

Countdown Study Guide

Countdown by Deborah Wiles

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Plot Summary

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Franny Chapman is an 11-year-old student and the middle child of a military family during the weeks of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. She is a thoughtful, intelligent girl but is caught up in the daily aspects of her life, including her relationship with her younger brother, her older sister, her uncle, her best friend, and a boy who has just moved back to the neighborhood. At first, the situation in Cuba is a background to her daily life, but she is soon among those caught up completely in her fear that the Cubans will attack.

Franny's family lives the typical life of a military family of the time. She and her family live just off the military base and her father is an officer. Her mother does not work but lives in the strict social code of the time and place. For example, her mother worries what the other military wives will think about Uncle Otts' strange behavior.

When the Cuban Missile Crisis reaches its peak, the school children are taught to “duck and cover” in the event of an attack and the entire population is on edge, spurred on by official warnings that an attack could be imminent and would be met with a retaliatory attack. Franny and her brother, Drew, are fearful about the state of the world even while their lives go on. One major aspect of her life at this time is the status of her older sister, Jo Ellen, who is a college student. Jo Ellen is often absent and is being secretive at a time when people fear spies and any deviation can be a reason for official questioning. Franny discovers that Jo Ellen is hiding letters and when she takes one, she finds acronyms and numbers that seem to make up a code. She is terrified that Jo Ellen is involved in something secret, but that turns out not to be the case.

Meanwhile, Halloween is approaching and a boy named Chris has moved back to the neighborhood. Franny is interested in Chris, but so is her best friend, Margie. Margie's friendship begins to shift and she has a fight with Franny that lands them both in the principal's office. Jo Ellen helps Franny attend a Halloween party in the neighborhood while their parents are away for the evening, though they know Mrs. Chapman would not approve. A near-tragedy puts Margie and Franny in serious danger but Chris goes for help and adults arrive to save the girls.

As the situation in Cuba settles to a less-dangerous state, Margie tries to renew her friendship with Franny and Franny discovers that she has the power to accept or refuse. She decides that she will have to give it some time. Through the events leading up to this point, she learns the importance of loyalty and friendship, and that fear – though often unavoidable – can be survived.

Throughout the novel, the author includes historical documents, photos, news accounts, and quotes that were popular and important to the time. These give the reader a sense of what Franny saw and learned during her daily life, including music, television, and the social and political climates.



Chapters 1 - 2

Summary

The novel opens with an image of a nuclear bomb. The next page is a quote from Communist Party Secretary Nikita Khrushchev to U.S. President John F. Kennedy in which Khrushchev warned against the two of them putting themselves in a position of inevitable war. The next two pages are a double-page image of Kennedy and Khrushchev. Kennedy is quoted as saying the U.S. had sufficient nuclear weapons to blow up Russia multiple times, and Khrushchev saying that Russia would be satisfied with blowing up the United States just once. The next page is a poster advertising a building as a fallout shelter. The next is a newspaper account declaring Camp Springs School as a shelter and another talking about the military buildup in Vietnam. The next two pages show Bert the Turtle as he “ducks and covers” to protect himself from a nuclear blast (6, 7). The next eight pages show children practicing the “duck and cover” in their classrooms, and quotes from several people, including Kennedy’s declaration that Americans had made the conscious decision to reach the moon.

In Chapter 1, Franny Chapman is 11 years old in fifth grade, and she feels she has become invisible. She is a good “read-alouder” but Mrs. Rodriguez has skipped her when students are reading aloud in social studies for several days (17). Franny cannot help comparing Camp Springs Elementary School to her previous school in Hawaii, including the enclosed hallways at Camp Springs compared to the open halls in Hawaii. Franny greets her best friend, Margaret, on the playground just before the air-raid siren begins to scream. Franny and her classmates are outside and there is no way to get under their desks to “duck and cover” (21). Franny fears they are “all about to die” (21). Page 22 is a full-page image of the mushroom cloud of an atom bomb with the warning that a bomb can “smash buildings and knock signboards over,” but promises anyone who “ducks and covers ... will be much safer” (22).

In Chapter 2, no one really knows what to do. Mrs. Rodriguez directs her class to duck and cover near the wall of the school though another teacher is trying to get children inside. Franny joins the others at the wall, sitting by Denise Dubose until the two girls see they are squatting in a mass of grasshoppers. Mrs. Rodriguez demands that they be quiet, and they obey. Franny wants to run to her house, which is nearby, but she doesn't. As the siren ends, her dog Jack licks her in the ear. Mrs. Rodriguez lets Franny take Jack inside to gather her things. The end of the day marks the end of the school week, and Franny cannot help but compare that to the possibility that her life will end too, someday when the siren is not signaling a drill.

The next page shows Harry Truman speaking from a desk in front of a large microphone. The next seven pages are about Truman's presidency and his legacy. He was from a farming family but did not want to be a farmer. He was president during World War II and directed the two atomic bombs dropped on Japan, and held to the philosophy that, as president, “the buck stops here” (33). Japan surrendered on the



same day that a man name Ho Chi Minh issued a statement of independence loosely based on the United States' Declaration of Independence, and wrote a letter asking Truman for help. By the time Truman died in 1972, "America was almost finished burying the 58,209 soldiers who lost their lives in the Vietnam War" (34). By contrast, more than 4 million people from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos died.

Analysis

The use of historical pamphlets, posters, and other documents gives this novel the feel of a documentary. The author explains that she roughly based the character on herself and the setting on her childhood neighborhood. The historical events, including Kennedy's speech, the duck and cover program, the actions of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the nuclear bomb warnings provide a historically accurate setting for Franny's adventures.

Bert the Turtle was used as part of a program to teach children to duck and cover in the event of a nuclear bomb attack. While modern-day readers will see the folly of that action because ducking under a desk would not save someone from a nuclear explosion, the program was an accepted campaign practiced in schools around the country during this time in history. The term is used frequently throughout the novel and students of this time frame believe following the duck-and-cover protocol will save them. That program is meant to give children a level of security in a frightening time of American history.

The section on Harry S. Truman appears between Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. That section could be considered a precursor to Chapter 3 or an ending to Chapter 2. The author does not make distinctions about the placement of these historical documents, photos, and stories. The author uses the literary tool of contrast during that section by talking about the more than 58,000 Americans who died during the Vietnam War, compared to some 4 million people from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The final sentence of that section is not explained, but it could be an anecdotal piece of information meant only to engage the reader. The sentence states that Truman had only a middle initial – S – but no middle name.

The formatting of the section on Harry S. Truman is interesting and uses bold fonts and spacing to make dramatic points. For example, the author writes about America's fear that Communism would spread from Russia if "Russians decided to bomb the United States with their brand-new nuclear bombs" (33). The author then leaves a blank line and inserts the phrase "(such roughhousing)" as an editorial comment (33). Obviously, the use of a nuclear bomb is more than roughhousing, which means the author is using understatement as a literary tool to make a point.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Franny? List what you know of her character and her life up to this point. Keep the list and add details as the author presents them.



Discussion Question 2

Describe this period in history. Why does the author use a fictional cast of characters set in a historically accurate setting?

Discussion Question 3

What has been revealed about Franny's family? Do they seem typical for the time and place?

Vocabulary

infantry, dreary, tiresome, construction, brutal, trenches, roughhouse, slobbery, dismiss, wailing, defense, pamphlets, gathering, fallout



Chapters 3 - 6

Summary

Franny takes time to see the school nurse who tends to the scrape Franny got on her knee during the drill. She then begins the walk home with her younger brother, Drew, and Margie. Drew is carrying a load of books, as usual. Margie announces that a girl in their grade, Gale, is dressing up as Marilyn Monroe for Halloween. Franny decides that is “creepy, since Marilyn Monroe just died,” but Margie says Halloween costumes are supposed to be “creepy” (39). Margie is just about to say what Gale has suggested for Margie's Halloween costume when Drew interrupts, saying he will be an astronaut. Franny predicts their father will be working, as usual. Their conversation is brought to a halt when Franny sees Uncle Otts.

Page 41 is a flyer advertising the Civil Defense and words from a Pete Seegar and Joe Hickerson song.

In Chapter 4, Uncle Otts, dressed in his World War II helmet and waving Civil Defense Literature, begins to shout at the children. One boy runs away and Uncle Otts yells that he is a “deserter” and a “yellow-bellied coward” (43). Franny and Margie hide behind a bush and other kids laugh or run away. Franny does not know what to do but Drew walks up to Uncle Otts and says, “At ease, Sergeant,” which immediately calms Uncle Otts. As Drew begins to walk home with Uncle Otts, Margie says that Uncle Otts has become frightening. Franny refuses to leave her hiding place for a few minutes, knowing that the other kids will laugh at her now. Margie, who plans to go shopping for new shoes that afternoon, leaves the bush before Franny. She does not know if it is worse that Uncle Otts is truly losing his grip on reality or that she did nothing to help him.

Page 46 is an image of soldiers and lyrics about the poppies of Flanders fields.

In Chapter 5, Franny notices that someone is moving into a house in her neighborhood. At home, she finds Jo Ellen vacuuming. Jo Ellen has been crying but will not say why. They briefly discuss Uncle Otts. Jo Ellen says some plans that arrived in the mail contributed to Uncle Otts' behavior today. Franny's mother is upset because Uncle Otts showed his bizarre behavior in front of the ladies of her bridge club, saying they will talk to their husbands and that it could affect Franny's dad, who is being considered for a promotion. Franny says Jo Ellen spent the previous summer in Mississippi with their grandmother, a woman they call Miss Mattie, and that she has not been the same since that visit.

The next ten pages show images of various events and quotes from various people. There is a photo of Mary Ann Mobley being crowned Miss America 1959, two images from the Civil Rights Movement, including several people sitting on the ground and standing near a burning bus, a family seated at the dinner table, and a quote from the Students for a Democratic Society.



In Chapter 6, Franny's mother, Mrs. Chapman, berates Franny for not coming straight home from school. Franny does not tell her mother about Uncle Otts. Franny goes to help Jo Ellen finish cleaning up after the bridge club meeting. Jo Ellen drops a letter and Franny sees the name "Ebenezer," but Jo Ellen refuses to explain and is upset again.

Franny often has trouble falling asleep and she sometimes hears her parents talk with friends about the situation in the world, including in Russia. Franny does not understand it all. Most nights, she imagines what she would say if she wrote a letter to Khrushchev. She is often still awake while her parents are watching *The Tonight Show*.

Pages 65 through 72 are about Pete Seeger. He was born to a wealthy family in 1919, had access to an excellent education, and loved art. His father was a pacifist and Pete had "a deep sense of justice" (67). His father introduced him to other pacifists, some who called themselves Communists. He was a good musician but felt more interest in performing the music than in being popular. He often revived old songs or used poetry for inspiration. Pete served in World War II, then everyone became afraid of spies. Pete's former association with Communists put him under the light of suspicion and he was tried, convicted, but then acquitted of being a spy. He continued to use his music to object to wrongs, including oppression of blacks during the Civil Rights Movement and the American involvement in Vietnam.

Analysis

The novel is a mixture of the fictional account of Franny's life and the historically accurate setting and events of this time during the early 1960s. In an interesting choice, the author presents Franny's chapters in first person and present tense. For example, "I shove my hair out of my face" and "I swallow hard to keep the tears away" (44). The use of the present tense makes a deeper contrast to the historical accounts, such as the British news report of an American pilot "who was shot down" by the Russians and "captured by the Soviets," then "released from prison" (51).

There is a great deal of description of Franny's neighborhood and her house. The neighborhood seems typical of the time and place. Franny describes the various houses she passes on the way to her own, and who lives in each. Her home is a split-level, popular in middle-class neighborhoods during this time. She talks about entering the front door into a foyer, then immediately making the choice to go upstairs or downstairs. The main house, including living room, kitchen, and bedrooms for Franny, Jo Ellen, and their parents are all located upstairs. The bedrooms for Drew and Uncle Otts are downstairs.

The inclusion of Pete Seeger's biographical information in this placement is meant to provide hints about Jo Ellen's activities, but it may misdirect some readers' predictions. Seeger was tried, convicted, but later acquitted of being a spy during a time in America's history when many entertainers were suspected of being part of the Communist Party. That piece of information, coupled with the fact that Franny saw a strange envelope in Jo Ellen's possession, will lead some readers to suspect that Jo Ellen is somehow being



caught up in the activities of a Communist group. The rest of Seeger's story is that he became involved in the Civil Rights Movement and other protests, using his music as a vehicle. That, coupled with Jo Ellen's letter and the fact that she spent the previous summer in Mississippi, will lead readers to the correct conclusion: That Jo Ellen is preparing to work with that movement.

Discussion Question 1

What is Franny's reaction when Uncle Otts encounters all the students walking home from school? Why is she disappointed in herself about her reaction?

Discussion Question 2

Who is Jo Ellen? Describe her relationship with Franny, based on their brief interaction so far.

Discussion Question 3

Who was Pete Seeger? Why is his story important?

Vocabulary

pudacrat, satchel, dutiful, laden, disgust, blathering, hostage, compelled, inquisition, emblazoned, appealed, acquitted, philosophical



Chapters 7 - 9

Summary

At dinner, Drew says a boy named Johnny Carmichael wet his pants during the drill at school, and Drew helped him leave the room and get into dry pants without letting anyone know about Johnny's accident. Mrs. Chapman and Jo Ellen applaud his action, and even Franny is impressed. Uncle Otts is not at the dinner table with the family. Mrs. Chapman has decided he has to eat in his room because he can talk about nothing but being prepared for a nuclear strike.

After dinner, Franny asks permission to listen to Jo Ellen's records. Jo Ellen refuses and points out that Franny gets an allowance and can choose to buy her own records. Franny uses her allowance money for Nancy Drew books. Drew and Mr. Chapman go outside to play with a boy from the neighborhood while Franny, Jo Ellen, and Mrs. Chapman clean up after dinner. Franny feels she has too many chores. Instead of sweeping the floor like her mother instructs, Franny decides she can use the opportunity to "spy on my sister" (78).

Page 79 is an image of Nancy Drew with an excerpt from one of the novels about her.

In Chapter 8, Jo Ellen is in her room, preparing for an evening out with her college friend, Lannie. Jo Ellen says she and her friends "are going to change the world" (82). Franny briefly relates her fear, asking Jo Ellen to stay home. They talk for a moment about Uncle Otts. Franny knows a friend who has a relative in a nursing home. Jo Ellen reminds Franny that their uncle "helped raised Daddy, and Daddy's going to keep him forever" (83). They talk about the world situation, and Jo Ellen says the situation is more complex than Franny can understand. Franny reveals that she feels unimportant in the family dynamics, but Jo Ellen says most of the problem is growing pains because of Franny's age. Jo Ellen puts one of the mysterious envelopes in her hope chest, locking it and retaining the key. After Jo Ellen is gone, Franny wonders why she is being so secretive with the envelopes.

The next day is Saturday and Franny is grounded because she never remembered to sweep the kitchen floor. Mr. Chapman is going out of town and Mrs. Chapman has taken him to the airport. Uncle Otts wakes Franny, insisting that she help him begin digging a fallout shelter. The yard is full of items he has ordered, including a composting toilet, flashlights, towels, boots, food, and more. Franny cannot decide what to do but she knows her mother is going to be furious that Uncle Otts is digging up the front yard. Franny calls Margie who does not have an idea either. Franny declines the offer to get Margie's mom involved.

Uncle Otts continues to dig in the front yard while Franny and Drew watch from the living room. He is obviously overheated but continues to work until he literally falls down. Margie rushes home for her mother while Franny and Drew run outside. Jo Ellen



arrives at that moment. Franny is not certain Uncle Otts is alive until she throws water on him, which revives him somewhat. Uncle Otts begins to talk, saying things such as

When Uncle Otts recovers somewhat, he says that burning is a “terrible” way to die (98). He refuses to go inside until Franny points out that they are all ready to work, but need a leader. Franny is relieved when her mother arrives, regardless of the fear that her mother will be angry.

Pages 100 through 107 are images and quotes. Page 100 is a full-page image of the cover of the “Fallout Shelter Handbook,” indicating the reader will find information such as creating shelters above ground and in-ground shelters for sale. Another page shows a family inside their well-stocked shelter. There is also a photo of Cassius Clay and a movie poster advertising a James Bond movie.

Analysis

Franny's parents and her older sister, Jo Ellen, all smoke openly around their home. The modern-day reader may be ready to condemn them for smoking in confined places, including cars, with the younger children present. This is one of many aspects of the historical setting. Smoking was accepted and socially encouraged during this era. While some people knew there were dangers associated with cigarettes, these were generally dismissed as insignificant.

When Drew tells the story of helping a classmate leave the room and get into dry pants, Jo Ellen and Mrs. Chapman show their approval. There is a lot of character development in this scene. First, Drew is the kind of person who would do that for a classmate, even if that classmate is not a close friend. Next, Franny hates that she is not naturally that kind of thoughtful person. She compares that action to Drew's move to help Uncle Otts calm down when she had chosen to hide in the bushes. Drew makes it clear he is not particularly interested in whether his classmates make fun of him while that is all Franny can think about. This contrast is a literary tool that is seen several times throughout the novel.

It is clear that Jo Ellen and her mother have been arguing on Friday evening, but Franny does not learn the details of those arguments. Her mother is clearly upset and Jo Ellen has been crying at one point. At another point, Jo Ellen says she has to remember that the situation is difficult for her mother as well, indicating that Mrs. Chapman is worried, but that she is hiding that worry. The author is using these situations to add depth to the characters, though the reader has to be able to see the deeper meanings in order to fully understand these characters.

Uncle Otts believes the family should build a fallout shelter. The blueprints arrive while Mrs. Chapman is hosting her bridge club, and she is horribly embarrassed about his reaction. Then Uncle Otts has a large delivery of items, all designed for the shelter. The reactions of the various characters seems reasonable, based on each character's state of mind and background. Uncle Otts lived through a world war, fought overseas, and



saw his brother die a brutal, horrible death. He is afraid and has taken all the warnings to heart. He truly believes he should try to protect his family by building a fallout shelter. Mrs. Chapman has been the wife of a military officer for years. She is more likely to predict that the situation will not come to an all-out attack. She worries more about what the neighbors will think if it seems her family is panicking. Franny is a child who is susceptible to the warnings that an attack is imminent, and she wants to trust the adults in her life, though there are two distinct trains of thought among those adults.

As Uncle Otts begins to recover, he realizes that he was talking about Nicky and the burning. He then speaks to Franny and the others in a “small voice” (98). The author uses this allegory as a means of making it clear that Uncle Otts is speaking softly, but it is more than just the tone. He is also subdued from that moment.

Discussion Question 1

What is the story Drew tells about the air raid drill at school that day? What does it say about his character that he did this?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Franny worried about Jo Ellen? What does Franny fear Jo Ellen might be involved in?

Discussion Question 3

Describe the situation in the world that is making Uncle Otts more volatile than usual. What effect is the world situation having on other characters of the novel?

Vocabulary

rendition, beams, thirsting, banishment, dignity, faraway, miserable, impending, terse, sheathing, snug, fabulous, atomic, evacuation, techniques



Chapters 10 - 16

Summary

In Chapter 10, Franny is working on her science fair project, though she knows it does not meet the criteria for the scientific method. Her mother has taken Uncle Otts to the hospital. Franny asks Jo Ellen if she can go ride her bike. Jo Ellen agrees, but says Franny should take Drew and Jack outside as well. Franny and Drew discover that Chris Cavas, a boy who lived in the neighborhood before, has moved back.

In Chapter 11, Drew had lived in Pakistan for the past year, where his father was stationed. Chris rides his bike with Drew and Franny to the gravel pit to see the swing some boys have put up. Drew swings out on the swing, then Chris says it is Franny's turn. Drew says Franny is afraid. She rushes to grab the swing from Chris's hand. She is excited "until the swing starts its forward journey," and she wants to get off (117).

In Chapter 12, Franny falls, knocking the wind out of her and ripping her shorts, but she is basically unharmed. On impulse, Franny tells Chris she is having a Halloween party, though she isn't. When they reach the neighborhood again, Chris asks if Margie still lives in the same house. Franny wants to lie, but she just says that Margie does live there. Franny sees that her mother is home, and that Uncle Otts is not with her.

In Chapter 13, Franny learns that Uncle Otts is in Malcolm Grow Hospital for "observation" (123). Mrs. Chapman immediately asks about Franny's condition. Franny does not want to tell her mother about the gravel pit or the swing, and she lies, saying she was going too fast down a hill. Mrs. Chapman questions Drew, who is never able to lie. He backs Franny's story, but only to a point. Mrs. Chapman sends him to his room and berates Franny for dragging Drew into her lie. At supper, Drew tries to break the awkwardness by announcing that Franny is planning a Halloween party. Mrs. Chapman is furious, saying that Uncle Otts is in the hospital, Mr. Chapman is on a trip, and their front yard is a "holy mess" (129). She calls Franny insensitive and announces they have to be ready for Sunday school the next morning.

In Chapter 14, Franny's family prepares for church the following morning and Franny can tell that Jo Ellen and Drew feel bad about their current situation. They arrive at church on the military base, which is near the hospital and serves as a reminder of Uncle Otts. When Franny's Sunday school teacher asks for someone to memorize Psalms 24 to recite the following week, Franny surprises everyone, including herself, by volunteering. Page 135 is the 10 verses of Psalms 24.

In Chapter 15, Franny compares the Sunday afternoons when her father is home to Sunday afternoons without him. When he is home, they go for a drive, watch an evening television show together, and Franny considers it a good day, culminating with her bedtime prayers. Today, her mother works to restore the lawn and does not let the children help. She says they have to stay home. Franny begins memorizing her



scripture and practices the piano. Margie and her mother come for a brief visit, bringing a casserole. Margie remains for a brief visit, and talks about Chris's return. Franny takes the conversation to Jo Ellen and the girls agree to “snoop” through Jo Ellen's room (140).

In Chapter 16, Franny takes the suitcase key from her mother's closet and discovers that it opens Jo Ellen's hope chest. She refuses to let Margie touch anything in the chest except the letters. Margie wants to take both the first and the last letter in the stack, but Franny insists they take only the one on the bottom of the stack. Drew enters, prompting Margie and Franny to leave Jo Ellen's room without being able to lock the chest. Mrs. Chapman enters Franny's room before the girls can read the letter, obviously unhappy that Margie has not left yet. Franny manages to have possession of the letter when she leaves.

Analysis

The author offers some information about Franny's grandmother, apparently as a means of introducing the next novel of the series. Franny refers to her grandmother as Miss Mattie, who lives in Halleluiah, Mississippi. The next novel of the series takes place in Mississippi, with Jo Ellen working on the Civil Rights Movement.

Franny talks with Jo Ellen, as sisters would do. Franny is worried that she isn't pretty and she talks about this with Jo Ellen, who assures her that she is pretty.

There is an example of exaggeration as a literary tool in Chapter 14 when Franny refers to Drew as “the family liar” (131). This is meant to bring attention to several aspects of the situation, including that Drew is trying very hard to be an honorable person like his hero, astronaut John Glenn. It is also a sign that Franny feels bad about the entire family situation, including putting Drew in the position of having to lie for her. Franny finishes that thought by saying that Drew likely does not even know a formal definition for the word characters, but he has a working knowledge of it.

The scene involving Franny and Margie in Jo Ellen's room is a comedy of errors. Franny is terrified of being caught but she is so worried about Jo Ellen that she believes she is willing to risk it. Having Margie for support pushes her into action that she might not have taken on her own. She is careful going through her mother's room, fearful that she will leave footprints on the carpet and knowing that she has to immediately return the suitcase key or her mother will know what happened. When she and Margie get the hope chest open, Franny bends the key and is unable to lock the chest back. She lies to Drew who is the first to catch her and is frantic when her mother arrives in her bedroom. Franny's guilt is obvious, but her mother probably puts it down to the fact that Margie was supposed to have left already. The fact that Margie grabs the letter and takes it with her to school is a symbol of the deteriorating relationship between the two girls.



Discussion Question 1

Describe Drew. Why does he feel that character is important? Does this seem a reasonable attitude for a boy of his age?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Franny feel guilty about Uncle Otts?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Franny want to read Jo Ellen's letters? What does this say about the relationship between the sisters?

Vocabulary

vigil, scientific, method, excavated, suspended, quease, slobbery, epitome, discretion, gravity, insensitive, winsome, scintilla



Chapters 17 - 23

Summary

In Chapter 17, they have TV dinners that night. Jo Ellen is not home but Franny is unable to get a few minutes to try to retrieve the key, lock the hope chest, and return the key to her mother's suitcase. In bed that night, she worries and pretends to write her letter to Khrushchev. The single line she comes up with is, "are you crazy?" (150). Mrs. Chapman is on the phone several times. Franny does not know where Jo Ellen is, and she is worried. Mrs. Chapman begins vacuuming the floor, then there is a sound and Mrs. Chapman cries out. When Franny reaches her mother, Mrs. Chapman says the vacuum must have blown a fuse or had a short. Franny sees that her mother is crying and they hug for a moment. Though nothing has been resolved, Franny is reassured.

In Chapter 18, Franny discovers that the key is missing from Jo Ellen's chest. When she sees Franny the next morning, she demands Jo Ellen's letter. Margie says the letter is at the bottom of her satchel, and she promises to give it to Franny at school. Margie makes it clear she has been talking to Chris and that she is invited to Gale Hoffman's Halloween party. Franny knows she will not be invited and that her mother will not let her attend even if she is invited. Margie interrupts their conversation by catching up with another girl in their class, Judy James. Margie knows she will not hear anything from Margie until recess, which makes her angry.

Page 158 is a full-page image of John and Jacqueline Kennedy with their two children. The next seven pages are historical information about John, nicknamed Jack, and Jacqueline, nicknamed Jackie. They were groomed by their parents for extraordinary futures, met at a dinner party, and were admired by many. Kennedy took office as the United States President at the age of 43. One of the first challenges was the failed "Bay of Pigs invasion," when American troops landed in Cuba under the previous president's instruction. The country faced problems on several foreign fronts, including Vietnam and Russia, and at home with the Civil Rights Movement. He was assassinated in 1963 in Dallas, Texas.

In Chapter 19, Chris is assigned to Franny's homeroom. Franny is daydreaming when Mrs. Rodriguez calls on her. Franny is excused to go to the restroom and she finds that Margie is there, just about to let Gale read Jo Ellen's letter. Franny is surprised that she and Margie are no longer friends. She shoves Margie, then shoves her again, and manages to get the letter. They shout and two teachers arrive. Neither Franny nor Margie will say what happened, but Gale confirms that Franny pushed Margie. Franny fears one of the teachers will take Jo Ellen's letter, but they just send both girls to the principal's office.

In Chapter 20, Margie and Franny are in the principal's office. Franny knows she cannot tell the truth about what happened because Jo Ellen's letter has to be a secret. Franny is surprised when Margie does not tell either, but apologizes and promises they will not



fight again. Franny choruses Margie's apology. The principal suggests the two girls talk over their differences, but Franny interrupts by throwing up.

In Chapter 21, Mrs. Chapman arrives while Franny is out of the principal's office. There is no more discussion and Mrs. Chapman takes Franny home. In the car, Franny says she does not feel like talking about her argument with Margie. Instead, she asks where Jo Ellen has gone. Mrs. Chapman says only that she will soon return. Mrs. Chapman surprises Franny by saying it seems that "Miss Margie Gardner is getting too big for her britches" (178).

Instead of going straight home, they go to the military base and pick up Uncle Otts. Franny sits in the back seat with him on the way home. Mrs. Chapman unexpectedly stops at McDonald's, which has never happened for Franny at lunchtime. Uncle Otts holds Franny's hand, and says he hopes Mrs. Chapman brings him a fish sandwich, which makes Franny laugh. At home, they eat the hamburgers and fries with glasses of milk, and Franny is happy.

In Chapter 22, Mrs. Chapman leaves Franny and Uncle Otts at home while she goes to pick up Drew and Mr. Chapman. Franny quickly confirms that the key is not in Jo Ellen's chest or in Mrs. Chapman's suitcase. She left her satchel in Mrs. Chapman's car, so she has nothing to do and she falls asleep, as does Uncle Otts. She wakes when Gale Hoffman rings her doorbell, giving Franny an invitation to her Halloween party.

In Chapter 23, Mr. Chapman arrives home and the mood gets better. Over dinner, Mrs. Chapman says Jo Ellen is staying with a friend on campus because of some late-night meetings. Franny is angry that she has been worried about Jo Ellen, and apparently for nothing. Uncle Otts turns the talk to picking up the work on the shelter, but Mr. and Mrs. Chapman insist they will not allow it.

Pages 192 and 193 are images of an atom and some buildings, some of the words of the Air Force song, and a bulletin announcing that Kennedy will address the nation.

Analysis

Franny has a habit of trying to change things by "telegraphing" messages to herself or other people. The word "telegraph" appears many times in the novel, especially when Franny is in strenuous or upsetting conversations. She uses this to try to make Uncle Otts stop yelling at kids on the day of the air raid drill. She uses it in the beginning of Chapter 17 as Margie is running to catch up with Judy James. In that scene, the message is presented by saying, "I telegraph Margie: trip over your own two feet and go splat!" (155). This is Franny's way of coping with situations, especially when she telegraphs messages to herself. It is actually an acceptable means of coping and is better than allowing herself to yell or act out in stressful situations.

There are some historically significant events mentioned in the novel, including the Bay of Pigs invasion and Kennedy's assassination. These are only peripherally important to the novel, but the reader who has a working knowledge of these events will better



understand the historical events that happen in the novel, and how those events impact the various characters.

The author uses traditional punctuation and capitalization throughout the novel with only a few exceptions. When those exceptions occur, it is clearly an effort to make the reader understand the strong impact of that passage. For example, Franny talks about the rules that govern life at school. One of those is that a student should never “give your teacher a reason to Call Your Parents” (167). The unusual capitalization here makes it clear that this is an important statement.

At the end of several of the chapters, the author includes quotes from “Your Charming Self,” a book by Melody Morris. At the end of the scene in the principal's office, the quote indicates that young ladies should be calm and cautions that “there is never a good reason for a temper tantrum” (175). This quote appears soon after Franny threw up in the principal's office, and could be an example of Franny's lack of calm or could be comparing her actions to a tantrum. As is the case with most of the historical quotes and photos, the significance is left to the reader to decide.

It is interesting that Mrs. Chapman has understood enough of the situation to know that Margie has been acting out of character in the friendship between Margie and Franny, and even more interesting that she comments on it. She uses the colloquialism that Margie is “getting too big for her britches,” which means that Margie is acting out in unacceptable ways (178).

Uncle Otts is fatalistic about the situation, saying that he expects the United States to be the victim of an atomic bomb at any time. He goes so far as to predict that they will be bombed before Halloween, which is just days away. That fatalistic attitude was common during this time in history and was seen in the number of people who built bomb shelters and took other preventative measures. While the rumors were rampant, the government and other official agencies were encouraging preparation, which lent a higher level of credibility. This fear, and the events that spurred it, is among the novel's themes.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the changing relationship between Franny and Margie. What factors could be causing these changes?

Discussion Question 2

What are some of the changes happening in Franny's life? How is she dealing with them?



Discussion Question 3

What does Uncle Otts say about the shelter? Why is he adamant? Why do you believe Mr. and Mrs. Chapman are against it?

Vocabulary

satchel, fanatic, strewn, bribes, charisma, pizzazz, primarily, moral, civilly, nincompoop, resolute, mesmerize, strident



Chapters 24 - 27

Summary

In Chapter 24, Franny wants to ask her mother if they should worry, but she knows her mother would deny that there is any danger and Franny does not believe that, so she does not ask. While she is supposed to be taking a bath, Franny looks at Jo Ellen's letter. There are letters and numbers that appear to be a code. She then joins the family for the newscast. Kennedy says the Russians have nuclear capability to strike anywhere in the world but pledges the United States will not back down. Franny and Drew are afraid. Mrs. Chapman is the first to speak, saying she "knew it was inappropriate" for the children to watch (199). Mr. Chapman is called to the military base. Uncle Otts tucks Franny into bed. He says there was a time when he was a child and he was just as afraid as Franny is now. She asks what happened and he says that he "grew up to become an old man," and he promises Franny that this situation will also resolve itself (200).

The next 15 pages open with an image of Kennedy on October 22, 1962, and excerpts from his public address along with military photos of missiles in Cuba and photos of protesters calling for caution to avoid a war. The final page is solid black with a comment by CBS Newscaster Douglas Edwards, indicating that the Cuban military bases are on "alert" in response to Kennedy's address, and with a prediction that the U.S. will "face losses" (216).

In Chapter 25, Mrs. Chapman sends Franny to get Drew up for school. She finds that he is refusing to get out of bed for fear that there will be an attack. She promises she will come directly to his room, get him, and that they will run home together. Drew is reassured and Franny is pleased that she, as the older sister, has made him feel better. As she is about to get out of the car, Mrs. Chapman tells Franny that she can be a better person, indicating that she should ignore any of Margie's attempts to fight. At school, no one is talking about the address the previous night. They are ushered immediately into an assembly where they watch a Civil Defense film urging them to go on with their lives, enjoying themselves and playing outside, but always with a plan of where to go to "duck and cover" in the event of an explosion. They are all afraid when they leave the assembly.

In their homeroom, they begin working on spelling words until Mrs. Rodriguez abruptly announces a change to geography. She pulls down a map and shows the students Cuba. She then says her husband is Cuban and that she has been there for visits. She talks to them throughout the morning about the country and its people. She teaches them to do the cha-cha, and they all laugh. At lunch time, Franny realizes that she is no longer as fearful of the people of Cuba and accepts that she may be able to relax.

The next 14 pages are images and words related to Cuba. There is a canceled Cuban stamp and a photo of Cuban actor Dezi Arnez and American actress Lucille Ball, a



famous television couple. There is a photo of Fidel Castro and Nikita Krushchev and a group, apparently of Cuban people, protesting the blockade.

In Chapter 26, Franny tells Chris she is not having a Halloween. Despite the fact that she knows her mother will not allow her to attend, she says she is going to Gale's party. After school, Chris suggests they go to the gravel pit to see how much water has collected from the recent rain. Franny invites a girl in their class, Judy James, who goes along with the group that includes Franny, Chris, and Drew. There are some bigger boys there and they all leave.

Page 251 shows a flyer reminding youngsters to “duck and cover,” and to remain until the danger is past.

In Chapter 27, Franny arrives home to find her mother has lots of groceries. She informs Franny that they are building the bomb shelter, as Uncle Otts wanted, but they are creating it in the laundry room, which is an unfinished room in the basement. Drew refuses to leave the tree house to help and Mrs. Chapman goes to get him. Franny sits with Uncle Otts on his bed another room of the basement. Uncle Otts tells her about military men in the family, saying that Mr. Chapman's father died in World War II. He shows Franny a photo of his brother, Nicholas, saying that he is responsible for Nicholas's death. He says he wishes he had been a pacifist, because that might have taken the family out of wars and saved some of the lives.

The next 11 pages show various scenes and quotes from newscasters and music of the day. These include a photo of the Kennedy's, a photo of a battleship, and an image of the turtle and a boy performing the “duck and cover.” There are also two images related to the Civil Rights Movement. One shows a black seated at a lunch counter with a news report saying four blacks had been arrested for demanding service at a white lunch counter. The other shows two water fountains, one set aside for whites and the other for blacks.

Analysis

There are letters and numbers in Jo Ellen's letter that seem to be in code. This is very dangerous during this time in history because everyone is on the lookout for spies, especially Soviet spies. In some cases, this would be enough evidence for officials to question Jo Ellen. However, the reader who is familiar with the Civil Rights Movement will immediately see a correlation between these letters. They include SNCC, or the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; CORE, or the Congress of Racial Equality; EBENEZER, which apparently refers to a church that played a prominent role in the Movement; and COFO, or Council of Federated Organizations. Each has a series of either seven or 10 numbers, indicating telephone numbers, either with or without the area code.

Young readers will not remember the newscaster Walter Cronkite, but he was an icon of television news during this time of history. The author ends the scene involving



Kennedy's speech with Franny saying that Cronkite reiterates what Kennedy said. The scene comes to a conclusion with the words, "And that's the way it is, Monday, October 22, 1962" (199). Cronkite always signed off his newscast with those words, which will ring a note of familiarity with older readers. This is one of many cases in which the subtleties might be lost on younger readers.

The modern reader has to keep in mind that this novel is set in 1962 when values and social norms were vastly different from today's expectations. One of those differences is the case of Gale Hoffman's family. Gale lives alone with her mother, who is divorced. While divorce is becoming slightly more acceptable in 1962, many people consider it a shameful situation. That is the case of several of the families in Franny's neighborhood, including her own. Her mother does not approve Gale Hoffman's mother, simply because she is divorced. Franny has an image of Gale's mother, wearing inappropriate clothing and acting outrageously. That image is spurred only by the fact that Ms. Hoffman is divorced from Gale's father. The social setting and social norms are an important part of the novel, and they shape the characters and events.

At one point, Uncle Otts says that he was responsible for the death of his brother, Nicholas. Franny later considers that and finds it to be unbelievable. This is an overstatement on Uncle Otts' part, and Franny takes it literally. It is actually a figurative statement in which Uncle Otts tries to express his guilt for joining the military, which may have prompted other family members to join as well. During that conversation, Franny points out that Uncle Otts has lots of medals, and she asks where they are. She has not seen them since he was taken to the hospital. Uncle Otts now says he will never again wear them, but does not explain. Those medals have been symbolic of his service but he may have changed so dramatically over the current crisis situation that he sees them in a different light, perhaps as symbols of his guilt.

Discussion Question 1

What is the basic message of President Kennedy's speech? What impact does it have on the various characters?

Discussion Question 2

What is Franny's concern about Jo Ellen? What is Jo Ellen actually doing? What is the significance of the photo of the segregated water fountains and of the blacks protesting whites-only lunch counters?

Discussion Question 3

Describe the conversation between Uncle Otts and Franny while they are in the basement.

Vocabulary

personified, clandestine, reckless, provocative, submission, pursed, inappropriate, vindication, ominous, archipelago, retracts, pacifist, posture



Chapters 28 - 31

Summary

In Chapter 28, Mr. and Mrs. Chapman go bowling with friends. Franny is relieved at the normal activity. Uncle Otts watches TV and Drew goes to bed early. Franny takes her dinner to Jo Ellen's room. She calls Gale and accepts her invitation to the party, though she has not asked and does not expect her mother will allow it. Then she takes Jo Ellen's letter and, on a hunch, calls the number under the word "EBENEZER" (273). She hangs up when someone answers, then calls back and asks for Jo Ellen, who comes to the phone. Franny is obviously upset and yells that the family is in crisis while Jo Ellen is "playing around" (275). Jo Ellen promises to be home on Saturday. She says she is working with a group that is "going to do good work in the world," and says that Mrs. Chapman does not approve (276). Jo Ellen does reveal that Nicholas was Uncle Otts' younger brother, and that he died in Uncle Otts' arms during the war. She explains that the current situation in Cuba has Uncle Otts afraid that he will not be able to keep his family safe, just as he failed Nicholas. The call comes to an end with Jo Ellen giving Franny another phone number, if she needs to call again. Franny then sets out to memorize Psalms 24 for church.

Page 278 is a full-page photo of Frannie Lou Townsend Hamer, who was a force during the Civil Rights Movement. Pages 279-286 is an account of Hamer's work for Civil Rights, especially centered around the right to vote. She was threatened and beaten, but never gave in. She died in 1977. While she had cancer, some believed the beatings she sustained fighting for her rights were to blame for her death.

In Chapter 29, Drew and Uncle Otts sleep in the shelter, which they call the bunker. Uncle Otts spends a lot of time testing and rearranging to be certain everything is perfect. Mr. Chapman works long hours. Mrs. Chapman is so distracted that Franny cannot find a way to ask permission to go to the party. Over the course of the week, Margie makes rude comments and laughs at Franny at every opportunity. Franny does not respond.

On Saturday, Franny is cleaning when Chris rings the doorbell, bringing a piece of mail that was left in his box by mistake. Mrs. Chapman greets him, but leaves to answer the phone. He asks Franny if she is really going to Gale's party. He says Margie said Franny was not allowed to attend "boy-girl parties," but Franny says Margie "doesn't know everything about me" (292). Margie drives by while Franny and Chris are talking in Franny's front yard.

In Chapter 30, Jo Ellen returns home that afternoon. Mrs. Chapman announces that she and Mr. Chapman will be dining out that evening, leaving Jo Ellen in charge. After they are gone, Jo Ellen helps Franny dress up like a gypsy – a stark contrast to the hobo costume she wore for the school costume event. One element of the costume are silk scarves, given to Jo Ellen by Miss Mattie. Jo Ellen says she expects to see Miss Mattie



when she works in Mississippi the following summer. She says she is looking at the world differently, and that she wants to change things, beginning in the South. Jo Ellen says she wants to hear all about Franny's first party when she returns. She hesitates, saying that Mrs. Chapman would not allow it if she knew. Franny promises to be home early and no more is said.

The next nine pages include several photos: one of several children dressed for Halloween, another of Martin Luther King Jr. and his family, another of Robert and John Kennedy. There is a line drawing of a witch stirring a cauldron and the logo of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

In Chapter 31, Franny tries to leave without encountering Drew so he will not have to lie about her activities. He stops her and gives her a small box containing the suitcase key she used to open Jo Ellen's chest. He says he knew he could fix this situation for her, so she did not get into trouble, and promises to put it back in their mother's closet that evening. Franny is touched.

Analysis

The novel is shifting subtly by this point to bring more emphasis on the Civil Rights Movement, which is heating up, especially in the South by this time. Franny has been so focused on the Cuban Missile Crisis because that is what is most prevalent in her everyday conversations and daily life, but the Civil Rights Movement is also an important social and political issue going on at this time. The use of photos of Martin Luther King Jr., Frannie Lou Hamer, and the segregated water fountains will make the reader understand that these issues are at the forefront of the news, along with the threat of nuclear war.

Miss Mattie is never fully identified, but it seems likely that she is Franny's grandmother. Her inclusion in this novel seems to be foreshadowing and the reader will expect to see her in the next novel of the series.

The author uses a different font and format to set apart some words and phrases within the text, in addition to the wording at the ends of the chapters. In most cases, these are quotes from songs, newscasts, and films of the day. The author also works in catchphrases that would have been familiar to a child like Franny. For example, in Chapter 30, Jo Ellen helps Franny learn to dance a little before the Halloween party. The words of a song appear in a slightly lighter font, centered on the page, with a space before and after the two-line quote. Then Jo Ellen urges Franny to dance and sing along, and she says, "Watch me now," which is another phrase from the song quoted on that page (296).

While the author typically follows standard grammar and punctuation rules, she sometimes strays in order to make a point. For example, Franny is describing her mother who is preparing for a formal dinner on the military base. She says that Mrs. Chapman is dressed in an emerald-green gown, then goes on to describe some of the



accessories by saying, “And high heels. And three strings of pearls ...” (295). The use of the sentence fragments brings attention to these accessories, as if each needs to be described in its own sentence. This is an effective literary tool in this case.

Franny is usually confident and self-assured, but she shows skepticism in her ability to handle the social situation of the Halloween party, specifically with regard to dancing. She uses several metaphors to describe her efforts. She says she looks “like a floppy albatross” and “a sick duck” (296). These are just two examples of the metaphors that are seen throughout the novel.

The final sentence of Chapter 30 is that Franny has set out on “the longest night of my life,” which is a strong example of foreshadowing (299). This is an indication that things are not going to go smoothly. If the novel was strictly a novel and not based on historically-true events, the reader might expect that a nuclear strike causes a problem on this evening, but readers should know that the Cuban Missile Crisis never came to the point that a missile was launched, meaning that something else is going to happen.

Discussion Question 1

What are Jo Ellen's plans for the following summer?

Discussion Question 2

What does Drew reveal about the key? What does this say about him? About his relationship with Franny?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Jo Ellen allows Franny to go to the party even though she knows their mother would not allow it?

Vocabulary

commandeered, babbling, quarantine, correspondent, dismantling, nonchalantly, courteous, sauntering, auspicious, dire, pennants



Chapters 32 - 35

Summary

In Chapter 32, Franny arrives at Gale's house and quickly discovers that Gale's mother is just an ordinary mom. Most of the children from the neighborhood attend Camp Springs Elementary School and most live near enough that they walked to the party. Gale is dressed as a hobo and she admires Franny's costume. A girl named Carol, in a moment of unexpected friendliness, asks Franny why she has not spoken out when Mrs. Rodriguez skips her during reading time. Carol believes the light from the window makes it difficult for Mrs. Rodriguez to see Franny. Another girl named Denise talks with Franny for awhile.

Margie arrives and immediately makes a rude comment about Franny. Chris arrives as well. Chris asks Franny to dance, and soon all the kids are dancing together. Margie says that she and Chris arrived together, but Chris counters, saying they were together only because their parents ate dinner together before the party. Franny says she has to leave and Judy offers to go with her. Margie shouts that Judy should watch out for Franny's family, including her sister who is a spy. She begins to talk about Jo Ellen's letters. Franny denies that, and adds that her uncle is "a good person" (322). Gale and her mother enter the room at that moment. Gale says that Margie is wrong. Margie begins to cry, saying she wanted to be Gale's friend. Margie runs out of the house, but does not run toward home. Chris and Franny say they will go after her, assuring Gale's mother that everything is fine.

In Chapter 33, Chris and Franny begin their search and come up with the idea that Margie might have gone through the woods, as Franny and Margie have done many times. Franny decides she is not going to chase Margie any farther but Chris insists he will continue with the search. Margie remembers locking Drew into a shed once, expecting to feel superior when she let him out. When she opened the door, he was so afraid that she only felt guilt. Now, she knows she has the ability to help search for Margie, and though she does not want to, she will.

In Chapter 34, Franny hears someone and calls out for Chris, but encounters Margie instead. Margie, apparently believing Franny was Chris, grabs her. She then begins to strike at Franny and the two girls are soon rolling around on the ground, not hitting each other but holding onto each other. Suddenly, there are explosions nearby and Franny grabs onto a tree, believing an atom bomb is about to explode nearby. She imagines all the things that will end with this explosion, but it does not happen. Instead, some of the older boys of the neighborhood are setting off fireworks. They run away, fearing the girls will tell on them.

In Chapter 35, Franny quickly discovers that Margie has fallen into the gravel pit. Franny crawls on her belly to the edge, near enough to see Margie in the moonlight. Margie is holding onto tree root, and Franny knows the side of the pit will give way if Margie turns



loose and tries to climb out. Franny tears up her scarves and makes them into a rope, but discovers she cannot get them far enough down for Margie to reach. Franny plans to run for help, but Margie begs her not to leave. Margie says that Franny is boring and has taken Margie's friends. Franny says she is the best friend Margie has, and that Margie is too stupid to realize it.

Franny's dog, Jack, arrives. Franny tries to send him home for help, but Jack – predictably – goes only far enough to bring Franny something to throw for him to fetch. Franny realizes it is a rope and she thinks about a swing the older boys tied to a limb overreaching the pit. She runs to the swing, climbs high enough to swing out over the pit, and holds on.

Analysis

The differences between expectations and reality is seen as Franny arrives at Gale's house. From the stigma attached to divorced women in this time, Franny expects that Gale's mother will seem different. She seems very much like other mothers of the time and place, which surprises Franny. Franny's expectations about other girls is another aspect of this situation. Franny has been focused on her friendship with Margie to the exclusion of everything else. Without Margie's constant companionship, she now finds that other girls in her class are friendly and have noticed her. That is especially true when Gale's mother makes it clear that Gale has talked about Franny.

There are three sentences at the end of Chapter 32, with two serving as juxtapositions that are meant to explain Franny's confusion over her relationship with Margie. She and Margie had been close until recently, and there is never an explanation offered as to why Margie makes a complete change to the relationship, other than her statement that she wanted to be friends with Gale. Franny says she does not know why she chose to be the one to go after Margie. She then says, "She was my friend. She is my enemy. I don't know what else to do" (324). The use of the past tense and present tense show the status of Franny's thoughts at the moment, that she and Margie had been friends but are now enemies. She has limited experience with relationship and simply does not know how to handle this situation. The next chapter ends similarly, with Margie saying she can help, though she does not want to, but she will.

At the end of many of the chapters, the reader finds a page or more containing historical photos and information. At the end of Chapter 33, there is a dark, blank page. This could be a foreshadowing of the search for Margie in the dark woods, or it could be an indication of Franny's state of mind. The reader is left to decide the significance.

There is an epiphany conversation between Franny and Margie while Margie is in the gravel pit. The girls know that Margie is in serious danger and that she really might fall to the bottom of the pit. When Margie first shouts that she is in the pit, Franny's thought is that she would have died from the fall, which is an indication of the danger facing the girls. That situation prompts the epiphany conversation between the girls. Margie finally admits why she is so angry. She believes that Franny is boring, which apparently



prompted Margie's decision to seek out other friends, and she had expected that Franny would have no friends without Margie. Margie is now angry that Gale and other girls in the class seem to like Franny, and that they are willing to be her friend even when Margie is not. Franny also speaks out, saying what she has not had the nerve to say all this time. She says that Margie is lucky to have Franny as a friend, and that she failed to take care of their friendship. This is typical of a coming-of-age moment, which is presented in a classic form in this novel.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the party.

Discussion Question 2

What seems to be the most important theme of the novel? Give at least two examples of this theme.

Discussion Question 3

What happens to Margie and Franny after they leave the party?

Vocabulary

smug, guardian, pummeling, spiraling, trek, silhouetted, tentatively, ballast, catapulted



Chapters 36 - 39

Summary

In Chapter 36, Franny swings out over the pit, holding the rope Jack brought her in one hand. She screams at Margie to grab the rope, and Margie does. Franny knows she is just going to have to fall when is back on solid ground, Franny is jolted by the impact. She soon sees a bright light and wonders if it is a bomb. She soon realizes it is an emergency lamp from Uncle Otts' shelter supplies. Drew, Uncle Otts, Chris, and Margie's father, Mr. Gardner, arrive. Chris has gone for help. Franny believes she is dying. Franny suddenly knows what she should write to Chairman Khrushchev and President Kennedy, and she composes the letter in her mind. She says they are afraid of each other because they do not know each other, ad that they should get acquainted in order to put an end to the fear.

In Chapter 37, Uncle Otts orders Drew to keep Franny awake in case she has a concussion. He the leads the effort to save Margie. Chris tells Franny he is sorry he did not remain with her, then tells her how much he admires her actions toward saving Margie. Margie is safely pulled from the pit and she rushes to Franny's side, thanking her and affirming that Franny has been an incredible friend.

In Chapter 38, Franny is in the hospital with injuries, including a broken collar bone. The following day, Sunday, Drew recounts some of the details. Franny's mother remains with her throughout the night, reading from a Nancy Drew book. She cries in relief when the doctor announces that Franny is going to be alright. She does not berate Franny at all, which seems strange to Franny. Franny misses church on the day she was supposed to recite the chapter from Psalms. She is expected to be home by Halloween night, which is Wednesday, but her father warns that she will not be allowed to walk around the neighborhood to trick-or-treat. Uncle Otts arrives. Franny is happy to see he is wearing his medals. He pins a medal on Franny, for her brave deed. Franny argues that she was afraid the entire time, but Uncle Otts says the only important thing is that she did not run away. He salutes Franny, and everyone in the family, including Mrs. Chapman, salutes back. Jo Ellen is the first to laugh, followed by Mrs. Chapman, which makes them all laugh.

The next 14 pages are historical quotes, music lyrics, photos, and drawings. The first page after the end of Chapter 38 shows a political cartoon. Kennedy and Khrushchev are standing on a box with a pair of huge claws trying to emerge. The words on the box are "Nuclear War," indicating that the two men almost allowed a monster to emerge onto the people of the world, and that they will have to struggle to keep the monster in check. One of the pages includes a statement about the release of prisoners from a U.S. invasion of Cuba and the decision for the U.S. to send aid to Cuba. Another page is a communication satellite and another is a statement saying the U.S. and Russia have a direct communications link, ending the need for telegrams. There are also pictures of Bob Dylan and the group, Peter, Paul, and Mary.



In Chapter 39, Franny arrives home. She is grounded. Uncle Otts says he has “put in a good word” for her (371). Jo Ellen has moved into the dorm. On Halloween, Uncle Otts sets up a table in the front yard to hand out candy. Franny pleads for the opportunity to sit outside and her mother agrees, but only for awhile. Drew, predictably, is dressed as an astronaut. The first group of trick-or-treaters includes Gale, Chris, Judy, and a boy named Tom West. No one directly asks Franny about the events at the gravel pit but Tom says she was “pretty cool” (374). Everyone seems shy with Uncle Otts. Franny apologizes for ruining Gale's party, but Gale dismisses it, saying her mother plans to invite Mrs. Chapman over, and that Franny will be welcome as well. Franny imagines trying to make her mother understand that Gale's mother is just an ordinary mom. Before they leave, Chris stands at attention and salutes Uncle Otts, prompting Uncle Otts to salute back. Franny is grateful for his kindness.

Margie arrives. She offers Franny the scarves, which Franny had made into a rope at the gravel pit. Franny wants them, but will not allow herself to say so. Margie puts them on the porch. Margie is also grounded, and says she has to take her twin sisters trick-or-treating. She apologizes, saying she wishes she could take all her horrible acts back. Franny does not want to, but she finds herself feeling kind. When Margie is walking away, Franny says she will “maybe” see Margie the next day (376).

After Margie is gone, Franny has Uncle Otts tie the scarves around her sling. She realizes that she really is going to grow up and grow old. She knows that there will be stories to tell when she is grown, and that she will have lots of memories. She remembers Jo Ellen saying that “there are always scary things happening in the world” along with the “wonderful things,” and that everyone has to figure out how to handle it (377). Franny finally has a better understanding of those words, though she is not certain whether finding a way to keep loving her family and friends is the hardest part of life, or the easiest.

There is a double-page image of concentric circles following that chapter with a quote by Kennedy, indicating the need to understand the other people on Earth while remembering that all adults want a safe future for their children, and that all are only human.

Analysis

The page at the end of Chapter 37 is solid black with a quote from a newscast indicating that “the crisis is over” (350). That historical statement refers to the Cuban Missile Crisis but it mimics the situation in Franny's life as well. The literary parallels between the historical situation and Franny's life are brought to a united conclusion as Margie apologizes to Franny. It seems that Franny has also made some changes in her way of thinking, which will be borne out in the coming chapters.

Franny's loyalty to her family is an important part of her character, and this includes her loyalty to Uncle Otts. It is an important part of her character that she has stood up for Uncle Otts before he stepped up, coming to Margie's rescue and taking control of the



situation at the gravel pit. If the author had waited until that point, Franny would have seemed shallow. The fact that Chris stands up to salute Uncle Otts is an important sign of his respect for the older man, but it is also very important to Franny, who does not want anyone to make fun of Uncle Otts.

Franny is surprised that her mother stays by her bedside after the accident, and that she cries when the doctor assures them that Franny will make a full recovery. Franny is even more surprised when her mother giggles after saluting Uncle Otts. The relationship between Franny and her mother has been strained recently, but at least part of that can be put down to the situation and the pressure Mrs. Chapman feels to be the perfect wife and mother. Their relationship does not change immediately, but this could be the first step in a new relationship between mother and daughter, more closely resembling the relationship between Jo Ellen and Mrs. Chapman.

It is significant that Uncle Otts hands one of his medals over to Franny for her acts of bravery. The medals have undergone several transformations as symbols in this novel, but at that moment they are again symbols of bravery. It is also significant that Uncle Otts has chosen to wear them again, after saying he would not. He is one of several characters that undergoes a transformation over the course of the novel, coming to a new stage of acceptance by the time Franny is safely recovering. More than likely, Uncle Otts has been suffering from depression, probably heightened by his advanced age. This does not mean that he will not fall back into depression, but Franny's near-death has probably made him more firmly rooted in the present, which will help him keep his past at bay, at least for a time.

The final chapter ends with Franny's conversation with Margie, but the author then includes another chapter that is focused on the historical facts of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Wiles reveals that she was a nine-year-old child during this historic time. She includes a website with a link to more information about the history, followed by acknowledgments and a bibliography.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the situation at the gravel pit. Who seems to be in control? What does this say about him?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the conversation between Margie and Franny at the end of the novel. What does each character express?

Discussion Question 3

What changes happen to members of Franny's family following her accident?



Vocabulary

alabaster, disgorges, SWAT, concussion, lumens, sidles, affirming, abyss, addled, contraption, lumbers, lauded, calamity



Characters

Franny Chapman

Franny is an 11-year-old girl in 1962 when the Cuban Missile Crisis is at its peak. She is the middle child of a military family with an older sister and younger brother. Her father is a military officer and her mother is a stay-at-home mom. Her father's uncle, Uncle Otts, also lives with the family. They live in Maryland but Franny remembers their time in Hawaii with fondness.

Franny is, in most ways, typical for her age and the time. She is concerned about the world and fears that her life will be cut short by the political upheaval. She is often concerned about what others think of her. When Uncle Otts shows up after school one day, ranting about the need for preparedness, Franny fears that the other children will laugh at her and that prohibits her from helping her beloved uncle through that difficult moment of his life. She later feels guilty about the times she let Uncle Otts down, indicating that she has a strong sense of loyalty, though she struggles as any young girl would.

Franny is also concerned about her older sister, Jo Ellen, who seems to be involved in something dangerous. The details are not revealed during this novel, but Franny's worry shows a level of concern that exemplifies her love for her family. She has similar concerns for Drew, and pledges to break the school's rules if they are involved in an air raid in order to comfort him.

Franny's best friend is Margie, but their friendship is tested as Margie becomes distant and then spiteful. It's only after the girls are in danger together and Franny refuses to leave Margie behind that Margie seems to realize the true importance of the friendship.

Jo Ellen Chapman

Jo Ellen is Franny's older sister and the oldest child of the Chapman family. She is a college student and has a strong sense of justice, family, and loyalty. Each time she and Franny interact, it is easy to see their strong relationship, even though they are separated by several years in age and by Jo Ellen's life experiences. The girls have an easy camaraderie though Franny obviously respects Jo Ellen's status as the older sister. The fact that Jo Ellen allows Franny to listen to her records is a sign of that camaraderie, but the fact that she feels able to say that Franny cannot have that privilege sometimes is an example of Jo Ellen's status as the older.

Jo Ellen seems to be involved in something dangerous, which makes Franny sick with worry. Franny's concerns are founded, though not for the reason she believes. Though Franny does not know about Jo Ellen's activities right up to the end of the novel, it is clear that Jo Ellen is becoming involved in the Civil Rights Movement.



Jo Ellen is in charge of Franny on the night of Gale's Halloween party, and she makes the decision to allow Franny to go, though they both know that Mrs. Chapman would not grant that permission. This seems like an error in judgment, but it is more likely an effort to give Franny a little freedom that is missing in their strict family.

Margie

Margie is Franny's best friend, in her grade at school, and lives nearby. Margie seems less mature than Franny, meaning she is unable to understand the importance and repercussions of her actions. She is often caught up in the drama of the moment, including her actions and statements when she tries to make it seem that she and Chris are closer than they actually are. Margie does not value Franny's friendship until she has put them in a crisis so that they are no longer close friends.

Chris Cavas

Chris is the son of a military family that lived in the neighborhood a year earlier and has just returned from an overseas assignment. He is a handsome boy who attracts the attention of most of the children in the neighborhood and the school. He seems to like Franny and he hates that Margie tries to make it seem that they spent time together as a couple when they were only together because their parents had spent an evening together. Chris is the one who rushes for help when Franny and Margie wind up in a dangerous situation at the gravel pit.

Gale Hoffman

Gale is the daughter of a divorced mother, and is somewhat of an oddity in the community because of that. She seems to be honorable and honest, seen by the fact that she tells the truth when Franny and Margie are involved in a fight in the restroom at school. She explains that to Franny when she issues Franny an invitation to her Halloween party, which indicates that she also has a need to be accepted.

Uncle Otts

Uncle Otts, whose real name is Arthur, is Phil Chapman's uncle. He lives with the family and has a close tie to each of them, as if he were Mr. Chapman's father instead of an uncle. He is an older gentleman who served in World War II. His brother died in the trenches and that haunts Uncle Otts. He is conscious of the threat of a nuclear strike and he wants to protect the family. One of his ideas is to build a bomb shelter in the front yard, but Mrs. Chapman will not allow him to take that step. He is having trouble coping with reality, perhaps partly because of his age and his worry about the world's political climate.



Despite his concerns, at one point he assures Franny that the world has been in turmoil before and that they will survive this crisis as well.

Mrs. Chapman

Mrs. Chapman is Franny's mother. She is a no-nonsense woman who believes in her duties as a military wife and mother. She worries about her children and obviously loves them, but she is sometimes overly strict in her effort to live up to what she sees as social expectations. She refuses to consider Uncle Otts' plan to build a bomb shelter in the front yard but is the first to begin setting up a similar shelter in the basement of their home when she believes her family might be in danger.

Mrs. Rodriguez

Mrs. Rodriguez is Franny's teacher. Her husband is from Cuba and she talks to the children at length about Cuba and its people, making it clear that these people are not the monsters many of the children have come to believe. By the time she teaches them about Cuba, Franny is reassured and feels she has reason to hope for a peaceful outcome to the situation.

Mr. Chapman

Mr. Chapman is an officer in the military and father of Franny, Drew, and Jo Ellen. He is a stable influence for his family during a tumultuous time, assuring them that the situation will resolve without a nuclear attack.

President John Kennedy

Kennedy is a historically-accurate figure in the novel who is seen in the political background. Franny and her family watch as he gives an address on television, warning that the Cubans have the power and ability to attack at any time.



Symbols and Symbolism

Duck and Cover

This is the slogan for a public-awareness campaign urging children to be aware of their surroundings in order to have a safe place to be in the event of a nuclear strike. The campaign features Bert the Turtle who teaches how, when, and where to find safety.

Uncle Otts' Medals

The medals are initially symbols of Uncle Otts' military service and his heroism, but they come to have a different meaning for him as he considers the current political situation and worries about the safety of the family. By then, he has taken time to consider the others who died in military service, and the medals seem to represent the guilt he feels over those deaths. After Franny is hurt trying to save Margie, Uncle Otts gives her one of the medals, indicating that he has come to accept them again as symbols of bravery and honor.

Jo Ellen's Letters

Jo Ellen keeps letters hidden and these symbolize the secret life she is living apart from the rest of the family, including Franny. Franny initially fears that these letters are part of Jo Ellen's involvement in something illegal, such as spying, but they are actually indications of her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.

Gale's Halloween Party

This symbolizes growing up and freedom to Franny, who attends though she knows her mother would have forbid it.

The Bomb Shelter

This is a symbol of the ability to protect oneself from a nuclear strike, and it becomes a problem in the Chapman family because Uncle Otts wants to build one in the front yard. When it seems that things are reaching a critical stage, Franny's mother agrees to set up a shelter in the laundry room of the basement.

The Swing at the Gravel Pitt

This symbolizes daring and danger, but also symbolizes hope that Franny will be able to save Margie after Margie falls into the gravel pit.



The Scarves

The scarves are an addition to Franny's costume for Gale's party, and they symbolize growing up and maturity at that point. Franny uses them to try to rescue Margie from the gravel pit, and at that point they represent hope. Margie offers them back to Franny at the end of the novel, and they again symbolize hope, but this time it is Margie's hope that she and Franny will become friends again.

Cuba

Cuba symbolizes fear as Franny and others face the possibility of a nuclear attack, but it comes to represent hope when Franny learns more about the country and accepts that it is filled with people, just like the people of America, who have similar lives, hopes, and fears.

The Suitcase Key

This key is what Franny uses to break into Jo Ellen's chest, but it later represents the changing relationship between Drew and Franny. Franny is unable to get the key out of chest, but Drew does get it out and promises to return it before their mother finds out. Drew says he only tells Franny because he does not want her to get in trouble, and he does not want her to worry.

Jo Ellen's Records

Jo Ellen has an extensive record collection, and these symbolize the relationship between the sisters and Franny's life. Franny loves to listen to the records, but Jo Ellen sometimes refuses permission, indicating that she is the older sister with a level of authority over Franny.



Settings

Camp Springs Elementary School

This is the school where Drew and Franny attend. The school seems typical for the time and place. It has enclosed hallways, which Franny says are very different from the open halls at her former school in Hawaii. The school is located in the neighborhood and it binds the children of the neighborhood together. Most attend school either at Camp Springs or on the military base.

Franny's House

Franny's house is a split level with a basement, including bedrooms for Drew and Uncle Otts, in the lower level. The house is typical for the time and place. There is also an unfinished laundry room on the lower level, and the family converts that into a bomb shelter following Kennedy's address on the Cuban Missile Crisis. Franny talks about some specific aspects of the house, including the kitchen.

The Military Base

This is the base near Franny's neighborhood, where her father works. The base includes housing for some of the families, though Franny's family does not live on base. The base also includes a church where Franny's family attends. She notes that the majority of the children at church also live on base, so she is not close friends with them. The base is also the location of the hospital where both Franny and Uncle Otts spend time.

The Gravel Pit

The gravel pit is in a wooded area near Franny's house, and is a gathering place for some of the neighborhood youngsters, including some boys who are older than Franny and her friends. These boys build the swing that Franny uses to get the rope to Margie after Margie falls into the pit. The pit is deep and dangerous, which is probably part of the reason the youngsters are drawn to the area.

Gale's House

Franny expects something different at Gale's house because of the stigma attached to the fact that Gale's mother is divorced, but she finds that the house is just an ordinary house like others in the neighborhood. This is the location of the Halloween party where Margie and Franny are just before Margie rushes away and falls into the gravel pit.



Themes and Motifs

Franny's Relationship with her Family

Familial relationships are often difficult and many people find themselves unable to fully withstand the rigors. Franny is no different and she finds that she has complex relationships, filled with understanding and misunderstandings, but ultimately has no choice but to find a means of continuing those connections. Four of Franny's family relationships are put to the test over the course of the novel. Her relationships with Drew, Jo Ellen, Uncle Otts, and her mother each endures problems, but Franny emerges from the situation with each forming a stronger bond than before.

Franny is Drew's older sister and they have their share of sibling rivalry. Franny recalls a time when she locked Drew in a shed and had expected to feel superior once she let him out. He was so terrified that she felt only shame at how she had treated him. Early in this novel, she puts him in a position to lie for her in order to cover up the fact that she had swung out over the gravel pit. She feels ashamed of that as well. That shame shows a new level of maturity for Franny and that prompts the change in their relationship. When Drew is obviously too afraid to go to school, Franny assures him that she will come get him if they have an air raid, and that they will run home together. She does it to reassure Drew, and he finds courage because he knows he can depend on her. He also shows a change in his personality when he finds the key Franny used to unlock Jo Ellen's chest. Instead of telling on her, Drew steps in and resolves the situation, only as a way of helping Franny.

The relationship between Jo Ellen and Franny has apparently always been close because they are sisters, but Jo Ellen is now an adult and Franny finds herself worrying. That worry increases when it becomes clear that Jo Ellen is becoming involved with something and will not tell Franny about it. Franny becomes insistent on finding out Jo Ellen's secret. On the night of the Halloween party, Jo Ellen agrees to let Franny attend, despite the fact that they both know Mrs. Chapman would not approve. When Jo Ellen is telling Franny good-bye, she assures her they will have a talk later and promises to tell Franny all about her summer plans. The fact that she is now willing to share with Franny indicates that Jo Ellen is seeing her more as an equal and less as a youngster.

The relationship between Franny and Uncle Otts is another example of this theme. Franny loves Uncle Otts and he is a fixture in their home, but she is also embarrassed by him during the early scenes of the novel. However, Franny comes to realize that her love for her uncle is more important than the possibility that someone will make fun of her. When she has the opportunity to stand up for him at the Halloween party, she does so without reservation. This indicates that she is becoming more mature, but it also indicates that she accepts Uncle Otts for the man he is rather than fearing that he will embarrass her.



The relationship between Franny and her mother is partly at the mercy of circumstances. Mrs. Chapman is the wife of a military officer and she feels that she has to live up to social expectations of that position. She is also learning to deal with the fact that Jo Ellen is an adult who can do things that Mrs. Chapman does not approve. Franny feels that she is the invisible middle child of the family and Mrs. Chapman is sometimes harsh in her reprimands, such as the moment when she berates Franny for her failure to stop Uncle Otts from digging in the front yard. The relationship undergoes a dramatic change when Franny is in the hospital. She is surprised that her mother remains by her side, never even going home to change out of her evening gown, and that her mother cries with relief when the doctor assures them that Franny will recover. In truth, the changes in this relationship are partly because of changing situations – including the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis and Franny's accident – and partly because of Franny's changing perspective.

The Importance of the Historical Setting

The Cuban Missile Crisis was real, and an entire generation of youngsters learned to duck and cover in their classrooms, while parts of the United States struggled with the Civil Rights Movement. A very real and reasonable sense of fear permeated the world during this time as people built bomb shelters and turned a watchful eye toward the sky. Many were conscious of the social and political climates Franny's life, while filled with specific issues related only to her friends and family, could be considered typical of many during that time in history. The use of historically accurate photos, drawings, news accounts, and quotes are scattered throughout the novel, correlating with events in the novel.

The author uses these historical events as a means of emphasizing the various events taking place in Franny's life. One example is seen in the use of the “duck and cover” flyers and films. Franny and her classmates practice the drill in case of a nuclear attack. Bert the Turtle is used as a campaign to increase awareness of the “duck and cover” drill. In the early pages of the novel, the air raid sirens and the resulting panic are a major event in Franny's life. Throughout the novel, the author uses descriptions and images of the drills and the cartoon drawings meant to enhance public awareness.

The fear Franny feels would have been typical of children of the era. Franny feels the need to do something and she composes imaginary letters to Khrushchev and Kennedy in an effort to make them understand that they are putting their combined countries through a horrible series of events. The author includes pieces of these letters, though they exist only in Franny's imagination. The final letter she composes, at the gravel pit after she is injured, urges the two leaders to learn more about each other, predicting they will discover they are very much alike.

Another piece of historical information seen in the novel involves the bomb shelters. These were officially encouraged to help people protect themselves in the event of a nuclear attack. The novel includes several images of shelters that are basically advertisements for the construction and supply of bomb shelters. Uncle Otts has



apparently responded to one of these advertisements in order to get the plans for a shelter and many items to supply a shelter.

The fact that the Civil Rights Movement is taking place is almost lost among Franny's immediate fear of a nuclear attack, but Jo Ellen is fully aware of the battle being fought over rights. She is working with a group and tells Franny that she wants to make the world a better place. The images in the novel include photos of Martin Luther King Jr., a black woman seated at a lunch counter, a burning bus used by a group of protestors, and a public place with designated black and white water fountains.

Another example of this theme is seen in the fact that the Cuban Missile Crisis comes to an end at the same time that Franny's personal crisis comes to an end. Uncle Otts and the others save Margie from the gravel pit just as Kennedy and Khrushchev save the world from a nuclear war.

The Friendship between Margie and Franny

Friendship carries with it a level of support and encouragement, and best friends typically depend on each other for an array of personal reasons. This has been the case between Franny and Margie up to the point that Margie makes the decision to change that. Franny believes that she and Margie have been best friends since Franny moved into their neighborhood, two years earlier. That friendship is tested by Margie's lack of support and then her outright rudeness toward Franny.

One of the first examples of their friendship is seen when Uncle Otts confronts a group of students walking home from the Camp Springs Elementary School on the day of the air-raid siren. Franny is mortified that she is going to have to face Uncle Otts and that the other children will see that her uncle is acting completely out of what they consider normal. Franny is so embarrassed that she hides behind a bush. Margie does hide with her, but that is as far as her support goes. Margie tells Franny that Uncle Otts is losing touch with reality when she should be offering words of comfort or support. Franny's reaction is less-than-honorable (which is discussed in another theme), but Margie shows a lack of friendship by not standing up with – or for Franny.

Later, Margie begins to distance herself and it almost seems that she might be embarrassed by Franny. That turns out to be untrue, though it might have been an acceptable excuse. Margie eventually reveals that she finds Franny to be boring, which most readers will find an inexcusable reason for ending their friendship.

Margie also feels that she is the stronger of the pair. That is probably true, though not in the way Margie expects. Margie really seems to believe that she is Franny's only friend because Franny is incapable of making friends on their own. Franny is actually a likeable girl who has not created other friendships because she is close to Margie. When Margie tries to turn others against Franny, she discovers that other girls actually turn to Franny with overtures of friendship. A major example of that is seen in Gale's reaction. During the Halloween party, Margie shouts that she and Gale had a plan. Gale



responds that she was never going to participate in Margie's plan, which apparently centered around making fun of Franny. Margie sees that as a betrayal of a girl she had hoped to befriend, and that prompts her to run away. The fact that Margie was playing out this drama at all is an example of her willingness to throw away her friendship with Franny.

The final example of this theme is seen as Margie approaches Franny at the close of the novel. Margie is obviously hoping that Franny will forgive her. She sees their friendship for the priceless gift it was only after she has thrown it away. Franny responds that she will consider the offer, making it clear that she also understands the value of friendship though Margie has hurt her.

Character

Character is that inner conscience that defines a person, prompting actions that might not otherwise be forthcoming. Various characters of the novel struggle with their consciences in specific moments, but most exhibit strong character traits that make them honorable, honest, and likeable. Franny's character is most often examined throughout the days leading up to Halloween, making her the most likely example of this theme. While Franny makes some questionable choices, she is ultimately struck with guilt for those actions and she stands up for the right things when given renewed opportunities.

The first example of Franny's character is seen when she is confronted by Uncle Otts walking home from school on the day after the air raid siren. Uncle Otts is clearly out of his mind with worry, and he is afraid. Franny is faced with the situation and decides to hide rather than face either her beloved uncle or her friends from school. Drew, another important example of this theme, is the one who steps forward and takes control of the situation, bringing Uncle Otts back to the present and putting an end to the display.

Another comparison between the two is seen when Franny remembers being caught outside during the air raid siren. She had been terrified but ultimately remained where her teacher told her to be. She was later proud of herself. Drew was in his classroom and one of his classmates wet his pants. Drew helped the boy out of the room and even helped him change clothes without revealing the situation to anyone. It is clear that Drew's actions took more courage than Franny's, and she is petty about the fact that he outshone her. Franny does, however, show her true character toward Drew when she assures him that they will run home together if there is a time when an actual air raid occurs. Her promise reassures Drew, who desperately needs her at that point. This is a true signal of Franny's good character, and of her willingness to step up for Drew.

Franny has time to be ashamed that she did not stand up for Uncle Otts, especially after Uncle Otts collapses outside while trying to dig a bomb shelter. After having time to think it through and to feel guilty about her lack of action on her uncle's behalf, Franny is ready to stand up for him when Margie talks about him at Gale's Halloween party. At that moment, Franny, surrounded by her classmates, says that Uncle Otts is a good



man. She is sincere in her support of her uncle despite the possibility that some of her friends will agree with Margie that Uncle Otts is not normal.

Franny shows yet another aspect of her character when she denies that she is a hero after Uncle Otts gives her a medal. She says she was afraid, even though she believes that she could have simply accepted the praise from her family without telling her true feelings. She shows that good character again when she feels compassion for Margie and says that they might see each other the following day.

Fear of the Unknown

People often fear what they do not understand, and this lack of understanding can sometimes be attributed to people who simply do not know each other. A person or group of people willing to open their hearts and minds to others is less likely to be afraid or to show hatred. To some degree, this is the case with Franny and others in her neighborhood, but it can also explain how some of the characters feel about each other and about specific situations.

A major example of this theme is seen as Mrs. Rodriguez teaches her students about Cuba. Mrs. Rodriguez's husband is from Cuba and she has visited the country on multiple occasions. She tells the students about the country, its people, and their culture. Franny is surprised when she and her classmates discover that the Cuban people are not the monsters she had come to expect. Until Mrs. Rodriguez's lesson on Cuba, Franny's only information came from the American media. She believed Cuba was filled with people who hated the United States. Through Mrs. Rodriguez's eyes, she discovers that those people are very much like Americans. She comes to realize that they have hopes and dreams, just as she has hopes. With that understanding, Franny's fear is diminished, at least a little. She and the other students were fearful before the lesson, mainly because the adults are frightened and because of Kennedy's public address the previous night. But once the class learns more, they are able to laugh and to see Cuba as something other than an imminent threat.

Franny and the other children are basically aware of the threat, and that fear is another example of this theme. Some of the characters know about war, including Uncle Otts and Mr. Chapman, but even those characters know only that there is a danger of an attack. Most people fear the possibility of an attack, especially because they cannot predict the time and place. Uncle Otts becomes so stressed at the possibility of an attack that he winds up in the hospital. Franny's mother is snappish and unkind.

To a lesser degree, Franny's personal life carries some examples of this theme. She fears the girl-boy party hosted by Gale because she does not know what to expect. She fears her life without Margie as her best friend because she is not certain she will have other friends. Margie eventually comes to fear her life without Franny's friendship.

Another example of this theme is seen only peripherally, through Jo Ellen's plans and some of the historical documentation. Much of the violence of the Civil Rights



Movement can be traced to a fear of the unknown. Whites sometimes feared the state of the world if blacks were given truly equal rights and blacks sometimes feared whites. Jo Ellen tells Franny that she wants to help make the world a better place, and she plans to do that by working with the Civil Rights Movement.

Styles

Point of View

The book is divided between the story line typical of a novel and a series of documents, photos, and historically accurate accounts of people and event. The historical information is presented in third-person from an omniscient perspective. The novel portion is presented in first person and limited to the perspective of Franny, an 11-year-old girl in the fifth grade during this tense time of American history. The choice of perspective is appropriate because she is old enough to understand that Americans are in danger, but not old enough to fully comprehend all the nuances of the situation. She has learned to obey the order to “duck and cover” but is old enough to question whether that will actually save her and whether it is actually the best course of action for her. She is young enough to timidly respect and accept authority, but old enough to privately question what the adults are telling her.

An example of her perspective is seen in her relationship with her older sister, Jo Ellen. Jo Ellen is in college and the relationship between the sisters is somewhat rocky because of the age difference. Franny depends on Jo Ellen because Jo Ellen is one of the adults in Franny's life. This dependence grates on Jo Ellen to a degree, but Franny is unable and unwilling to change the dynamics. However, when Franny fears that Jo Ellen is about to get in trouble, she is willing to break into Jo Ellen's personal space in an effort to keep Jo Ellen safe.

Franny's perspective is focused more on the threat of a nuclear attack than on the other events taking place in the world, because that threat is more real to Franny than the other events. The Civil Rights Movement is in full swing and there are people dying as blacks fight for equality. Franny's family lives near a military base in Maryland, and the Civil Rights Movement is mainly taking place in distant states. The fact that her father is a military officer and that the family lives near Washington, D.C. makes the threat of a nuclear attack much more real in Franny's perspective.

Language and Meaning

The novel is written in American English, though some of the language is somewhat dated in an attempt to be true to the place and time settings. Some elements of the novel's historical documentation assumes that the reader will recognize people, events, and quotes. For example, there is a two-page image two men facing each other. One is seated on a chair and the other is seated on the end of a bed. The only words on the two pages are “Heartbreaker” and “Two Drifters,” which could be referring to the lyrics of a song made popular during the time. The two men are John F. Kennedy and his brother, Robert Kennedy, who were political figures during this era. There is also a graphic of Bullwinkle and Rocky, two cartoon characters famous during this era. They are not identified and the two characters, pictured shaking hands, appear on a page



describing a new level of communication between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The novel is written from the perspective of a young girl, and the language reflects that perspective. She uses words and phrases that are specific to her time, place, and personal vocabulary. For example, she uses the term “heavens to Murgatroyd” as an exclamation in places where some people might use curse words or other slang terms (18). Some words are real only in Franny's vocabulary, such as when she imagines Mrs. Rodriguez saying that Franny is “the best read-alouder” in the class (18).

Structure

The novel is divided into 39 chapters that are focused on an 11-year-old girl named Franny. These chapters are presented in a relatively small, even font while the rest of the novel is filled with photographs and images, interspersed with quotes and information presented in fonts of varying sizes and styles.

The novel includes documentary evidence of the events taking place at the time of Franny's imaginary life. These pieces include photos and quotes taken from various historical and social documents of the time, ranging from newscasts to song lyrics. These pieces of information are presented in pages before and after each chapter. Photos are typically identified but some pieces of information appear as random quotes or statements. Most can be associated with photos or other pieces of information to provide context but some are left to the reader to figure out. For example, there are four elements of page 60. The top shows a black hand and white hand clasped together with the letters “SNCC” below them. This is a reference to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee which focused on racial issues of the time. There is more information about that organization in the preceding pages. The next element is a black bar with the words “The future's not our to see, What will be, will be.” Those are lyrics from a song, and more lyrics from that song are seen on page 52, along with a photo of Miss America. The next element is a photo of an Air Force jet flying, as would be typical during this time of military unrest. At the bottom of the page, there is a white line with very small words that read, “Exit, Stage Left! Snagglepuss.” This is a reference to a television show of the time and may be referring to the fact that the plane is flying off the page to the left. The comment is not explained and there are no other references to that television show. Some readers may find the conglomeration of quotes and pictures to be chaotic, but the author likely created that tone because that is how the novel's characters are feeling at the time.



Quotes

It's the air-raid siren, screaming its horrible scream int eh playground, high over our heads on a thousand-foot telephone pole - and we are outside. Outside. o desk, o turtle, no cover."

-- Franny (chapter 1 paragraph 29)

Importance: Franny is describing the situation when they are on the playground, rather than in their classroom, when the siren goes off. They are supposed to "duck and cover" as they have been taught through the actions of a public awareness campaign featuring Bert the Turtle, but they have always done the drill using their desks for cover. This time, they do not have that. The fact that Franny identifies the telephone pole as 1,000 feet tall is an indication of her perspective. She is a child, but the pole seems incredibly tall because it holds the siren.

I can picture the dinners in their houses tonight, the talk around the table, all about the Chapmans, who moved in on the corner of Allentown and Coolridge two years ago, and their uncle, who has gone crazy."

-- Franny (chapter 4 paragraph 9)

Importance: Franny is hiding in the bushes while Uncle Otts rushes around, confronting other students. He has become disoriented, probably as a combined result of the air raid siren and the arrival of plans for a bomb shelter that arrived that day. Most important is that Franny leaves it to Drew to comfort Uncle Otts while Franny hides. She is embarrassed and is later ashamed of her act.

Who's Ebenezer?' I say, staring at the flowing script of the return address."

-- Franny (chapter 6 paragraph 11)

Importance: Franny has just seen Jo Ellen drop an envelop, which prompts her curiosity about the situation. This leads to her breaking into Jo Ellen's chest in an effort to find out more. Part of this is concern about Jo Ellen but part of it is because Franny is obsessed with Nancy Drew mysteries, and she immediately makes this into a mystery even though it is none of her business what Jo Ellen is doing.

We're building a bomb shelter to protect this family,' says Uncle Otts. 'Starting today.'"

-- Uncle Otts (chapter 9 paragraph 23)

Importance: Uncle Otts is literally beginning to dig up the front yard and is ordering Franny and Drew to help. Franny is afraid because she knows her mother will be angry if they dig up the yard, but she feels she is a child incapable of telling Uncle Otts what to do. Uncle Otts collapses a short time later, which leads to a stay in the hospital.

The most insensitive thing you've ever done is to allow your uncle to exhaust himself in the front yard in front of God and everybody. I hope you're proud of yourself."

-- Mrs. Chapman (chapter 13 paragraph 55)



Importance: Mrs. Chapman is angry at the situation, and she seems to unfairly take it out on Franny. One of her character flaws is her concern about what others think about her, and this is seen clearly in her worry over what the neighbors think about Uncle Otts trying to dig a bomb shelter.

I don't know why we're so mad at each other - we've been best friends since I moved in next door two years ago. That's what I want to say. But that's not what I say."
-- Franny (chapter 19 paragraph 27)

Importance: Franny has found Margie in the restroom, about to show Jo Ellen's letter to Gale. Franny is furious but she does not understand the situation, nor does she understand why Margie is acting against her.

If the real siren goes off, I'm gong to run right to your classroom and get you, and we'll race for home, how's that?"
-- Franny (chapter 25 paragraph 25)

Importance: Franny has finally come to realize that Drew needs her reassurance as much as she needs reassurance from the adults in their lives. It is a sign of her emerging maturity that she is finally prepared to give it to him.

We're building your uncle's bomb shelter,' says Mom. "In the laundry room."
-- Mrs. Chapman (chapter 27 paragraph 8)

Importance: This is the moment Franny understands that her mother is worried, and this explains why Mrs. Chapman has seemed overly worried and even angry at things that seem relatively insignificant. The laundry room is the perfect answer to the family's need for security, and Franny arrives to find her mother has bought food to go along with all of Uncle Otts' equipment.

Thank you for letting me go, Jo Ellen. I promise I'll be back early."
-- Franny (chapter 30 paragraph 52)

Importance: Jo Ellen has just said that their mother would not allow Franny to attend the party, if she knew about it, acknowledging that they are going against their mother and that both will be in trouble if Mrs. Chapman finds out.

I knew you would get in trouble. I knew I could fix it."
-- Drew Chapman (chapter 31 paragraph 20)

Importance: This is a sign of the changing relationship between Drew and Franny, which is an element of one of the novel's themes. Drew is talking about the suitcase key Franny took from her mother's room and used to open Jo Ellen's chest.

You take my friends!' Margie wails, as if she's got to have it out, right here, right now, with me, in the dire dark, in case she plunges to her death."



-- Margie/Franny (chapter 35 paragraph 41)

Importance: Margie makes the statement that Franny has taken her friends, which is the first sign that Franny has about why Margie is mad at her. The rest of that comment, seen from Franny's perspective, is an example of the series of epiphanies that bring the novel to a close.

What a time to tell the truth. Here I could be lauded as the hero - no one would know any different - and I choose to tell the truth."

-- Franny (chapter 38 paragraph 38)

Importance: Franny has just told Uncle Otts that she was afraid while she was trying to save Margie, but Uncle Otts assures her that heroes are often afraid, and the key is that she did what she needed to do anyway.