering, repulsed, lumbering, grating, quizzically, rivulets, wanton, daunting, apocalyptic



# Chapter 15

## Summary

Birdie takes a bus to Boston, hoping to find Aunt Dot at the address on the postcard Dot had sent to Sandy. She first visits the old family house and when she sees that different people are living there, she sits down on the pavement, feeling dejected. A transvestite named Corvette comes panhandling for change, but takes pity on Birdie when he sees how upset she is. He helps her find the address she has for Dot, but the name on the apartment mailbox is not Dot's. She knocks on the door anyway, and is met by a little girl who leads her into the apartment. Dot is there, and when she sees Birdie, she drops the plate of food she's holding and wraps Birdie in a warm embrace. Dot feeds Birdie a big breakfast, and Birdie hopes that if she stays busy eating, she won't have to answer any questions from Dot. But Dot does ask questions, and Birdie invents lies to avoid letting on that she has run away. Dot must take her daughter Taj to a recital, but she invites Birdie to lie down and nap while she's gone.

As Birdie rests, she considers how her mother will react when she discovers Birdie has left. She imagines that her other identity, Jesse, could still be in her bed at home, could go on living as she had been. She misses her mother, and for the first time she realizes that Cole has been without their mother all this time.

When Birdie wakes up, she explores the apartment and discovers some family photographs, including one of Deck, Carmen, and Cole in Brazil. Later, Birdie asks Dot where her father and Cole are, but Dot says she lost touch with them in the late 70s, after receiving the photograph. Birdie, who was hoping that the long-awaited reunion with her family would finally be possible, is devastated by this news.

Dot and Birdie discuss Sandy's reasons for running away, and Dot is convinced (though she can't convince Birdie) that it was unlikely the FBI had ever really been interested in her. Dot describes her time in India, how she and her guru had become lovers, and how happy she felt. When asked why she returned to America, Dot explained that it came down to a craving for black American music. Birdie wants to know if Dot is happy with her choice, and Dot explains that after running away somewhere, you can never be completely satisfied in either place, but you can float above all of it, and that this is how you cope.

## Analysis

Even after deciding to abandon her false identity, Birdie finds that there are many more illusions she will have to leave behind before finding her real self and a normal life. Her long-standing belief in the possibility of a family reunion with Deck, Cole, and her mother is tarnished when Dot reveals that she doesn't know Deck and Cole's whereabouts. Birdie's conviction that her mother fled into exile out of necessity is also



placed in doubt as Dot questions whether the FBI ever really had any interest in capturing Sandy. Birdie gets some valuable insights about coming to terms with a life split between two alternatives when Dot describes her flight to India and her return to America, describing her own process of accepting the idea that the path not taken will always hold some appeal.

By telling her story to Dot, and talking about the truth of the matter of Deck's and Cole's absence as well as her mother's choice to flee, Birdie is slowly coming to grips with the hard facts of her new and old lives.

## Vocabulary

vestige, leprechaun, synchronized, dashiki, grizzly, déjà vu, impenetrable, accoutrements, displacement, shrewdly, halting, legible, ruffians, tenement, dilapidated, devour, ravenous, burly, perpetually, dreadlocks, clinical, lucid, benevolent, lusty, sepia, destitute, supine, bane, piqued, insatiable



# Chapter 16

## Summary

Dot uses a school identification card among Birdie's things to track down and call Sandy. She hands the phone to Birdie, and Sandy immediately begins to scold and curse Birdie for running away, demanding that she return. Birdie refuses, and Dot suggests that they talk again later, after Birdie has had time to think.

Dot and Birdie discuss Dot's views on life and on color. They are very different from her father's—much more positive. Dot says everyone's soul has a distinct color, and pronounces her own soul as deep red.

Feeling restless after a few days at Dot's, Birdie starts trying to look up old friends. She locates Ali Boardman, her almost-boyfriend from Nkrumah, whose father, Ronnie, was Deck's best friend. They meet at a pizza shop, and Birdie gets updates on some of their old friends from Nkrumah, which has long since closed down. When she asks whether Ali's father might know where her own father is, he tells her that his father disappeared about the same time that hers did. Birdie is shaken by this news and leaves this meeting feeling unsettled. She wonders whether she'd have been better off staying in New Hampshire.

Birdie steps up her efforts to find Deck and Cole, writing to the Brazilian consulate and calling a private detective. But the detective is too expensive, and Birdie is left feeling helpless and frustrated.

Returning to the apartment one day, Birdie is surprised to find her mother and Jim waiting for her. Sandy demands that Birdie return to New Hampshire, and Birdie refuses. An argument follows, which turns into a wrestling match on the sidewalk outside when Birdie tries to escape by bolting out of the apartment. During the scuffle, the police pull up and demand to know what is going on. Birdie says that Sandy is a friend of the family, and that she lives with Aunt Dot. The police accept the story and leave. Dot firmly refuses again to go with Sandy and Jim, telling her mother that "it's over." Dot promises to take good care of Birdie, and Sandy and Jim leave. Birdie takes a walk through the cold city streets, realizing for the first time how little she has ever really known about her mother.

## Analysis

Birdie has now shed yet another layer of illusion: that of her mother as her closest ally, as a risk taker who would stop at nothing to protect her family and defend her values. Instead, Sandy now appears to Birdie as a frightened woman who, like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*, is terrified by things that don't really exist. For the first time, Birdie says aloud that it's over, that she can no longer participate in the lie of Jesse and Sheila Goldman. But she's not yet ready to let go of her plan to find Deck and Cole. Learning



that Ronnie Parkman's whereabouts are also unknown adds a new element of mystery and potential danger to her quest.

## Vocabulary

muslin, anguish, succumbing, languidly, unrelenting, pixyish, bleak, flouncy, culprits, strategic, nostalgic, cardigan, reminiscing, contaminated, contagious, mahogany, precarious, elaborate, macrobiotic, decorum, perceptible, nymph



# Chapter 17

## Summary

Birdie finds Ali again he is surprised to see her bruised and swollen face. When he asks what happened, Birdie first avoids telling him the whole story by saying a “crazy lady” did it, then thinks again and admits it was her mother. Birdie then unburdens herself by telling Ali the true story of her and her mother’s disappearance. Ali listens, then admits that he also lied when he said his own father had disappeared. He agrees to tell her where to find him, and adds that he no longer speaks to “the punk.” Ronnie is gay, a fact that is a major source of shame for Ali. When Birdie visit Ronnie, he welcomes her warmly and recalls the old days when Sandy took so many risks for her social causes. He remembers her friends who were arrested and imprisoned. This makes Birdie feel ill, as she reconsiders whether Sandy’s paranoia was really legitimate fear.

When asked if he knows where her father is, Ronnie seems surprised that Birdie has not seen him. He tells her that Deck left Brazil after only a couple of years, when it turned out to be more racist than America had been. He recounts how he ran into Deck in San Francisco, and that Deck had launched into his usual theories until he happened to notice how flamboyantly Ronnie was dressed, at which point he couldn’t get away from him quickly enough. However, Deck did give Ali an address and phone number, which he passes along to Birdie. The information is two years old, but Birdie takes the number, finds a pay phone and calls collect. There’s no answer. After three tries, she is approached by a flasher and has to leave. She continues to feel ill.

Birdie goes to see Sandy’s mother. The woman’s first question for Birdie is, “Where is that horrid daughter of mine?” Birdie refuses to tell, but says that Sandy’s fine and has people who care for her. She asks for her grandmother’s help in getting to the address where Deck and Cole might live. Her grandmother first refuses, but reluctantly agrees when Birdie says she’ll divulge Sandy’s location if she gets the money. She insists, however, that Birdie spend the night, as she is obviously suffering from some kind of illness. Birdie departs for the airport in a town car provided by her grandmother, who is left with a fictitious address and phone number for her daughter.

## Analysis

In one of the longest chapters of the book, the suspense of Birdie’s quest to find her father and sister is steadily building, as Birdie leaves no stone unturned to reach her goal. As Birdie tells her past to Ali, it’s as if she’s telling the story to herself, saying it all out loud so as to confirm for herself that it is the truth. But even as she works to find her true self, she uses her talent for lying to manipulate everyone who may be able to help her reunite with her family. Long overdue to rejoin Deck and Cole, or to at least understand what has happened to them, Birdie becomes increasingly impatient. When





her attempt in the phone booth to reach Deck and Cole fails, she decides that only a personal visit will do.

The scene at Sandy's mother's house with Birdie telling whatever lies will achieve her aims for the moment, Ronnie's retelling of Deck's disillusionment in Brazil, and his recollections of the arrests of Sandy's friends all reinforce the sense of certain parts of Birdie's life being in a kind of suspended animation. The reader is left to wonder whether some of them will ever be resolved, or whether Birdie is doomed never to be satisfied.

## Vocabulary

dismayed, coifed, wayward, indignance, decipher, effete, forgo, somber, reminiscing, jemson, disdain, disheveled, macabre, contemptuous, railing, emaciated, testosterone, hypocrisy, pungent, populace, prowled, veranda, vast, muffled, lilted, vulgar, rambunctious, imposing, horrid, cowered, innate, glacial, conspiratorially, crumpet



# Chapter 18

## Summary

Birdie locates the address she's been given, but no one is home. She tries to think of what her mother would do in this situation, and then walks to the back of the building, finds an open window, and climbs in. Met by a friendly puppy, she examines the apartment and is certain it is, indeed, where Deck lives. Judging by the messiness of the place, she also determines that there is no woman living there. Deck arrives and, after a moment of shock, embraces Birdie awkwardly. Birdie wants to ask the bigger question of what possible excuse he could have for not looking for her, but she instead asks where Cole is. Her father replies that she is living in Berkeley and that Birdie can see her any time. Then Birdie does ask the bigger question. Deck replies that it would have been "a real project" to find her, and mentions a book he was working on that was taking much of his time. He hands her the 700-page manuscript as if it were a gift that could make up for the lost time. Birdie questions whether Deck cares where she's been or what she's been doing all the time they've been apart, and she tells him she's been posing as a white Jewish girl. Deck launches into one of his lectures on racism and shows her a chart he's built on the wall of his living room, which portrays the fates of famous mulattos throughout history. A photo of her and Cole are in the final column of the chart, with a blank space for their future fates. He tries to explain that her generation may be the first mulattos to survive. Birdie comes unglued and demands to know why Deck didn't take her with him when Sandy planned to disappear, and accuses him of leaving her behind because of her color. Deck insists that it was the wisest choice at the time, and that Sandy had agreed.

Deck drives Birdie to meet Cole, lecturing all the way on the problems of race, just as he's always done. He notices that Birdie appears sick, and invites her to stay at his apartment if she doesn't want to spend the night at Cole's. Birdie learns from the girl who answers the door at Cole's house that she's studying at a nearby café. The girls have a tearful reunion and go back to Cole's house to catch up. Cole, like Birdie, feels abandoned by the parent who didn't take her. Although she believes that Sandy needed to flee because of what she had done, she thinks Sandy should have tried harder to find her and make contact. And like Deck, Cole has her reasons for not trying harder to find Birdie and their mother.

Birdie gives Cole their mother's phone number and goes with her to a pay phone, where they feel it will be safer to call Sandy. Birdie tries to imagine the other end of the emotional conversation they are having. An agreement is made for the three of them to meet in the summer at Penn Station, where Sandy is unlikely to be discovered.

Cole asks Birdie to live with her, and Birdie agrees, although it is hard for her to imagine living in any one place permanently. Cole informs Birdie that mixed-race kids were plentiful at the local high school that she had attended. Birdie dresses and goes out to



buy food for breakfast. On the way, she sees a school bus full of children of all races and momentarily ponders the fact that life was continuing as it always had.

## Analysis

Chapter 18 brings the resolution of Birdie's questions, as she is finally reunited with Deck and Cole. Ignoring Dot's pointed question, "What possible excuse could Deck have for this?," she goes to find out for herself. Although the answers are painful, she is better off for hearing them, and finds that she is strong enough to bear the truth. When the book concludes, Birdie's future is unknown, but the tone is hopeful. With a final analogy to the weather, the author hints at the possibilities: "Outside, it wasn't clear yet what kind of day it would be. The air was crisp, and the sky above was a bruise of colors from the just-rising sun."

## Vocabulary

aquiline, expansive, wistfully, dilapidated, pugnacious, decapitation, imposture, venetian, parasols, clambered, swivel, barren, pattering, mongrel, bedraggled, stifling, nonchalant, derivative, ecstatic, drivel, disarmingly, perilous, apparition, pungent, twinge, lethargy, conviction, skulking



# Characters

## Birdie Lee

Birdie Lee is the main character of the novel. The story is told from her point of view, from the time she is about four years old until about fifteen. Birdie is a child who thinks deeply about what is happening around her and does her best to fit in, but never quite feels that she belongs anywhere. She often has the sense of being invisible or feeling as if she'd like to disappear. Birdie is a mixed-race child: her mother is white and her father is black. Her skin is relatively light, so people are often surprised when they see her with her much darker father.

## Cole Lee

Cole is Birdie's older sister. Cole is darker than Birdie; in fact, the two do not look much alike, but they are very close. Cole devises a secret language, called Elemenó, that the girls speak to one another. As Cole grows into adolescence, and it becomes clear to her that their mother does not know how to do things that she thinks a black child's mother should do (such as braid her hair in cornrows or give her advice about moisturizing her ashy skin), she becomes more and more resentful. At heart, however, Cole is a sensitive girl who loves both her parents deeply.

## Sandy Lee

Sandy is the mother of Birdie and Cole, and the wife of the girls' father, Deck Lee. She has a blue-blood background but prides herself on relating instead to the "common people." She works in the social change movement, taking risks (whether real or perceived) to her own safety and that of her family, in order to advance the cause of civil rights. Sandy is a bold, tough woman who is never hesitant to take charge of situations, nor to criticize her husband's failure to act on his own convictions.

## Deck Lee

Deck, the father of Birdie and Cole, is an intellectual who comes from a poor background. His commitment to social justice focuses entirely on exposing the issues of racism by writing and lecturing about them, rather than taking concrete action as Sandy does. In Deck's mind, everything hinges on getting the nature of the problem right, and for him, the nature of the problem always comes back to white people's racist beliefs and actions. He and Sandy are mutually resentful of one another's perceived shortcomings and faulty perspectives, and early in the story, they separate. Deck seems to be a man trapped in his mind, one who cannot apply his ideals to anything real in his life, not even his own family.



## Ronnie Parkman

Ronnie is Deck's one-time best friend, now estranged because he has revealed his homosexuality to Deck. Ronnie is also the one who is finally able to give Birdie an address for her father.

## Redbone

Redbone is a character who makes a few brief appearances in the novel. We know little about him, except that he has "kinky red hair" and is always criticizing the civil rights movement for taking too little action to right social injustices. But like virtually all the characters in the novel, Redbone is not exactly what he seems. His street slang is described as inauthentic, and it is rumored that he is the one responsible for alerting the authorities to Sandy's activities, causing her to flee.

## Aunt Dot

Aunt Dot is Deck's sister and a favorite relative of everyone except perhaps Deck himself, who does not approve of her alternative lifestyle. Dot moves to India to study with a guru, and returns alone some time later after having had his child. She is someone that Sandy, Cole, and Birdie all trust, and she is more upbeat about life and about race than anyone in the family. Dot is the person Birdie turns to when she runs away from Sandy and Jim in New Hampshire, as well as the one who soothes Birdie's aching heart when she struggles to understand why her father hasn't come looking for her.

## Carmen

Carmen is Deck's new girlfriend, with whom he forms a relationship after leaving Sandy. Presented as somewhat superficial, Carmen's thinly veiled racism is also evident the first time she meets Birdie and realizes that she's the product of Deck's marriage to a white woman. Nevertheless, because she is a relatively glamorous black woman, Cole gravitates to her as a replacement mother figure for a time.

## Alexis

Alexis is a girl with whom Birdie was close when she and her mother lived in Aurora. Birdie describes how the two girls played a game called "honeymoon" in which Birdie lay on top of Alexis and the two girls rubbed their bodies together. She remembers her feelings of arousal when they played this game, and the memories of Alexis and Aurora always return when Birdie is in a sexual situation. Birdie remembers that Alexis taught her much of what little she did know about sex.



## Walter and Libby Marsh

Walter and his wife Libby are the owners of the house that Sandy rents in New Hampshire. They are middle class intellectuals who are taken in by Sandy's fictional stories about her and Birdie's past. They have a teenage son, Nicholas, whom they send to a private boarding school under the belief that Nicholas will succeed and rise above the small-minded town where they live. The Marshes seem to place much value on appearances, and are cordial to Sandy and Birdie in their presence, but talk suspiciously about them in their absence.

## Nicholas Marsh

Nicholas is the son of Libby and Walter Marsh. He takes an instant liking to Birdie, and a couple of times in the novel, it appears likely that he will be the first boy with whom she has sex; however, their attempts are always interrupted. Nicholas, like Birdie's other friends in New Hampshire, makes racist comments and jokes without a second thought, and like her other friends, he has no inkling that Birdie is from a mixed-race family. Nicholas is sent to a private boarding school but is expelled two years later and seems mostly interested in smoking pot and drinking.

## Sheila Goldman

Sheila Goldman is the name that Birdie and Sandy create as part of Sandy's new identity. Sandy poses as Sheila when she and Birdie flee Boston to escape persecution from the government for Sandy's revolutionary activities.

## Jesse Goldman

Jesse Goldman is Birdie's fictional name. She is passed off as the daughter of Sheila Goldman and a deceased—and fictitious—Jewish professor named David Goldman. Birdie, as Jesse, must remember all the details of her made-up life as a white Jew, and she does this very well. Almost no one suspects that she is half black. At times, even Birdie seems a bit confused about which girl is real—Birdie or Jesse.

## David Goldman

David Goldman is the fictitious father made up for Jesse Goldman (Birdie) by Sandy. Professor Goldman is portrayed by Sandy as a Jewish academic who has recently died of a brain aneurism.



## Jim Campbell

Jim becomes Sandy's boyfriend when she and Birdie are living in New Hampshire. For a long time, Birdie is convinced that Jim is one of the "Feds" that Sandy is running from. Sandy keeps their real identities a secret until one Christmas Eve. When she reveals the truth, Jim stands by them and does his best to show support.

## Mr. Pleasure

Mr. Pleasure is a horse that belongs to the Marshes, and that Birdie often rides when she needs to get away from the New Hampshire house and the pressures of living her false life. Mr. Pleasure also is the link between Nicholas and Birdie, as it is the horse's deviation from their normal riding route that brings Birdie to the Marshes' house, where she meets Nicholas for the first time.

## Samantha Taper

Samantha Taper is the only black girl in Birdie's middle school in New Hampshire. She is a smart girl who also is a champion at baton twirling; yet, her only friend is another misfit, a white girl named Nora. Birdie is fascinated by Samantha but doesn't dare befriend her because it would spoil her own place in a clique of white girls, which she's worked hard to secure and maintain. But Samantha proves to be an important force in Birdie's story by being the only person who privately recognizes Birdie as being black like herself.

## Mona

Mona is the head of the clique of white girls to which Birdie belongs. Mona lives in a trailer with her mother and Birdie is fascinated by her life—from her brash talking, to her apparent wisdom in all matters related to boys, sex, clothing, and makeup. Mona is the white girl Birdie sometimes imagines she could be, and Birdie tries hard to stay in Mona's good graces, even when Mona's obvious racism stings Birdie's own feelings about herself.



# Objects/Places

## Boston

This is where the novel begins. It is the family home of the Lees, and the place to which Birdie returns after her years of running. The city is still simmering with civil rights unrest several years after the peak of the movement in the 1960s.

## Aurora

A place that Sandy and Birdie live for a time during their years in exile together, Aurora frequently brings back memories for Birdie, especially when she is in intimate situations with boys. During their time in Aurora, Sandy also has a lesbian relationship with a woman named Bernadette. Like *aurora borealis*, Aurora and its meaning in Birdie's life are mysterious.

## New Hampshire

The state in which Sandy and Birdie finally settle after running for several years. Ironically for Sandy, who's devoted her life to racial equality, the place in which she chooses to remain is almost universally white, and is a place where Birdie has to bury her own racial ties and work very hard to "pass" as white.

## Attic/basement

The girls' room is in the attic and is a place of innocence and fantasy. In the basement, where the girls are forbidden to go, is the real world of Sandy's secret meetings, where mysterious packages and people come and go. In between, the family tries to maintain some semblance of normal life.

## Cars

Perhaps because they are a means of moving and symbolize Birdie's constant motion as a key theme, cars figure prominently in the novel. They include Deck's Volvo and Chevrolet, their mother's succession of clunker cars that are part of her disguise, and Cole's Karmann Ghia.

## Music

The era in which the novel occurs, and the specific locations and people within it, are set within a context of popular music. In Boston, the girls' early lives are set against the





backdrop of Aretha Franklin, The Stylistics, Stevie Wonder, Joan Baez, James Brown, Roberta Flack, Al Green, and Diana Ross. When the novel's action moves to rural New Hampshire, the players include Patsy Cline, Merle Haggard, and Kenny Rogers, as well as Jim's reggae favorites, Peter Tosh, Jimmie Cliff, and The Wailers. The white teenagers listen to rock bands like J. Geils Band and The Doors, and Dot's world travels bring Indian music into the mix.

## **Hair**

The novel contains many references to hair, especially as it provides cues to a person's race. Cole longs for authentic-looking cornrows; Birdie passes as white partly because of her straight hair, and Samantha's hair gives away her race because of the nappy bits at the nape of her neck. When Sandy wants to disguise her identity, one of the major ways she does this is by changing the color of her hair.

## **Rain/water**

Most of the critical moments in Birdie's story take place in rain or other forms of water. A snowstorm brings the first separation of Birdie and Cole. Birdie's life-changing conversation with Samantha takes place in the rain. Dot describes wading into a river and realizing how happy she was in India. Birdie envisions her father and Cole "playing in the water, unburdened, no longer held back by that which they had left behind." When Sandy comes to Boston to bring Birdie back to New Hampshire, Birdie runs from her into a drizzling rain. When Birdie reunites with Deck and later with Cole, the weather is drizzly. At the conclusion of the novel, when Birdie has had her questions answered, the skies are foggy, but the fog is lifting.

## **Canaries**

Deck makes a comparison between mulattos and canaries in a coal mine: they are both indicators of the level of poison in the environment. Deck sees Cole's and Birdie's generation as the first one in which the canaries will survive, even if they are slightly poisoned.



# Themes

## Disappearing/Appearing

Throughout the novel, there are references to things and people disappearing and reappearing as something different from what they were. The first sentence, “A long time ago I disappeared,” and the last sentence, “Then the bus lurched forward, and the face was gone with it, just a blur of yellow and black in motion,” both refer to the idea of disappearance. Birdie and her mother disappear, as do her father and sister. Birdie’s old identity disappears, and a new one that doesn’t quite fit appears to replace it. Birdie, uncertain of her place in the scheme of things, often feels as if she has disappeared. Dot disappears to exotic India and later reappears, somewhat changed. Birdie worries that her memories of her father will slowly disappear over time.

## Racial and Ethnic Identity

Like the idea of disappearing, racial and ethnic identity is a central theme of the novel. Characters, neighborhoods, schools, and entire towns are characterized as black, white, and (in Boston) Irish. Identities are built around these labels, but again and again, the novel shows that the identities don’t hold up under close viewing. Sandy loves all races equally but can’t tolerate her husband’s failure to be “black” in the way she thinks he should; likewise, Deck looks past Sandy’s work for racial equality and sees only her blueblood upbringing. Birdie passes as white but longs to express her black identity.

## Lies and Trust

Both Birdie and Sandy struggle with decisions about whom to trust, at certain points uncertain whether they can even trust one another. The novel is filled with characters who lie and otherwise deceive one another about their identities, their histories, their motives, and their actions. Ironically, the person who initiates Birdie into the culture of lying and deceit is the same person who advises her to trust no one. One of Birdie’s most difficult tasks in the novel is to make moment-to-moment decisions about whom to trust.

## Social Justice/Revolution

The central problem that divides Sandy and Deck is how each of them deals with this issue. Sandy risks everything to keep the movement alive, and Deck insists that it is already dead and needs to be replaced by a new understanding of the root causes of racial injustice. The larger revolution in society is played out on a personal level in the lives of the characters.

## Intellectuals

Deck, his mother, the Marshes, and even the fictitious David Goldman are all portrayed as intellectuals who have high ideals but fail to put them into action in their lives. Deck intellectualizes the problems of racism to such an extent that he neglects important problems in his own family, and the Marshes are seen as superficial and ineffectual people who are sheltered in their own world. When Birdie (as Jesse) tries to explain to Nicholas how her father died, she says his aneurysm was a result of thinking too much.



# Style

## Point of View

The novel is told by a narrator, in the first person point of view. The narrator is a woman in the foreword, but she is remembering her childhood, and her voice shifts to that of a child as the chapters are laid out. It is easy to imagine the innocence of this narrator when the story is told in a child's voice. The author shows the reader that the narrator (Birdie) is often confused about all the grown-up events and ideas swirling around her. The reader is permitted to listen in on Birdie's thoughts as she tries to make sense of ideas unfamiliar to her. By allowing the entire story to be told from Birdie's point of view, the author reinforces the idea that many events occurring around children that do not directly involve them nevertheless have an effect on shaping their own thoughts and beliefs.

## Setting

The first and last parts of the novel are set primarily in Boston during the period from the mid-70s to the early 80s. These dates are important, because they represent a time when much of the civil rights and other social justice movements were weakening in their influence on mainstream life in the U.S. Boston is important for the storyline because it represents both the highest intellectual ideals (Cambridge, Harvard) and the gritty, working class streets and neighborhoods where such ideals are seen as having little relevance to real life. The middle section, which covers the time of Sandy and Birdie's exile, is set mostly in rural New Hampshire, a place where Sandy feels that she and Birdie can most easily disappear.

## Language and Meaning

The language of this novel reflects both adult content and a child's limited ability to reason about that content. In order for the reader to understand what Birdie is grappling with, the events and conversations she witnessed must be described clearly, using language appropriate for an adult reader. But the author also wants to portray the internal life of a child who is trying to make sense of these events and conversations, many of which are simply too complex for her or require more world experience than she has amassed. Therefore, the book's language is more adult-oriented when describing the external world and its happenings, and more childlike when describing Birdie's or Cole's thoughts and speech. The novel seems to switch comfortably between the two levels of writing without drawing much attention to the switch.

## Structure

The novel comprises three major parts, with six chapters in Part 1, eight chapters in Part 2, and four chapters in Part 3. Part 1 involves setting the scene of the Lee family and their troubles, which result in the family's split. It concludes with Sandy and Birdie's disappearance. Part 2 describes Birdie's life as she learns to "pass" as white, and it ends with Birdie's escape from New Hampshire. Part 3 resolves Birdie's questions when she finally locates her father and Cole and comes to an understanding with her mother.

The whole story is told in the first person, although at times the narrator is clearly Birdie the young girl and at other times it seems to be Birdie the adult, speaking retrospectively or describing the meanings or possible meanings of the things Birdie the young girl is experiencing.

The novel contains one main plot and two subplots. The main plot revolves around Birdie's quest to understand her identity as a product of a bi-racial marriage. A subplot follows Sandy's revolutionary activities and her escape with Birdie into anonymity, but there is no conclusive information for the reader about what, if anything, Sandy has actually done that would warrant such a drastic move. A third subplot involves Birdie's uncertainty about her own sexuality. Although none of the subplots are resolved with any certainty, the novel's ending has an upbeat tone, as if to imply that with time, Birdie will sort out what is important and learn to accept that the rest may never be resolved.



## Quotes

Before I ever saw myself, I saw my sister. When I was still too small for mirrors, I saw her as the reflection that proved my own existence. (Chapter 1)

My mother did seem to be waiting for something. She would sit on the front stoop till late in the night, smoking, and scanning the street as if waiting for someone to show.”  
(Chapter 2)

We sat together in the tub for a long time, until our fingertips were ridged and prunelike and the water around us had turned lukewarm. It had begun to rain outside, softly, and Maria, on her knees behind me, washed my hair, seemingly fascinated by its limp consistency. (Chapter 3)

The new woman, Carmen, sat daintily beside my father in the front seat, a wet smile turned toward him, her hands folded in her lap. As I climbed into the car, my father introduced us. She glanced back at me, and there was something in her look that made me pause—a sort of surprise and hesitation before she attempted a smile and mumbled a lukewarm “Hi. (Chapter 4)

She tried to smile, but it turned into a kind of grimace, and all of a sudden I could see that she was scared but trying not to show it. ‘Tell Mum I love her, okay? Tell her I’ll talk to her later? (Chapter 5)

It was then that I allowed myself to wonder where Cole was at that moment, what sky she slept under, if she too was waking with her face wet and salty, a pain throbbing in the center of her palms, and the feeling that she had been kidnapped. (Chapter 6)

I was consoled by those stories, by my mother’s faith in Cole’s return, and by the fleeting nature of our lives, which kept the reality of our situation from ever closing in. (Chapter 7)

They’ve got her, baby, and they’re gonna get us if we aren’t more than careful. We gotta watch our asses, not get too close to anybody. You know that. (Chapter 8)

As I pushed past her to get to the back door, she whispered to me from beneath her smile, in a low, clenched voice: ‘I got us this far, baby. Now, leave the rest up to me. (Chapter 9)

They seemed like remnants from the life of some other girl whom I barely knew anymore, anthropological artifacts of some ancient, extinct people, rather than pieces of my past. And the name Jesse Goldman no longer felt so funny, so thick on my tongue, so make-believe. (Chapter 10)

I saw myself from above that first day, saw with a rush of embarrassment what a strange creature I really was: a pitiful creature called Jesse for lack of a better name; a girl who dressed in oversized tomboy clothes, her hair in twin braids, who tapped her



fingers against her lips in a rhythmic pattern, a nervous habit that looked like some religious tick. She looked old-fashioned to me. Like someone who has been kept in a box, missed a century, collected dust. (Chapter 11)

: “Samantha had been just a dark shadow, taking up space but not attention in the halls of the junior high, eternally depressed and weighty. Now she seemed determined to be seen. (Chapter 12)

I had become friends with Mona and all the little racists. That way I would always know that I was living a lie. Better them than someone who would smile in my face and make me believe I was at home. (Chapter 13)

I missed the girl I had been then, so dirty and misfit and off-kilter. A girl raised by wolves. (Chapter 14)

: “I wanted Dot to tell me it was going to be okay, that Cole and Papa were on their way back. I wanted lies, sweet lies. Good lies. Lies made the world to around, my mother had taught me that. (Chapter 15)

: “Have you forgotten? I can’t fuck around like this with your little adolescent rebellion. We’re not like the goddamn Partridge Family. I’ve got bigger things to worry about. (Chapter 16)

: “And now her words came back to me. Sandy’s not running from the law, baby. She’s running from herself. And if this were true, there had never been a danger at all. We had been hiding from only ourselves. And it was safe, then, to speak. (Chapter 17)

They say you don’t have to choose. But the thing is, you do. Because there are consequences if you don’t. (Chapter 18)



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

What do we know about the Lee family? What is the relationship between Birdie and Cole like? What about Sandy and Deck? What are the major points on which the two parents disagree? Which situations cause Birdie to feel invisible, or make her want to be invisible?

## Topic 2

What are Dot's plans for the future? How do the plans turn out? Why does Deck disapprove of his sister's lifestyle? Why does Redbone pick up Birdie to show her the guns? What is the secret language shared by Birdie and Cole? How did it come about, and when do they use it?

## Topic 3

Why does Cole begin to distance herself from the rest of the family? Why does Sandy start to behave strangely, and what is she afraid of? What is the meaning of "Golliwog?"

## Topic 4

Why doesn't Carmen seem to like Birdie? When Sandy invents new identities for herself and Birdie, how does Birdie react to this? What does "passing" mean, in the context of the book? Who is "passing," and why?

## Topic 5

What is Birdie's initial reaction to Jim? Why does she feel this way? What does Birdie do when her friends make racist comments or jokes? Why does she respond this way? What does Birdie seem to be feeling when this happens?

## Topic 6

What are the situations that make Birdie think of Alexis? Why do you think the author included Alexis in the story at all?





## Topic 7

How does the story end? Are Birdie's problems solved? Does she seem happy? How does the future look for her and her family?