

# **Crazy Lady! Study Guide**

**Crazy Lady! by Jane Leslie Conly**

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## Plot Summary

Crazy Lady tells the story of Vernon, a boy in early adolescence struggling with family, friends and school. At first, Vernon lives like any other young boy, causing minor chaos on his block in a neighborhood of Baltimore. He laments that, as a boy in junior high, he can no longer play kids games, but remains too young to get a job like those in high school. This leaves Vernon and his friends to dismantle bicycles and hot wire cars, just to prove that they can.

Then, however, Vernon receives his first report card. Already behind one year, and big for his age, he laments the failing grades in nearly every class. At his sister's advice, Vernon goes to see the guidance counselor. When she tells Vernon that tutoring costs \$2 per hour, he knows his family cannot afford the expense. Since the sudden death of his mother several years before, the family gets by, but just barely, and Vernon's father already works himself to near exhaustion to provide for Vernon and his four siblings.

One day, however, a neighbor hears Vernon stand up to the local grocer, who frequently tries to overcharge customers. When she approaches him to commend the act, Vernon realizes he is talking to "the crazy lady," a single mother who lives one block over from Vernon's family. The neighborhood knows her as an eccentric, drunk, and rude woman. What's more, her son appears to be mentally retarded and attends a special school. The pair often bare the brunt of insults and jokes, even from Vernon and his friends. For reasons Vernon cannot explain, he helps the lady carry her groceries home and confesses that he is struggling in school. She promises to help. Vernon goes away from her dilapidated house, hoping none of his friends saw him at the crazy lady's house.

A few days later, Vernon receives a note from Maxine, the crazy lady, offering to introduce him to a teacher. Desperate to pass the seventh grade, Vernon goes to the meeting. Maxine introduces Vernon to her son, Robert, then to her neighbor, Miss Annie, who lives in the other side of Maxine's duplex apartment. Miss Annie's side is as neat as Maxine's is messy. Miss Annie agrees to help Vernon in English. Quickly, however, she begins to ask him to "pay" for his lessons by helping Maxine.

At first, Ronald makes Vernon very nervous, and Vernon seems to have a similar effect on Ronald. Eventually, however, the boys develop a close relationship. When Robert's teacher encourages Maxine to enter her son in the Special Olympics, Vernon organizes a neighborhood carnival to raise the money. The carnival becomes a huge success, and Vernon feels proud of his accomplishment and disillusioned that he felt incompetent for so long.

When summer comes, Vernon passes all his needed courses, thanks to Miss Annie's diligent tutoring. He also takes Robert to the Olympics. The two boys enjoy the event immensely, and Vernon feels that Robert has become a close friend. However, he learns, at the end of the day, that Maxine has decided to send Robert to North Carolina to live with family, because she feels her alcoholism prevents her from taking care of him properly. Vernon reacts with much anger and sadness.

The day Robert leaves for North Carolina, the neighborhood turns out to give him dozens of going away presents. Vernon runs alongside the car until he cannot keep up. When he lands, sobbing, alongside the road, Vernon's father is there to pick him up.



# Chapters 1-3

## Chapters 1-3 Summary

Vernon, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, begins the story by explaining that he writes about an event that happened two years previous, when he was in the seventh grade.

The Dobbs family consists of five children and his father. Vernon's mother died of a stroke years before. This is the first and only time Vernon sees his father cry. Mom made all of her children feel special, and treated everyone in the neighborhood with respect. Since mom's death, Vernon's father acts differently. He works a lot and seems to struggle with family and household management.

The Dobbs family lives, by Vernon's estimation, one block from the slum. The family seems uncomfortable around African-Americans at first, but they come to find out that those people are the same as themselves.

During Vernon's seventh grade year, he visits the slum for the first time, to meet with Miss Annie, his tutor. Most of the time, Vernon spends his time with his friends Chris and Bobby, sometimes with his older brother Tony, a very studious boy, or his younger brother Ben. The boys dream of the day they will play baseball for the Baltimore Orioles. However, Vernon fails to make the junior high team, feeling, for the first time, like a little fish in a big pond. Vernon observes that Junior High puts young people in a difficult spot, too old for child's games, but too young for a part time job.

That leaves the boys to find their own entertainment. Bobby patrols the neighborhood for Toyota brand cars, just to prove he can hot-wire them. They move the cars a block or two and leave them. They also have a habit of stealing candy bars from Woolworths, though larger items begin to make Vernon nervous.

During these aimless afternoons, Vernon and his friends spot Maxine Flooter and her mentally handicapped son, Robert. The boys have fun antagonizing Maxine, to see her riled up. Maxine, a known drunk, frequently treats the boys to long tirades of swear words and threats. Other adults who notice the teasing only ask the boys to stop because the tirades are too loud. No one sticks up for Maxine for her own sake.

## Chapters 1-3 Analysis

Vernon's use of the seed metaphor not only symbolizes his bad dreams about the events from two years previous, they also foreshadow some of the chores that Miss Annie gets Vernon to perform for her.

The setting of the story plays heavily in the plot. Vernon's family feels pride that they do not live in the slum, though they do live only blocks from it. The family obviously

struggles financially since the death of Vernon's mother, but they maintain their autonomy. The external struggles that Vernon faces also serve to draw his family, internally, closer together.



# Chapters 4-6

## Chapters 4-6 Summary

Vernon's carefree days end when he receives a very poor report card, in which he fails all of his required subjects, especially English and Math. He worries about repeating the seventh grade, because he is already one year behind and big for his age. He visits the school's guidance counselor about tutoring, but knows his family cannot afford the two dollar an hour fee.

One day, though, Vernon goes to the grocery for his sister. He gets into a yelling match with the grocer, who tries to overcharge both Vernon and the woman in line in front of him. Outside the store, he realizes the woman was Maxine Flooter, when she commends him for speaking up. Vernon offers to walk further up the hill to get the required potatoes for both him and Maxine. When he delivers the potatoes, Maxine speaks kindly about Vernon's mother, who treated her handicapped son Robert with kindness. Vernon finds himself confessing about his school problems, even while hoping that none of his friends spot him being kind to Maxine. Maxine offers to find him a tutor.

Maxine finds Vernon a tutor, her neighbor, Miss Annie, a retired grand schoolteacher. Miss Annie makes Vernon work hard during his tutoring, and then tells about herself. Finally, she asks Vernon to "pay" for the tutoring by cleaning up Maxine's yard, which Miss Annie shares with her. Miss Annie takes the responsibility of looking out for Maxine and Robert, especially when Maxine has been drinking.

## Chapters 4-6 Analysis

The main conflict of the novel begins when Vernon receives his bad grade card. At the end of chapter four, moreover, the author uses foreshadowing to clue in the reader that something unusual will happen to aid Vernon in his studies.

Vernon's mother always symbolizes a happier time for Vernon. When Maxine mentions Vernon's mom, Vernon confesses his personal problems for no apparent reason. The mention of his mother always produces a softening effect on Vernon.

Miss Annie's character, moreover, represents a sort of surrogate mother for Vernon. Though she in no way matches Vernon's mother physically, she brings a routine and responsibility, along with acceptance and confirmation that Vernon lacks.



# Chapters 7-9

## Chapters 7-9 Summary

Vernon often feels embarrassed about Maxine's dress and actions. He tries to hide his visits to Miss Annie and especially Maxine. He feels that being studious is not admirable, and helping Maxine is definitely not manly enough to receive the praise of his friends. However, after spending time with her, Vernon feels sympathy for Maxine, especially when she appears so grateful for Vernon's help.

When the kids finally find out about Vernon's tutoring, they tease him a little, but mostly they seem to realize the dire position in which Vernon finds himself. His relationship with Maxine and Robert, though, remains a secret.

One afternoon, Miss Annie asks Vernon to babysit Robert while Maxine runs an errand. Vernon notices that Robert appears to be afraid of him. He shows Robert a disappearing quarter trick that seems to calm the boy. When this change takes place, Vernon realizes that the fear makes Robert look ugly. Once he relaxes, Robert looks nearly normal. When Maxine returns, she shares her history, including her relationship with Robert's father, who never marries; something looked down upon by Vernon.

In Chapter Nine, Vernon's secret about visiting Maxine gets out. Vernon yells at his brother for spilling his secret. The family seems to operate without much interaction at this point. Vernon notices that no one seems to question why he is late.

Vernon's father, however, defends Maxine's unusual ways of dealing with people. He confesses that more adults wish they could talk that way, but hold back due to their children or their job. However, Vern's father assures his son that he never regrets having a large family, even after the death of Vernon's mother.

## Chapters 7-9 Analysis

Several conflicts arise in the novel, the first being Vernon's internal struggles concerning his family and his grades. He shows a great deal of initiative in taking care of the problem with his grades himself. He realizes that his mother would have taken care of this type of problem.

Vernon feels very strongly about gaining acceptance from his friends, showing a very typical response for young people. The author shows an accurate portrayal of young people in this way.

Vernon frequently equates Robert's attractiveness with his abilities or emotions. He quickly notices that fear changes Robert's appearance and makes him appear ugly. Later, Vernon notices that fear makes many of the handicapped people appear the same when afraid.





The family conflict flares again in Chapter Nine, but will continue to climb for several more times before they reach a turning point. However, the admission that Vernon's father never regrets having so many children begins to show Dad's concern, and eventual changes for his family.



# Chapters 10-12

## Chapters 10-12 Summary

Maxine gets drunk for two days, after which time Vernon learns about how she fights to keep Robert out of foster care or an institution. After two weeks clean, though, Maxine gets drunk and arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct. Miss Annie takes care of Maxine's house and asks Vernon to deliver some checks to Maxine in jail, so she can sign them and pay Miss Annie her rent. Maxine thanks Vernon for visiting her in jail. Vernon uses his bus fare home to buy a soda for Robert. Vernon wants to share his escapades of the day with his family, but finds he cannot manage the words.

When midterm grades come out, Vernon does much better than his former report card. Miss Annie rewards him with some time off from tutoring and Vernon enjoys time with his friends for the first time in months.

Maxine invites Vernon over to meet Robert's teacher, where she introduces Vernon as Robert's new friend. This makes Vernon feel quite uncomfortable. However, Vernon finds Miss Murphy, Robert's teacher, to be one of the most beautiful women he has seen in a long time. Miss Murphy suggests that Maxine enrich Robert's life with physical activities. She suggests the Special Olympics. Vernon agrees to help Robert with the Special Olympics. However, when they learn that Robert will need new tennis shoes, Maxine becomes concerned. They do not have the \$30 required for the shoes.

Once Vernon leaves Maxine's, Vernon feels very nervous about helping Robert with the Olympics. Vernon comes up with the idea to hold a carnival on their block, to raise money for Robert's tennis shoes. However, he fears more than ever that his friends will call him a \*\*\*. He fears that helping someone like Robert will not seem manly to Vernon's friends. To make the charity work seem less nerdy, Vernon claims that Miss Murphy's beauty temporarily confused him, and he made the offer for her sake.

Vernon receives a surprise visit from this friend Jerry one afternoon. Jerry admits that he has a brother like Robert who lives at a special school. Jerry's family visits every Sunday afternoon. Vernon promises not to tell any of the other guys about Jerry's brother.

The whole block turns out for Robert's carnival. Maxine arrives, excited and quite drunk. Vernon worries that Miss Murphy will see Maxine while she is drunk and try to take Robert away. The highlight of the afternoon seems to be when three of the men on the block dress in drag and perform as the Pointer Sisters. Vernon's dad assures him, after the carnival ends, that he is very proud of Vernon.

Maxine, however, shows up drunk and announces that she will not accept any charity. This refusal hurts Vernon deeply.



## Chapters 10-12 Analysis

The carnival acts as the climax of the plot. Vernon's relationship with Robert changes after the carnival; he begins to see him as a friend. Since Vernon's visit to Maxine in jail, he sees them both as fellow humans.

Vernon's image of himself among his friends is a typical theme in young adult literature. His stereotypically unmanly views on manly actions, however, reflect more on the period of the novel, being in the early 1980's.



# Chapters 13-15

## Chapters 13-15 Summary

Once Vernon and his siblings count up their profits from the carnival, Vernon realizes he earned \$143 dollars for Robert. In spite of his success, Vernon has a fight with his brother Tony, who always excels in everything he tries. Because of his success with the carnival, Vernon feels that his family has been selling him short on himself. He wonders if his mother would have believed in him from the beginning and regrets that his family seems so surprised at his success.

However, Vernon shares his somewhat tarnished success with Miss Annie. Between the fight with Tony and the drunken show from Maxine, Vernon wonders how much good the carnival really did. However, Miss Annie assures Vernon that no one but Robert controls Maxine, that Vernon could do nothing to ensure a different outcome from Maxine. As a thank you, Miss Annie gives Vernon a book. She says a book can be a good friend.

Soon after, Maxine apologizes for the scene at the carnival. Vernon accepts her apology and his relationship with Maxine and Robert improves.

However, he continues to feel uncomfortable at home. He feels unsure about his family's view of him.

## Chapters 13-15 Analysis

To Miss Annie, books symbolize a friend. Vernon, as a typical pre-adolescent, has a hard time understanding the symbolism. He swears that Miss Annie is almost as crazy as Maxine is, for believing that fictional characters are her friends.

Vernon's relationship with Maxine and Robert has changed by this time. He moves from fear, to acceptance, now to responsibility. This change shows how more knowledge of Robert allows Vernon to feel more acceptance. Only in his ignorance does Vernon feel fear.



# Chapters 16-18

## Chapters 16-18 Summary

Vernon goes to Maxine's and explains the reason for their trip to Robert. He intends to take him, without Maxine. Robert seems nervous about the trip from the beginning. Once they leave the house, however, the entire neighborhood appears, excited to see Robert and see his new shoes.

Vernon takes Robert to the army surplus store for a new wardrobe first. Vernon seems proud that he figures the change due to him before the cashier tells him.

Before Vernon and Robert go into the shoe store, Vernon's friends Jerry and Bobby show up to help. The two boys pick out some shoes that are too expensive at first, but soon they all agree on the perfect pair of shoes, a red-checked pair of Converse. Young children from the neighborhood meet Robert outside of the store and exclaim over his new shoes. Once the boys deliver Robert back home, Maxine tells Vernon that he is Robert's best friend.

When Vernon visits Miss Annie to thank her, properly, for the book, they discuss Shakespeare. Miss Annie tells Vernon how, when Maxine and Robert came to visit, they watched a Shakespeare play on the television. Vernon notes the irony of Robert watching such a complicated story. Miss Annie admits that, mostly, Robert stared at his new shoes. Finally, Miss Annie asks Vernon to dig a garden for Maxine, so that she and Robert will be able to eat healthier foods. Vernon does so, under Miss Annie's watchful eye. Vernon realizes, silently, that he will most likely do all the tending and harvesting, since Maxine is often unreliable due to her drinking problem.

As he finishes up in the garden, he notices Miss Murphy leaving Maxine's house. When he mentions it to Maxine, she complains loudly about people not minding their own business; obviously, she refers to both the teacher and Robert himself. While Robert and Maxine argue about his questions, Robert picks up the hoe and shows a surprising ability to use the tool. This is the first of several talents with which Robert begins to surprise Vernon.

## Chapters 16-18 Analysis

Vernon's character continues to grow and change, as many young characters do in this type of coming of age novel. As he learns more about Robert, he gains confidence and knowledge about a variety of life situations. In addition, in a bit of situational irony, the hard circumstances in life are the very things that equip Vernon to handle the variety of situations in which he finds himself, such as visiting Maxine in jail and shoe shopping with Robert. Because the kids in his family, since the death of his mother, pitch in around the household, he completes the tasks with confidence and ease. This gives the story a very realistic tone.



The author also continues to explore the subject of knowledge. Maxine and Miss Annie show various kinds of knowledge, as does Vernon's father. Some of the knowledge is a worldly knowledge, such as sacrificing for one's children; the other is book knowledge, such as Miss Annie having tea with her favorite characters. Vernon seems to have more use for the practical knowledge of his father, but, as he spends more time with Miss Annie, he gains a respect for her type of knowledge as well.

Finally, the author begins to revisit some symbols from Vernon's introduction when Vernon begins to prepare Maxine's garden. In Chapter One, Vernon compared his dreams to seeds. According to Miss Annie, the seeds she orders for Maxine symbolize hope for the struggling family. Moreover, each seed, whether weed or flower, deserves a chance to grow, much like Robert deserves a chance at life just like Vernon and his friends.



# Chapters 19-21

## Chapters 19-21 Summary

The day after Vernon notices Miss Murphy leaving Maxine, Jerry calls to say that Miss Murphy called his father to discuss Maxine. Vernon, fearing that the officials may be trying to take Robert away from his mother, writes a letter in her defense to Miss Murphy. He carefully uses all of the writing lessons he has learned from Miss Murphy to make his case for Maxine being a responsible and loving mother. Then, he gives a baseball card collection to Jerry, as both a thanks and a peace offering, though the level of the conflict between the boys seems largely hidden by Vernon's worries about Maxine.

Finally, after several days, Vernon's father talks to him about his fight with his brother, Tony, after the carnival. Though his dad validates the reason for the disagreement between the brothers, he insists that there be no physical violence in their house. This continues to show the struggle Vernon's father has with managing the household alone, and the progress that is just beginning.

That night, Vernon goes to Robert's for dinner. He notices that Robert wears the shoes as much as Maxine will allow, though she fears that he will wear them out before the Special Olympics. Maxine then insults Vernon's mother, which causes an argument. During the argument, Robert throws a fit, but Maxine informs Robert that she will not police her words simply to suit him. Before Vernon leaves, he reminds Maxine and Robert that just five weeks remains before the Special Olympics.

When Vernon returns home, he notices that Sandra, his younger sister, stole the book Miss Annie gave him. She reacts selfishly at first; then, he remembers that his mother used to take him and his siblings to the library and read to them. No one reads to his younger siblings now. He returns the book, claiming that the story is for kids anyway. He listens as Sandra reads the story to Ben, their youngest brother.

That night, the family has a pleasant conversation, centered on what a nice person Miss Annie is.

## Chapters 19-21 Analysis

A key to the book's ending begins to unravel as Vernon fears Miss Murphy's intrusion into Maxine's family. It seems that, despite all his help, no one can clean Maxine up enough, for long enough. What is worse, when Maxine stays sober, she becomes a person who is not pleasant to be around. Foreshadowing occurs each time Vernon notices Miss Murphy's visits.

However, as Maxine's family unravels, Vernon's family draws closer together. After the blowup with Tony and Vernon, Vernon's father seems motivated to make real change in

the family. He takes responsibility away from Vernon's oldest sister and insists that each child contribute.

Vernon also feels the pressure to step into his mother's place, when he remembers their trips to the library. His gift of the book to his younger sister in some way attempts to make up for the missing mother in all their lives. The addition of reading time adds back a family element that they had all missed and did not know it.





# Chapters 22-24

## Chapters 22-24 Summary

The seeds finally come for Maxine's garden. As Vernon helps Miss Annie by planting them, he confesses what Jerry told him about Miss Murphy's phone call. Miss Annie immediately gets on the phone with connections she has with the children's services department. Miss Annie assures Vernon that there is nothing to worry about, yet. Vernon still feels a great deal of unrest.

When he visits Maxine, he finds her on edge from the lack of drink. She confesses that she feels she must be clean all the time, because Miss Murphy has paid some surprise visits. Vernon begins avoiding Maxine. He takes Robert for a walk alone. When Robert insists on staying at one house for a long time to stare at the garden statues, he notices that Robert can count, as he is counting the statues. This serves as another example of abilities no one knew Robert possessed.

When Vernon returns home, he finds the house in an uproar because his older sister, Steph, is preparing for a date. Vernon consents to go to the store to buy her pantyhose and Tony, grudgingly, offers the money to pay for them. She insists that the boys pitch in to cook supper, pointing out that she will not always be around to care for the family. Vernon's father supports her in this.

## Chapters 22-24 Analysis

Robert's secret abilities continue to appear, as Vernon spends more time with him. Though they could be exciting, the change in Robert throws Vernon off. In a world that changes too fast, he wants Robert to be his constant. Vernon continues to resist changes in Maxine. For this reason, he fails to realize that the fact that Robert's abilities have gone unnoticed by Maxine might signal that Robert needs more than Maxine can give. This all ultimately serves to cause Vernon to be totally unprepared for Robert's outcome.

The change in Robert, though, pales in comparison to the change going on in the Dobbs' home. Steph's date signals a coming change for the family when she finally moves on to a home of her own. The boys seem to fear losing their sister too soon after losing their mother. Steph steps in in many ways to be surrogate mother to the boys, but Vernon's father admits that this cannot continue indefinitely, because it never allows Steph to have the life of a normal teenage girl.



# Chapters 25-27

## Chapters 25-27 Summary

Vernon watches daily for a surprise visit from Miss Murphy and warns Maxine to stay clean. Miss Annie continues to monitor Maxine's case through his contact in the department. She learns that questions are being asked, but no complaint is filed.

Then, Maxine gets very drunk and throws a fit in the neighborhood, threatening bystanders and breaking bottles on the sidewalk. Vernon intervenes and offers to clean up if the owners don't press charges. Maxine wonders off, drunk and unpredictable. Vernon assures Miss Annie that he will go in through the window to check on Robert if needed.

The next day, Vernon finds no one home but a very hungry looking dog. Vernon feeds the dog and leaves a note for Maxine. Then, Sunday Maxine and Robert come into Vernon's church. She causes quite a scene in front of the congregation during a shouting match with the priest. As she exits, she insults everyone she recognizes, including Vernon, whom she calls dumb. After church, Vernon's friends attempt to cheer him, but he remains very hurt by Maxine's allegations and their public nature.

After the scene at church, Vernon refuses to forgive Maxine. He goes to see Robert as much as possible, but only when he knows Maxine is out.

At the end of the year, Vernon passes all his subjects but French; Miss Annie shows a great deal of pride in his improvements. Vernon feels a great deal of pride as well. When Vernon reminds Maxine about the upcoming Special Olympics, he feels some foreboding. Remembering the fiasco at the carnival, Vernon begins to realize that Maxine possesses a knack for messing up the most marvelous of occasions.

## Chapters 25-27 Analysis

Despite all of Vernon's feelings of responsibility and care towards Maxine, their relationship never fully recovers from her insults at the church. Now that Vernon owns several successes, including his management of the carnival, he feels her insult holds no merit, and therefore embarrasses him unfairly.

However, he remains very committed to Robert, showing the degree to which both his character and his relationship develops throughout the novel.

Ironically, one would expect Vernon's grade card to be a high spot in the novel, but it only gets a passing mention. Vernon seems to have a handle on his schooling and puts it in a proper place in his life, unlike before, where his schooling had no place in his life. Also unlike his brother, who puts his schooling even above his family.



# Chapters 28-30

## Chapters 28-30 Summary

Vernon's father, with a lot of effort, given his limited reading abilities, makes a schedule of chores for the house, to allow each child to contribute and give Steph a break. Vernon feels pride over his father's show of leadership.

Vernon then goes to take Robert for a walk. He tells off Maxine, who appears drunk, and walks back towards his house. When Ben, Vernon's younger brother appears and shows Robert how to draw a dog with sidewalk chalk, the usually mute Robert surprises everyone by saying the word dog. Vernon, not sure what to make of this new development, rushes Robert home and tells no one.

Vernon continues to visit Miss Annie and work Maxine's garden, though he avoids Maxine. Miss Annie confesses that befriending some people takes more effort than others do. Vernon confesses that he worries Robert will have to go away.

When he returns home, he discusses his fears of change with his father. The conversation turns to an argument, where Vernon lashes out at his father, and confesses that he misses his mom. Dad reacts calmly and comforts his son. Then, Vern's father asks Vernon to teach him to read, citing that Vernon seems to be the best choice in the family, because he knows what it is like to struggle. Vernon realizes that to be part of a family, one cannot be selfish.

When Vernon arrives to pick up Robert the day of the Special Olympics, he tries to talk to Maxine, but she remains distant. Vernon's father drives the boys to the park.

There, they socialize, eat at the booths, and enter Robert in several walking races. Though he fails to place, Robert and Vernon have a great time. He proudly shows off his shoes to the other people from his school. Vernon notices the same look of fear in the faces of the other contestants that he originally saw in Robert. He notices that a friendly smile often makes the fear go away.

Jerry's brother places well, as does a young girl who arrives with Miss Murphy. After the games, Miss Murphy offers Robert and Vernon a ride home. They accept.

During the ride, Miss Murphy acknowledges that Vernon possesses a talent for working with "special kids." She points out that he will really miss Robert when he goes away.

Vernon reacts emotionally, demanding that he get out and walk the rest of the way home. He realizes his worst fear will come true. When he confronts Maxine, she claims she has no choice but to send Robert to live with her relatives in North Carolina, before the state forces her to remove him to foster care.



## Chapters 28-30 Analysis

The news of Robert's move begins the resolution of the plot. With each change in his life, Vernon reacts with a corresponding level of anger. To such a big change, he reacts very emotionally. In contrast to the unselfish sharing of responsibilities in his own household, he views Maxine's actions as selfishly choosing drink over the care of her son. Vernon, as a typical adolescent, fails to see any benefit to either himself or Robert from the situation. He only wants to keep things as they have been.

Miss Murphy has come to symbolize a person of an untrustworthy nature. Her great beauty stands in contrast to her involvement in Robert's removal from the neighborhood. Vernon seems to learn that you cannot trust someone just because they look good on the outside. Ironically, none of her actions is overtly bad; Vernon just fails to get what he anticipated from the beautiful teacher.



# Chapter 31-32

## Chapter 31-32 Summary

First, Vernon visits Miss Annie to share the news. Miss Annie, in her aged wisdom, defends Maxine's decision. She recognizes the selflessness in the decision where Vernon only sees selfishness.

The neighborhood as a whole seems split in the support of Maxine. Some think that Robert deserves a chance with a real family; others regret seeing Robert go and think the community could pitch in to care for him as they always have. On the day Robert's aunt and uncle arrive to take him away, the community comes out in droves to give him parting gifts. Vernon gives him a picture of himself and runs alongside Robert's car down the block, with the neighborhood cheering in his ears. He runs until he physically cannot continue and collapses at the curb. When he looks up, his father stands there to comfort him.

## Chapter 31-32 Analysis

This book includes some grownup decisions and the process that children often go through to process them. Vernon fails to totally understand Maxine, Robert and their situation. He only sees what the changes mean for him. Though he has come to count Robert as a friend, he fails to see any benefit to this move.

The novel lacks the satisfying ending of many coming of age novels. There fails to be much of a lesson learned by Vernon. The book serves, as he stated in the beginning, to share a tale that continues to haunt him after several years. He hopes in telling it, the dreams will stop haunting him.



# Characters

## Vernon

The protagonist of this novel is Vernon Dobbs, a seventh grade boy living in Baltimore, Maryland in the early 1980s. He lives with his father, one older brother, one older sister, and one younger brother and sister. His mother died several years before, suddenly, of a stroke. Vernon, already big for his age, is one year behind in school.

Vernon tells the story from first person point of view. He recounts the events of the previous year, when he meets and, eventually befriends, Maxine and Robert Flooter. At the beginning of the novel, Vernon is an immature and even cruel young boy. He shamelessly steals candy from the local Woolworths and calls rude names to "crazy" Maxine Flooter.

However, circumstances occur that lead Vernon to seek tutoring from Miss Annie, Maxine's neighbor. As a payment for the tutoring sessions, Miss Annie asks Vernon to do various chores for Maxine. The more time Vernon spends with the Flooters, the more Vernon feels a growing responsibility and even friendship towards them. Vernon's character matures to learn that friendship takes work. He also learns that intelligence comes in many different forms.

When Robert moves away, Vernon takes the news hard. He runs after the car, showing his support and love for his new friend. Due to the pain the leaving causes him, the reader can see why Vernon felt compelled to write his story.

## Maxine Flooter

Maxine Flooter is an alcoholic woman who lives one block from Vernon's home, in what he describes as the "slum." Maxine lives with her mentally handicapped son, Robert.

The boys in the neighborhood call Maxine the "crazy lady" because she always tells people what is on her mind; often she tells them during loud shouting rants. She makes wild threats about aliens and the like to intimidate those who taunt her, like Vernon and his friends. Maxine's rants turn especially colorful when she has been drinking.

One day, however, Maxine compliments Vernon for the way he stands up to the grocer. When Maxine learns of Vernon's problems in school, she enlists the help of her friend, neighbor and guardian, Miss Annie. This shows a caring side of Maxine that her tantrums masked previously.

Throughout much of the book, Maxine appears capable when she remains sober and out of control when she drinks. One drunken episode lands her in jail. However, in the end, Maxine tries to stay sober for weeks, because she worries about a surprise visit



from Robert's teacher. The withdrawal turns Maxine into a shell of a person, who lashes out at anyone who tries to help.

In the end, Maxine realizes that her presence does more harm to Robert than good. She signs custody over to some relatives from North Carolina. Vernon lashes out at her seemingly weak character. She defends her choice, claiming that her alcoholism is something beyond her control. She desires to give Robert more opportunities than he has living with her.

## Robert Flooter

Robert Flooter's character changes more in the course of the novel than any other. In the beginning, he appears to be a very mentally handicapped teenage boy. He dresses himself only after much struggle. He never talks. When Vernon comes to visit, Robert seems very frightened at first. Vernon observes that the fear makes Robert ugly.

With the support of Vernon and the neighborhood, however, Robert demonstrates more abilities than previously known. He shows aptitude for counting and using garden tools. Towards the end of the novel, he says his first word. Miss Annie, Vernon and others speculate about Robert's true abilities, if only someone could work with him more. However, Vernon resists this idea because it means Robert will move away.

Though Robert never speaks, Vernon learns to understand his body language in a way that allows them to become friends. It appears that Vernon becomes Robert's first real friend. Vernon's support allows Robert to enter the Special Olympics.

## Miss Annie

Miss Annie lives on the other side of the duplex occupied by Maxine and Robert Flooter. While Maxine's side looks messy and unkempt, Miss Annie's house appears clean and well maintained. Maxine introduces Vernon to Miss Annie when he confesses to Maxine that his is failing school. Miss Annie agrees to tutor Vernon for free.

After their first tutoring session, Miss Annie tells Vernon about herself. She is a retired elementary teacher. She loves to read most of all. She feels that a good book is like a friend. Vernon struggles to understand this comparison.

Miss Annie tells Vernon that she realizes he cannot pay her. She asks if he will do favors for her instead. He agrees, and Miss Annie begins to give him tasks at Maxine's house, to help her clean up. First, Vernon cleans Maxine's yard, then he begins to plant a garden. Miss Annie's accepting attitude begins, slowly, to rub off on Vernon. Miss Annie seems to always have a positive comment about everyone. She admonishes Vernon that sometimes, being someone's friend takes a lot of work.

When Vernon begins to get good grades, Miss Annie rewards him with a book. When he feels angry towards Maxine, Miss Annie never criticizes his feelings. Miss Annie



becomes a kind of surrogate mother for Vernon through her acceptance and guidance in his life.

## **Mr. Dobbs**

Vernon's father plays a minor role in the book. Since the death of Vernon's mother, Mr. Dobbs works a lot. He begins to notice, however, that the family dynamic is becoming less welcoming among his children. He strives to create some balance and cooperation, especially with his chore schedule. Eventually, he asks Vernon to teach him to read. Mr. Dobbs promises to always be there for Vernon. When Vernon falls down after running after Robert's car, Mr. Dobbs is there. This is the final, poignant scene of the novel.

## **Ben Dobbs**

Ben is Vernon's youngest brother. He seems to be a bother to Vernon much of the time. Out of guilt, Vernon allows Sandra to read his new book from Miss Annie to Ben. Near the end of the novel, Ben shows Robert how to draw a dog with sidewalk chalk and witnesses Robert trying to say the word "dog."

## **Tony Dobbs**

Vernon's older brother, Tony, takes his schooling very seriously. He gives the impression that he is smarter than anyone else in the family. Though he is still in high school, he saves all his money for college entrance exams. Tony resists helping out around the house more than any other family member.

## **Steph Dobbs**

Steph is Vernon's oldest sister. As the oldest in the family, Steph steps in as a mother figure after the death of their real mother. She does the cooking and cleaning. When she prepares to go on her first date, though, her father seems to realize that the responsibilities placed on Steph are unfair. He insists that the other kids pitch in more, to allow Steph a social life like other girls her age.

## **Sandra Dobbs**

Vernon's younger sister, Sandra, appears the least in the novel. She steals Vernon's book that he got from Miss Annie. At first, Vernon demands the book back. Then, he remembers the nights his mother read to him and regrets that Ben and Sandra never got that opportunity. He allows Sandra to have the book, and she reads it aloud to Ben.





## **Bobby**

Vernon spends his free time with two friends, Bobby and Jerry. Bobby is the more outgoing one. He hot-wires a Toyota just to prove he can. He is also the one to encourage the other boys to steal candy bars. It seems Bobby would be most critical of Vernon's friendship with Robert. However, when Vernon takes Robert to buy his shoes, both friends tag along.

## **Jerry**

Jerry is close friends with Bobby and Vernon. The three boys spend time terrorizing their neighborhood, before Vernon's grades become bad. When Vernon begins to plan the carnival for Robert, though, Jerry stops by and confesses that he has a mentally handicapped brother who lives in an institution. This seems to signify support of Vernon's friendship with Robert. However, Jerry asks that Vernon keep his secret from Bobby.

## **Mrs. Dobbs**

Vernon's mother dies long before the story begins, of a stroke. However, her absence causes much grief in the Dobbs home. All the children miss her acceptance and encouragement. Eventually, they learn to offer this to one another.

Also, Mrs. Dobbs' reputation in the neighborhood comes up several times. Both Miss Annie and Maxine remember Vernon's mother as a kind woman, and tell him so. Though Vernon misses his mother, he enjoys hearing the flattering words about her. He seems to have missed her generous attitude when she was alive, but seeks to acquire it for himself by doing things such as hosting Robert's carnival.

## **Miss Murphy**

Description



# Objects/Places

## School

In the beginning, Vernon struggles with school. In elementary school, he was among the best baseball players in his class. Now that he enters junior high, he feels like a small fish in a big pond. Vernon is already one year behind in school, so his poor grades worry him greatly. By the end of the book, Vernon has both increased his grades and learned that there are many different kinds of intelligence.

## Oriole Stadium

Vernon lives near Oriole Stadium in Baltimore. He dreams of playing there in the major league, until he enters junior high and realizes that his baseball skills lag behind his peers.

## Tenley Heights

Vernon's neighborhood seems solidly working class, though it borders a neighborhood that is clearly poorer.

## Books

Miss Annie tries to explain to Vernon that books can be a friend. Vernon tells Miss Annie that she is a "bookaholic."

## Seeds

The seeds that Miss Annie and Vernon plant for Maxine symbolize hope for Maxine. Miss Annie hopes that the plants will allow her to be a better mother to Robert. Unfortunately, Robert leaves before the plants bear fruit.

## Alcohol

Alcohol represents an enemy that Maxine cannot defeat. Ultimately, she chooses to give Robert a chance at a better life away from her. Vernon feels that her choice of drinking over Robert is selfish.



## Red Converse Shoes

When Vernon learns that Robert needs new tennis shoes for the Special Olympics, Vernon organizes a neighborhood carnival to raise the money. On the day that Vernon takes Robert to shop for shoes, Vernon's two friends, Bobby and Jerry go along, showing support for Vernon's friendship with Robert. The boys find some red checkered Converse shoes that are perfect in appearance and price. Robert wears them whenever possible.

## Home

From the beginning, Vernon's home appears fractured, since the death of his mother. Maxine's home, also, often appears in chaos.

Maxine cleans up the home for visits from Robert's teacher, but the changes are fake and only for show.

Mr. Dobb's, however, strives to bring harmony and cooperation to his family. He institutes a choir schedule to ease the burden on Vernon's oldest sister. He also insists that the children treat one another with respect, even when they disagree.

## Money

No one Vernon knows appears wealthy. His family often only has enough money for food. In comparison, though, Maxine appears poorer. This is never more apparent than when she lacks the money to buy tennis shoes for Robert.

## Special Olympics

The Special Olympics serves as the event that draws Vernon to Robert and allows the boys to be friends. The day at the Special Olympics seems to signify the beginning of a close relationship, but soon after, Robert moves away.



# Themes

## Intelligence

Vernon shows no interest in intelligence until he learns about his failing grades. He seems to think of his brother, Tony, as the smart one.

However, when Vernon struggles in school, he knows better than to turn to Tony. He wants a tutor that can show some encouragement, not judgment. Surprisingly, he finds that in Maxine's neighbor, Miss Annie. She shows him his ability to achieve educational intelligence. She also shows him about the intelligence required to be a true friend to "special" people like Robert Flooter.

Maxine also admonishes Vernon about his intelligence, telling him that there are different kinds of intelligence besides what they teach in school. When Vernon successfully organizes the carnival, he seems to see his capacity for worldly intelligence as well. Mr. Dobbs also shows a worldly intelligence in his understanding about Maxine Flooter.

In the end, however, Maxine insults Vernon in public when she calls him stupid at church. This insult to his intelligence forever alters their relationship. Vernon has a hard time forgiving Maxine for both the insult and the public nature of it.

## Family

The Dobbs family struggles to define itself after the death of Mrs. Dobbs. Steph steps into many of their mother's jobs, such as cooking, and Mr. Dobbs works more hours to earn their living. However, not until Tony and Vernon begin to fight does Mr. Dobbs realize that something may be missing from their family.

He begins to institute policies to insure that the children help out and support one another. When more structure appears in the Dobbs' home, peace returns. They learn that a family can continue, even after they lose one member. Mr. Dobbs seems to realize, also, that his children need his presence. He takes time off work for things important to them, like giving Vernon and Robert a ride to the Special Olympics. When Vernon falls after chasing Robert's car, Mr. Dobbs is there to pick him up, though he should be at work.

The Flooter family seems even more dysfunctional. Maxine admits that she never married Robert's father, which shocks and scandalizes Vernon, showing the moral attitudes of the day. Maxine and Robert barely get by when she is sober. When she drinks, chaos reigns. She loves Robert very much, but never does things to enrich his life, like the Special Olympics. It takes the involvement of the neighborhood to allow Robert this opportunity.



In the end, Maxine realizes the importance of family, and she wants Robert to have one. She signs custody to relatives in North Carolina, where Robert can have a stable home with both a mother and father figure.

## Friendship

Vernon exhibits typical adolescent friendships. He "hangs" with boys of his age who live nearby, Bobby and Jerry. The three boys participate in dares and other mildly criminal behavior to gain one another's respect, even when the actions, such as stealing candy bars and paper, makes them feel uncomfortable. This is the only type of friendship Vernon experiences until he meets Miss Annie.

Miss Annie teaches Vernon that sometimes one has to work to be friends with certain people but the effort is worth it. It seems, from the accounts given by Maxine and Miss Annie, that Vernon's mother knew this about friendship as well.

In addition, Miss Annie strives to show Vernon the friendship available in books. Though he never fully "buys" this explanation, he does remember the importance of reading with his mother and consents to allow his sister to read his new book to his little brother.

Vernon begins to feel a responsibility towards Robert. Then, he begins to learn to communicate with Robert, even though he does not talk. The two boys become friends.

The loss of this friendship hits Vernon hard. It spurs him to write his story.



# Style

## Point of View

Vernon Dobbs tells this story from first person point of view. The reader gets the view of Vernon on all subjects. Vernon shares his feelings and thoughts about the scenes that he witnesses.

The story occurs in the past for Vernon, and he uses flashbacks to tell the story that has haunted him for several years. Therefore, most of the story occurs in past tense, from Vernon's point of view.

When Vernon's feelings about people change, their part in the story changes as well. The impact of Vernon's point of view effects the details and the characterization of the other people in the novel.

Vernon's point of view also shows, very accurately, the view point of an adolescent boy. He worries about the acceptance of his peers; he resists interference from adults, and he engages in mildly dangerous behaviors, such as shoplifting.

## Setting

The story takes place in Baltimore, Maryland during the early 1980s.

The book begins in an unknown year in the early 1980s. Then, Vernon flashes back to the beginning of the school year in 1980. The book continues through June of the following year.

Vernon not only lives in Baltimore, he lives in a very working class neighborhood called Tenley Heights. Vernon seems to feel pride in his neighborhood, especially after the way they turn out to support Vernon and Robert in the carnival.

However, Vernon seems relieved that he does not live in the "slum" where Maxine lives. Ironically, though, she only lives one block away.

The setting works nearly as a character in the book. The neighborhood, as a whole, learns to support Robert and, then, one another. Vernon feels that the support of the neighborhood can take the place of a family for Robert, but Maxine decides that Robert needs a real family, and sends him to live with her family in North Carolina.

## Language and Meaning

The author uses simple language throughout the book, which fits the point of view of a teenage boy. Most of the language remains at an early, teenage level.



Some of the language reflects the time period of the novel, of the early 1980s. Also, the author sometimes write phonetically spelled words. This is most obvious when she describes how Robert says dog (daw).

## Structure

The author tells the story in 31 chapters and 180 pages. The type is larger than a typical novel, but very normal for a young adult book.

The book occurs linearly, following the school year of 1980-1981 of Vernon Dobbs.



## Quotes

"Dreams can make you so scared or addled or miserable that you'll do whatever you have to just to be free of them." p. 2

"I found out that once you're in junior high, you're too big for lots of the stuff you used to do before." p. 10

"Why I thought I could do French when I can't hardly speak my own language is more than I can say." p. 19

"Seeing him like that, trying so hard to do something so simple, gave me a funny feeling inside." p. 37

"Sometimes Maxine says things the rest of us would like to say but can't, because of our jobs and our children." p. 51

"Two boys, I thought, alike and not alike, both missing their mothers." p. 59

"It was okay for girls to want to do well at school, but not for boys; they weren't supposed to care." p. 70

"They couldn't take Robert away. He's her son."

"They could, too. Once you're down and out, anything can happen." p. 85

"She dressed for the occasion: her dress was lime green and the hat she wore looked like a squashed tomato with a veil stuck to it." p. 138

"Weeds flower too, you. And they can be beautiful." p. 146

"I thought I knew Ronald, you know? But it turned out he was changing, just like everything else." p. 152

"There were zillions of people around, and lots of them caught your eye and held it. They had bodies and faces that didn't fit quite right, and some of them had the same expression Robert did when I first saw him: scared...Once you smiled, that usually changed." p. 164





## Topics for Discussion

Describe an instance of foreshadowing in this book.

How does Vernon's character change in this book?

What type of conflict occurs in this book (man vs man, man vs self, man vs nature)?  
Give an example.

Do you think Vernon and Robert are friends? When does this occur, or why not?

How does Vernon's family life affect the plot?

What is the climax of the plot?

Do you think the story has a good ending? Why or why not?

Are Vernon's friends good friends? Why or why not?

How would the story be different if Vernon's mom were alive?

What is the most important lesson Vernon learned from Maxine? Robert? Miss Annie?