

Define "Normal" Study Guide

Define "Normal" by Julie Anne Peters

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Overview

When Antonia Dillon takes a student job as a peer counselor at her middle school, she finds herself in a counseling session with Jazz Luther, a punker who appears to be rude and intolerable. Antonia plays by the rules; she dresses conservatively and devotes herself to getting good grades in school. Jazz, on the other hand, wears black lipstick, has piercings and tattoos, and rebels against everything. These two seemingly opposite teenagers appear to have nothing in common, yet during the course of their counseling sessions they find themselves opening up to each other and becoming friends. Antonia and Jazz both gain emotional maturity as they learn to relate to each other and help each other cope with their problems. Each helps the other view their own issues from a different perspective, and by the end of the novel they have both grown up in surprising ways.

Antonia and Jazz have backgrounds as different as night and day, and the way they relate to their families colors the way they react to the world. Antonia Dillon appears to be happy and well adjusted: she performs well in school, she never questions authority, and thus she fits the socially accepted definition of normal. Jazz does not fit the socially accepted definition of normal. She dresses in a radical manner, she rebels against authority, and she appears to be angry with everyone. Underneath their exteriors, however, these two girls have secret pains and desires that unite them in a common bond. By the end of the novel, the term "normal" takes on a new meaning, and the way someone looks and dresses has little meaning.

About the Author

Julie Anne Peters was born in 1952 in Jamestown, New York. She received a bachelor of arts from Colorado Women's College (now the University of Denver) in 1974, and a bachelor of science from Metropolitan State College of Denver, where she graduated summa cum laude in 1985. In 1989, she received a master's of business administration from the University of Colorado, Denver.

Peters enjoyed various careers before becoming an author. She worked as an elementary schoolteacher in 1975, then entered the field of computer design and research and held positions at Tracom Corporation and Electronic Data Systems from 1975-1988. After receiving her master's of business administration, Peters worked as a special needs educational assistant for the Jefferson County School District in Lakewood, Colorado, where she remained from 1990-1994. It was here where she began to see the consequences of using the word "normal" as a label and gain the experience she needed to write *Define "Normal."* Then, with no formal training as a writer, she began a career as an author, finding this a good vehicle to reach kids about the issues they are faced with in their lives.

Define "Normal" has made lists of recommended books from numerous state library associations and has won recognition as the American Library Association's Quick Pick for Reluctant Young Adult Readers and Best Book for Young Adults.

Peters began her writing career publishing both fiction and nonfiction in children's magazines and by writing and publishing educational activities for children. She says she enjoys turning young people on to reading because she was a reluctant reader herself, and she loves writing young adult novels. As a writer, Peters belongs to the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, the Authors Guild, and the Authors League of America. Currently she writes magazine pieces for both adults and children, and she is working on two more young adult novels that focus on identity and family relationships. She lives in Lakewood, Colorado and is an activist for human rights and animal rights and a member of numerous organizations. As an activist she belongs to the American Civil Liberties Union and the Cat Care Society.



Plot Summary

Define Normal is the story of two girls' friendship and their respective journeys of recovering their relationships with their mothers. Antonia and Jazz are paired up as part of a peer counseling program. From the start, both girls dislike each other on the basis of their appearance. Only after they get to know each other do they realize that they have more in common than they realized. As they continue to shatter each other's definitions of what they think normal is or should be, they realize that their definitions of normal are not what they had originally thought.

From the beginning of their peer counseling sessions, Antonia and Jazz experience a much conflict due to their preconceived notions of what they think the other person is about. Since Dr. DiLeo, the school psychologist, will not allow either of them to quit the program, the two find ways to get along. They gradually break down the barriers between them and begin to share information about their lives with each other. Eventually, Jazz invites Antonia over and gives her swimming lessons.

During this time, Antonia's home life continues to deteriorate. Since her father left them several years ago, her mother's clinical depression has gone from bad to worse. It gets to the point where Antonia has had to take charge of the family and become the primary caretaker for her two younger brothers. When it starts to affect her academic performance, people step in to alleviate her responsibilities. The friendship she develops with Jazz paves the way for Antonia to trust Jazz and her family to lend a hand when things reach the breaking point for Antonia.

The Luthers reach out to help Antonia and her brothers. With their help they are placed in foster care with the Abeytas, an older couple. They take the children in and provide a warm and caring environment for them, especially for Antonia's brothers, Michael and Chuckie. After a disappointing visit with her mom in the hospital, Antonia is reluctant to hope they will ever return home.

Throughout the entire ordeal, her friendship with Jazz continues to develop and grow. Jazz has her own set of issues to deal with as well. After a dispute with her mother over wearing a particular dress for a piano competition, Jazz quits piano altogether. To help her friend feel better, Antonia gets her to play the piano in the school auditorium. When Mrs. Luther discovers her daughter playing during school hours, she is overcome by Jazz's talent and their argument is resolved. In the end, Jazz gives in and wears the dress, so that people will listen to the music and not pay attention to what she wears.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Define Normal is the story of two girls' friendship and their respective journeys of recovering their relationships with their mothers. Antonia and Jazz are paired up as part of a peer counseling program. From the start, both girls dislike each other on the basis of their appearance. Only after they get to know each other do they realize that they have more in common than they realized. As they continue to shatter each other's definitions of what they think normal is or should be, they realize that their definitions of normal are not what they had originally thought.

Antonia Dillon meets Jazz Luther for the first time in a peer counseling session. She feels a sense of dread as the punky Jazz walks in. Following along with a checklist of questions Dr. Dileo gave her to ask, Antonia attempts to make progress with Jazz. Instead of answering the questions, Jazz talks about her tattoos. Antonia feels anxious about the entire situation because she thinks Jazz is nothing but a punker and a druggie. Their brief meeting ends with Antonia talking about herself in hopes that Jazz would be more comfortable about opening up. Jazz yawns, walks to the door, and opens it to leave.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The conflict begins from the first page as Antonia dreads having to be a peer counselor for Jazz Luther. From the beginning, both Antonia and Jazz treat the other based on preconceived notions of what their definition of normal is. However, there is a flicker of letting go of those ideas. Antonia admits that she thinks Jazz's tattoo is kind of cool and she almost laughs at one of Jazz's jokes. Antonia's behavior is an element of foreshadowing that their ideas are likely to change.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Antonia tries to convince Dr. Dileo that he needs to find someone else to peer counsel Jazz. Since there is no one else, he encourages her to stick with it and tells her she can do it. This does not make her feel any better, so she goes home for the day angry. However, when she gets home, she discovers that her mom is sick again, and her two younger brothers have been left to fend for themselves. Michael tells her that there is no food in the house so she grabs her mom's credit card and heads out to store.

Chapter 2 Analysis

There is a pattern to Antonia's feelings that comes through in this chapter. First with the peer counseling when she confronts Dr. DiLeo and pleads with him to change her assignment and once again when she is faced with the problems at home. In both scenarios she wants to run away. There are problems mounting, and it simply becomes too much for her to handle. Although in many respects she is a girl with a thick skin, she is heavily burdened by all of the responsibilities she has to carry. It is because of her desire to do the right thing that keeps her in place in both the peer counseling program as well as home.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

After a day of struggling to stay awake in her classes, Antonia goes home and makes dinner for her brothers. She decides to check on her mom and brings her a plate of food. Her mom has been in bed sleeping all day. When Antonia comes in, she thinks for a moment that it is her husband, and she lays back down when she learns it is just Antonia bringing her dinner. Her mom asks Antonia to buy some cigarettes for her, and when Antonia refuses, her mom makes an angry remark and shuts a door in her face.

Chapter 3 Analysis

This chapter shows the drastic change in Patrice Dillon. As Antonia goes into her room to give her dinner, she stops to look at old photographs. These pictures depict a happier time for the family. Antonia's father is still around, and Patrice is smiling and looking well. The fact that Antonia is standing in the darkened bedroom while her mother refuses to get up shows how much things have changed. It also shows the darkness surrounding Antonia.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Jazz and Antonia meet again for a peer counseling session. Jazz comes in with a new hairstyle, which further convinces Antonia that Jazz is a little nuts. As Antonia tries to get a handle on the session, she finds she cannot do so. She believes the two of them have such big differences in their personalities that she does not see how the counseling can work. They start talking about their parents, and Jazz tries to pull some information out of Antonia, who refuses to budge. Jazz makes sarcastic comments with the intention of creating comic relief, but Antonia does not see it this way. Antonia feels threatened by the questions Jazz asks her, and Antonia finally storms out.

Antonia goes directly to see Dr. DiLeo and fills him in on the situation. She pleads with him to change her assignment changed, but he refuses. He asks her what problems they are having and Antonia remarks that Jazz mocks her. She says that Jazz does not take the program seriously. Dr. DiLeo persuades her to give it another shot and even offers to sit in on the sessions. Antonia refuses his offer and he suggests that perhaps if she opened up about herself, Jazz would open up, too.

Chapter 4 Analysis

More and more Antonia begins to feel as though the walls are closing in on her. She continues to have problems getting through to Jazz in the peer counseling sessions, although it is clear that Antonia does not open up either. The two girls are in a standoff. When Antonia meets with Dr. DiLeo again, he persuades her to open up to Jazz about herself and talk about school or family. Antonia's defenses go right back up; she does not want to share her feelings with Jazz. She does, however, want help. At the end of the chapter when Dr. DiLeo says that Jazz needs her help, Antonia wonders who will help her. She seems to be blind to the fact that there is someone who can help.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Antonia comes home from school to find that her mother is awake with Chuckie in the kitchen. Her mom apologizes for being short with her the night before. Antonia is visibly concerned when she learns that her mom sent Michael to McDonald's by himself, which upsets her mother. Antonia knows her mom is still not well when she discovers the burnt pot in the kitchen sink. Her mother then confesses that she used some of Antonia's savings to help pay the electric bill.

Determined to make the peer counseling sessions work with Jazz, Antonia reviews notes and tries a different approach. The next time the two of them meet, Antonia takes control. They talk about their siblings and make comparisons between them. Jazz has an older sister, who plays by the rules, while Antonia has two younger brothers that are coping with their sick mother. The subject moves to their favorite teachers, of which Jazz has none. Antonia likes Mrs. Bartoli, who Jazz thinks is out to get her. Finally, Jazz makes a comment that suck-ups rule, which pushes Antonia over the edge. Antonia gathers her things and storms out of the conference room.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Their differences are still alienating Antonia and Jazz. When Antonia provokes Jazz about her appearance, she fears Jazz will attack her. Antonia thinks Jazz probably has a weapon in her possession. However, Antonia is in for a surprise when she discovers that Jazz is actually an "A" student, the same as Antonia. By the end of the chapter, Antonia is beginning to change her tune a bit, when she feels sorry that Jazz does not get the recognition for her academic talents that Jazz should.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Dr. DiLeo sends a note for Antonia to come see him. When she does, she sees that Jazz is also there. He talks to the two of them and tells them that they need to reconcile their differences and get back to the peer counseling. He goes on to tell them that despite their various backgrounds and personalities, neither one is better than the other or right or wrong. After he leaves them to talk for a few minutes, Jazz tells Antonia that she is too serious and needs to lighten up.

Antonia misses some problems on her algebra test, and feels as though she has failed. Mrs. Bartoli expresses concern for Antonia, which Antonia disregards. She proceeds to her peer counseling meeting with Jazz. When she gets there she sees Jazz sitting on the conference table in a lotus position, chanting a mantra. Jazz tries to get Antonia to join her, and Antonia does, but then starts asking questions about Jazz's parents. They share the different activities they have done with their parents. Then they start talking about their friends, and Antonia realizes that she (Antonia) really does not have many friends at all. She also learns that Jazz does not do the types of things with her friends that Antonia had envisioned.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Antonia begins to feel as though she and Jazz are making progress. There is better dialogue between the two girls. When Jazz asks about Antonia's friends, Antonia notices that is one of the questions that she has down on her list to ask Jazz. Antonia thinks that she is now getting somewhere. At the end of the chapter, more of Antonia's beliefs about Jazz are torn down as Jazz talks about what she and her friends do. Antonia automatically thought that they do drugs or commit crimes, but Jazz assures her that they do what most other people their age do: hang out.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

It is Sunday night and Antonia decides to make a dinner of bacon and eggs for her brothers. The smell of the bacon brings back very strong memories from Antonia's past, which upsets her. After dinner she decides to call her friend, Tamra. When Tamra gets on the phone, however, she tells Antonia that her sister had died over a year ago. Antonia explains that she never got the message and apologizes for not being there for her friend. It has been a long time, and Tamra has moved on with other friends.

As Antonia is getting off the phone with Tamra, Chuckie starts to get violently ill. Not knowing what else to do, she and Michael take him to the hospital. Luckily, Chuckie only had the flu. Once they are ready to leave the hospital, they are not able to do so without a signature from an adult. As soon as the doctor is distracted by an incoming trauma patient, Antonia takes the opportunity to grab Chuckie, and the three of them sneak out.

Chapter 7 Analysis

There is an ongoing theme of Antonia's fear of failure that shows up in this chapter. Despite all of her protestations to Dr. DiLeo about being a peer counselor for Jazz Luther, she ultimately is afraid of letting him down by quitting the program. She knows that he is relying on her to help Jazz, and she thinks that if she quits or is a bad peer counselor, she will have been a failure.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

At her next meeting with Jazz, Antonia starts to open up a little more about herself. She tells Jazz that Chuckie had gone to the emergency room and how she missed school because of it. Then she mentions Tamra's sister's death. To help her relax a little, Jazz starts to give Antonia a shoulder rub. Antonia goes on to say how Shelley would never have committed suicide. She was happy and normal. Jazz catches the word normal and asks Antonia to define what that means. Antonia answers that she was happy, healthy, had family and friends; she was popular. When Jazz hears this she and Antonia get into a debate over what their definitions of normal are. Jazz asks questions about Antonia's parents, and when Antonia does not answer, comes to the conclusion that her parents are normal, by Jazz's standards.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The girls' notion of normal, as an ongoing theme throughout the story, comes into question once again. Antonia tells Jazz about Tamra's sister, but Antonia does not know how she died. Jazz automatically assumes that she committed suicide. Antonia says that Shelley would never have done that; she was perfectly normal. By Antonia's own admission, she says that normal means happy, healthy, and having friends. When Jazz says that she has friends and family, Jazz concludes that she (Jazz) is normal, too. Antonia's argument is defeated.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

After everyone in Antonia's house gets over the flu, her mom announces that she wants to take them on a picnic to Cherokee Reservoir. Her mom makes the sandwiches; they get in the car to go, and her mom breaks down. They all get out of the car, and her mom goes back to bed. When Antonia meets with Jazz the next time, Antonia finds that she (Antonia) is beginning to look forward to the session. Jazz picks up where she left off, asking about Antonia's parents.

Although she is reluctant to start, Antonia tells Jazz that her father is a roofer. To get the spotlight off her, she asks Jazz about her mom. Jazz turns it around and starts asking Antonia about her mom. They both avoid the subject. Antonia confesses that the one thing she wishes she had learned was how to swim. Jazz invites her over to use the indoor pool and offers to give her swimming lessons. Antonia hesitates because she knows that her mother will never be well enough to take care of her brothers while she is out.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Jazz continues to ask Antonia about her family. Finally, Antonia tells Jazz that her father is gone. Jazz then comes to the conclusion that he is dead. Instead of clarifying the information, Antonia chooses to change the subject to Jazz's mother. Antonia does not make it clear why she (Antonia) does not set the record straight immediately about her dad. This sets the stage for further tension as this information has a way of coming out later.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

On Saturday morning when Antonia gets up, she sees that her mom is up and looking very well. Her mom tells her that it is okay for Antonia to go to Jazz's house for the day. She calls Jazz up and tells her she is coming over. When she gets there she sees that Jazz lives in what appears to be a mansion with an indoor pool. Jazz lets her borrow a bathing suit and starts to teach her how to swim. Antonia gobbles up the opportunity now that it is in front of her. Even after she struggles with her breathing and swallows water, she insists that she continue with the lesson.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Once again, Antonia's determination and fear of failure shine through. She sees this opportunity to swim as a do or die situation; or a *sink or swim* situation. Her fear of failure is so great that she is willing to continue the lesson, even when she is tired and choking on water. Jazz remarks that Antonia is obsessed. However, this feeds into Antonia's overall feeling that she does not want to let anyone down.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Antonia goes overboard on the swimming lesson and blacks out in the water. Jazz, who is also a lifeguard, saves Antonia. It is at this moment that Jazz's mother comes home and sees that Jazz has a friend over. Mrs. Luther likes Antonia right away and comments on her nice manners. She invites Antonia to dinner with them that night, but Antonia claims her mother is expecting her home. Mrs. Luther offers to give Antonia a ride home on the way to their dinner. When she gets home, Antonia sees that the house is dark and no one is home.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Despite Antonia's best efforts to keep her defenses up and keep people in the dark about her situation, she knew she was going to get caught when Mrs. Luther offered to drive her home. Mrs. Luther is just being nice by taking Antonia home after swimming. However, Antonia fears that Mrs. Luther will know something is going on once she sees her house. She knows that if anyone questions it, the authorities may get involved and destroy the remaining pieces of her family. This is the same reason that Antonia chose not to call Mrs. Marsh when Chuckie was in the hospital. She continues to do everything in her power to keep her family together.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Since Mrs. Luther does not want to leave Antonia alone, she takes her to dinner with Jazz and Mr. Luther. Antonia goes inside to change and joins them to eat. At the restaurant she and Jazz order lobster, which Antonia loves. Mrs. Luther asks about Antonia's mother, and Antonia tells her that she is an image consultant. In order to avoid further talk about her mom, Antonia merely says that her mom is taking time off until Chuckie starts school.

When the Luthers take Antonia home they see that nobody is home yet and offer to let her stay the night. Antonia goes inside to see if they left a note and goes outside with a blank sheet of paper and tells them that they did leave a note. Jazz, however, knows she is lying.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Antonia is nervous about having Jazz and her mom see where she lives. When she sees that no one is at home, Antonia hopes she can brush them off. She knows that something is wrong, since nobody has come home yet. Trying to stay calm and keep it together, she figures out a plan to get Mrs. Luther to leave. Thinking fast, she pretends that they left a note and goes outside with a blank piece of paper. The last thing she wants is Mrs. Luther or even Jazz getting involved in her family situation.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Antonia is alarmed that her family still is not back. She is debating on a course of action when the phone rings. It is Michael. He tells her that their mom took him and Chuckie to a hotel, and he does not know exactly where he is. Looking at signs around him, he tries to describe where he is, so she can get to him. Their mother is in trouble, and he is afraid. When she hangs up with him, she wonders how she is going to get there. At that moment, Jazz calls. Antonia asks her if she knows anyone that drives, because she needs a ride.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Antonia suspects the worst. She is now stuck between a rock and a hard place. Since both of her brothers are in trouble with their mom, Antonia is forced to do the very thing that she does not want to do. Since she is saddled with responsibility and does not want to lie to Jazz as her peer counselor, she tells Jazz that she needs help. Giving in like this is a major turning point in the story.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

They arrive at the motel and find Michael outside one of the rooms. Antonia tries to get Mrs. Luther to leave, but she refuses. She marches into the room and gets Michael and Chuckie. Antonia's mom is hunched on the floor behind the television. They pile into the car with Mrs. Dillon in the front seat while Mrs. Luther goes to the office to make some phone calls. When she gets back she tells them that they are all going back to the Luther's house for the night.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Despite the emotions Antonia feels when finding her mother and allowing Mrs. Luther's intervention, Antonia feels relieved. She feels a sense of dread when they get to the motel, and Antonia does want Mrs. Luther to leave her there, but deep down she knows that the biggest problem she has is running away from the problem. The events in this chapter set up further change and potential rehabilitation for the Dillons as a family unit.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

The next morning, Antonia gets up and finds everyone is having breakfast in the kitchen with Mr. Luther. When Mrs. Luther comes in to the kitchen, she tells Antonia and her brother that she has taken their mom to the hospital for psychiatric evaluation. Michael exclaims that she is not crazy, but scared. Mrs. Luther agrees and says that she knows he is scared too. Antonia asks if she can go see her, and Mrs. Luther replies that it is not a good idea until she is feeling well enough. Then she asks Antonia how she can get in touch with their father, and Jazz breaks in to say that their father is dead.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Antonia is relieved when she wakes up at the Luthers the next morning. It is Sunday morning and everyone is relaxing over a complete breakfast, which is the exact opposite of what she is used to. When she is reminded of her mother, she starts to crumble emotionally, but she manages to keep it together. Then, when Michael asks the question of what is going to happen to them, Mrs. Luther asks about their father. She is clearly trying to figure out a way for someone to properly care for the children. However, since the father is not available, it foreshadows other events leading to an alternate solution for Antonia and her brothers.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Jazz asks Antonia how they will manage when their father is dead and their mom is not well. Antonia says that they have some money and they get by. She gives Antonia another bathing suit to put on, and they have more swimming lessons. Later in the afternoon, Jazz prepares for her piano lesson. She tells Antonia about her French instructor, who she romanticizes over. When she goes for her lesson, Antonia listens in and is dumbstruck by Jazz's talent. After the lesson is over, Antonia tells Jazz that she is impressed with her ability. Jazz tells Antonia that she is practicing for a competition and her mother is making her wear a formal gown that she does not like.

Chapter 16 Analysis

The reader can get a clear idea of how Antonia is feeling at the very beginning of the chapter. She is listening to a CD that Jazz started playing. The lyrics are saying, "hurt me, baby. Slash me. Burn me." Antonia reflects that not only are those words that she can relate to, but she finds them soothing. Not only does this give a real glimpse into what Antonia is feeling, but it shows how she is more accepting of Jazz and her interests. All of a sudden they do not seem to be so different.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

On Monday morning, Jazz's dad dropped everyone off at school. When Antonia and Jazz meet for their peer counseling session, Jazz remarks how much she likes Antonia's brothers. She tries to get Antonia to talk about her mom, but she refuses and instead asks Jazz about her mom. Jazz talks about an incident where her mom called the cops on her after she had been out late. Jazz sees it as a way for her mom to control everything, but Antonia suggests that maybe her mom is afraid that Jazz will change.

Since Antonia is still staying with Jazz, she waits for her after school and they go home together. When they arrive, they see that someone is there waiting for them. They find out it is Karen Millbrook, who works for Social Services.

Chapter 17 Analysis

One of Antonia's biggest fears comes to fruition at the end of this chapter when Karen Millbrook from Social Services shows up. Antonia feels at home with the Luthers and her world is turned further upside down when she is faced with the reality of going into foster care. Antonia wants nothing more than to have a normal family life, which she gets a taste of while staying with the Luthers. The idea of Social Services intervening makes her feel like things will never go back the way they were when her mother was well.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Karen has come to take Antonia and her brothers into foster care. She tells Antonia that she does not know how long Antonia's mother will be in the hospital. In the meantime, they need to go somewhere else. Karen takes them to the Abeyta's house. Luis and Tillie had raised several children of their own and are enthusiastic about taking Antonia, Michael, and Chuckie in. Since the Abeyta's were in the same school district, they did not need to switch schools.

At the next peer counseling session, Antonia tells Jazz right off the bat that she does not want to talk about her living situation. She gives in a little and tells Jazz that the Abeyta's seem like nice people. When Antonia refuses to say anything else, she gets angry at Jazz for pushing, and they get into a fight, which ends with Antonia leaving the session.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Antonia is clearly uncomfortable with the foster home situation. She seems mortified that things have come to this, and feels like she needs to be more on top of things. She begins to think about things left behind at home that need to be tended to while she is in math class; it distracts her to the point where she is making mistakes. Antonia's feelings are further aggravated when Jazz antagonizes her by pushing her for details about her foster parents. Antonia's anger sounds like jealousy when berates Jazz about how Antonia thinks Jazz has this great home and parents, but Jazz is completely thankless in return. She is too upset to realize that Jazz is pressing Antonia because she cares about her.



Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Antonia gets home from school, and Karen comes to visit. She tells them that their mom is feeling a little better and wants to see them. Although Michael declines, Antonia is anxious to see her. Antonia is startled by her mother's appearance. She is still unwell and mostly unresponsive, which makes Antonia very upset. Karen explains to her that the medication sometimes takes a while to work.

After the hospital visit, Karen takes Antonia out to McDonald's and tells Antonia about how she also used to be clinically depressed. She tells Antonia that she had gone through what her mom is going through. Antonia finally accepts that she will be staying with the Abeyta's for some time. Karen also tells Antonia that she knows that her father is not dead; he and her mom are merely divorced.

Chapter 19 Analysis

Antonia is in a hurry to get her life back to normal, which to her means being at her own house with her mother well enough to take care of them. This is evident when Antonia shows how excited she is by the idea of going to see her mother. Despite the fact that she hurts Tillie's feelings, she feels the urgency to see her mother and more or less wishes her to be well enough to come home and get things back to the way they should be. Her hopes are dashed when she sees her mother, who doesn't recognize Antonia. Antonia fears that her mother may never be well enough to come home. When Karen speaks to Antonia about her own history, it gives Antonia hope again that things might still work out.



Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

Karen asks Antonia if she knows where her father is. She says she has no idea. When they get back to the house, Antonia does not say anything about her visit. Back at school, Antonia begins to look forward to the peer counseling sessions with Jazz. During their session, Antonia asks Jazz about her practice for the piano competition. Jazz says that although she keeps her piano playing a secret from her friends, she wants to get into Juilliard to continue her studies.

Antonia then tells Jazz about her visit with her mom at the hospital and how scary it was. She says that her mom's condition is not a mental one, but a physical one. After school, Karen is waiting to pick up Antonia. She tells Antonia that she has been to the house and was able to get some clothes for her. While Antonia is working on her homework, Tillie sends Michael into her room with a snack. Michael tells Antonia how much he likes Luis and Tillie and that he wants to stay. He is afraid to go home and says he does not care if their mom never comes home from the hospital.

Chapter 20 Analysis

When Karen picks Antonia up at school, Antonia once again feels a sense of dread. To her, it could not be a good sign. However, Karen had been to Antonia's house to pick up some clothes for the children. When Antonia hears this, she instinctively slips into her old mode of assuming all of the responsibility and asks Karen if the toilet was flushed. Karen does not understand why Antonia was asking this, but it shows how Antonia was still not able to let go of taking charge of her family and making certain everything was running smoothly.



Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

On a Sunday morning, Antonia decides to call Jazz and see how her piano competition had gone the night before. Mrs. Luther tells her that Jazz cannot come to the phone. Antonia is disappointed when Jazz does not call her back. At school, Antonia sees Jazz with her friends and asks her. In return, Jazz pretends she does not know what Antonia is talking about. Jazz and her friends walk away, laughing at Antonia's expense.

At their session later on, Jazz tells Antonia that she does not want to talk about the competition. Antonia automatically thinks this means Jazz lost. Jazz tells Antonia how she is also grounded for life. She tells Antonia that she quit the piano and never played in the competition. She quit because she had gotten into a fight with her mother over the dress she was supposed to wear, but did not want to. When Gregoire, her instructor, sided with Jazz's mom, it was the final straw.

Chapter 21 Analysis

The tone is set early on in the chapter when Antonia calls Jazz on the phone and gets Mrs. Luther instead. From the conversation they have, Antonia hears anger and sadness in Mrs. Luther's voice. Although she does not pick up on it, this foreshadows further tension between Jazz and her mom. The fact that Jazz does not tell Antonia about the competition is a clue that something has gone wrong. When Antonia finds out that Jazz and her mom had a fight, it is clear to Antonia that there is more going on beneath the surface in Jazz's home.



Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

Karen comes by for another visit and asks Antonia if she has tried calling her mother since her visit with her. She says she has not and does not want to visit her again either. Karen encourages her not to give up hope.

Antonia decides that the only thing she looks forward to anymore are the peer counseling sessions. This time when she arrives, she notices Jazz with the headphones on again, playing an air piano. Antonia asks if she is still not playing and Jazz says no. Jazz jumps into questions about how Antonia is doing with the foster home situation and how it is all working out. Antonia says that her brothers are adjusting well, but she does not want to be there. During their conversation, it comes out that Antonia's dad is not dead after all. Although she feels bad about lying, Antonia explains that she just did not want to talk about her dad, since her dad is dead to her.

Their next session on that Friday starts out the same way as the one before. Antonia asks Jazz why she does not simply give in and say she was joking about the dress. Jazz answers that she has no intention of giving in to them. Jazz feels that her parents are the ones suffering because they have spent a lot of money on her lessons. They call a truce, and Jazz lets Antonia know that she is there for her if she wants to talk at all.

Chapter 22 Analysis

Antonia mentions that the only thing she looked forward to anymore was the peer counseling sessions. This is a sign that she has changed her perspective on a few things. First, since her mother is getting help and she and her brothers are being cared for, she no longer has the weight of the world on her shoulders. With the toughest responsibilities going to others, she has the chance to concentrate on herself and her studies. It also gives her the chance to focus on her peer counseling which is important to her because she knows that Dr. DiLeo is relying on her. Plus, she is beginning to truly enjoy the friendship she has with Jazz, who she wants to help.



Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

Karen comes by with another update on Antonia's mother. She says that there are good days and bad days. As soon as there are more good days than bad, she will be coming home. Karen also says that her mom is experiencing some side effects with the medication, and they have yet to find the right combination. She tries to persuade Antonia to call, but Antonia is resistant and gives excuses.

When Antonia sees Jazz at the next session, she asks if her parents have suffered enough. She feels it is time for Jazz to give in, so everyone can feel better. Antonia sees how it is hurting Jazz and wishes she could make it better. Antonia asks if Jazz can play at home when no one is around, but Jazz's mom is there all the time. Jazz asks about Antonia's mom, and Antonia just says that she just cannot go back to the hospital to see her. They begin to feel a sense of sympathy for one another's situation and true friendship seems to be blossoming. Later that night as Antonia thinks about Jazz and her situation, she comes up with an idea.

Chapter 23 Analysis

Antonia once again feels the fear of failure, a common theme throughout the book. As it is a sensitive issue for her, she feels compelled to figure out a solution for Jazz. As her peer counselor, she feels responsible. She notes that the rift between Jazz and her mom has grown since she and Jazz began the peer counseling. When she sits up at the end and exclaims that she has a solution, it foreshadows events to come that will bring Jazz back to her music.



Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

When the girls meet for their peer counseling session, Antonia leads Jazz into the auditorium where there is a piano on the stage. She makes her sit and play. Jazz breaks into the polonaise that she was supposed to play at her competition. Halfway through it, she stops. She tells Antonia that it is just too painful because the memories are too fresh. Instead, she plays a Bach minuet. After she finishes her set, she discovers her friends in the back of the auditorium. Mortified, she runs from the stage.

That night, Antonia calls Jazz and finds out from Mr. Luther that she is grounded once again. He softens and allows her to come to the phone. Antonia apologizes for Jazz's friends being there and tells her that it was not her idea. She tells Jazz that they are not real friends if they cannot accept who she really is. Deep down, Jazz is grateful to Antonia for doing what she did, and she thanks her before hanging up.

Chapter 24 Analysis

In this chapter, the roles reverse between Jazz and Antonia. For Antonia, she becomes more aggressive, the way Jazz usually is. She exhibits this when she refuses to take no for an answer and makes Jazz play the piano in the auditorium. Jazz exhibits behavior similar to Antonia's from earlier in the book when Antonia cooks the bacon which reminds her of better times for her family. For Jazz, she refuses to play the polonaise because there are too many painful memories attached to it.



Chapter 25

Chapter 25 Summary

Instead of their usual session, Antonia and Jazz go straight to the auditorium for Jazz to play. The next time, however, they meet back in the conference room. Antonia finds Jazz again sitting in the lotus position and chanting. They get back to their discussion, and Jazz presses Antonia about her father and asks about what happened. Antonia simply says that things got to be too much for him to handle and he left. Antonia goes on about her relationship with her mother and explains how close they used to be, when things were still good. Antonia suggests to Jazz that they meet from now on in the auditorium. Jazz is about to object when her friend, Ram, comes along. Instead of running away, Antonia sticks around and Jazz introduces them.

Chapter 25 Analysis

Antonia hears for the first time how strong she is by handling all of her family issues. To her, she is merely doing what needs to be done. She feels that it was her responsibility to step up and take care of her brothers. When she tells Jazz about why her father left, she says that it just got to be too much with her mom and brothers. It is Jazz that tells Antonia that it is not her responsibility to step in for her father. She is still not ready to accept that she should not have to do it.



Chapter 26

Chapter 26 Summary

The next time Jazz is playing in the auditorium, Dr. DiLeo comes in to watch. He asks about the counseling sessions and she tells him that they have modified their sessions to include the piano playing. Mrs. Bartoli also comes in and is surprised when she sees Jazz playing on stage. Antonia tells her how smart Jazz is, and Mrs. Bartoli is even more surprised. During the same conversation, she tells Mrs. Bartoli that she wants to join the math club again.

The next day in the auditorium, Mrs. Luther appears next to Antonia, surprising her. She is overcome with emotion as she listens to her daughter play. When Jazz is done playing, she sees her mother in the audience and turns away. Her mother runs up to the stage and embraces her. When Jazz tries to refuse, her mother promises her that she can wear whatever she wants, as long as she plays.

Chapter 26 Analysis

Antonia's definition of normal is almost completely shattered. In this chapter, she sticks up for Jazz to Mrs. Bartoli. She stands up for Jazz to Mrs. Bartoli because she feels that Jazz has received an unfair shake from Mrs. Bartoli. It seems to surprise the teacher that the two girls have become friends because Mrs. Bartoli's definition of normal is what Antonia's used to be at the beginning of the story. This is another example of how much Antonia has changed her mind about what is normal. She has also come to learn, as has Jazz, that there is much more to a person than meets the eye.



Chapter 27

Chapter 27 Summary

Back at school on Monday, Antonia is excited about a conversation with her mother and wants to tell Jazz all about it. When they get together, Jazz also tells Antonia that she is playing the piano again. Although Antonia is happy about her mom, she expresses concern about her return home. Antonia gets the feeling that something is going on, and Jazz suggests that they go seek Dr. DiLeo.

Dr. DiLeo explains to both Jazz and Antonia that he set them up with each other for peer counseling. They each, however, believed that they were only helping the other, not the other way around. He tells Antonia that a few people such as Mrs. Marsh and Mrs. Bartoli came forward and expressed concern for Antonia. He goes on to tell Jazz that her mother called him making threats, and that, ultimately, both girls were in trouble. Both girls left in a huff, feeling utterly betrayed.

Chapter 27 Analysis

Dr. DiLeo's gamble pays off. By putting Jazz and Antonia together for peer counseling, he demonstrates he had the insight to know that the two could help each other. It also shows that he did not have the same preconceived notion of what was normal or not. As a psychologist, he looked at the two as individuals with their own set of family problems that would probably be best suited for each other.



Chapter 28

Chapter 28 Summary

Karen picks Antonia up at school and tells her that she can go home tomorrow. She goes on to tell Antonia how well her mother is doing and how proud she will be when she sees her. When the Abeytas find out the news, they take it hard. Michael also takes the news hard; he does not want to go home.

On Sunday Karen arrives to take the kids home. It is hard for Michael and Chuckie to say good bye, but as hard for Antonia. When they get home, their mother is already there. She comes out to meet them, Antonia thinks she looks fantastic. They decide to celebrate with the cake they baked for her. Before Karen leaves, Antonia asks her to find some counseling for Michael, since he seems to take the return home badly.

Chapter 28 Analysis

Antonia feels betrayed by the secrecy that surrounded the peer counseling sessions. However, she feels a sense of loss in the absence of her meetings with Jazz. It is clear their relationship has extended beyond what was required of them; they became friends. She also admits that Jazz did, in fact, help her through some rough times. Not only did Jazz help her, but her overall situation has evened out a little bit as her outlook in general has brightened, particularly after her mother returns home.



Chapter 29

Chapter 29 Summary

Antonia returns to her bedroom and immediately feels right at home. She notices there is an envelope waiting for her. She sees it is an invitation to go to Jazz's competition the next day. When Antonia asks her mother if she can go, her mother suggests that they all go, including Michael and Chuckie.

At the competition, Antonia notices that Jazz has cleaned up her punk look for a more conservative one. Jazz is wearing the dress that her mom had picked out for the last competition. She performs a stunning program, which everyone loves. After it is over, Antonia's mother introduces herself to the Luthers. She does not remember meeting Mrs. Luther the one time prior. Mr. Luther videotapes the girls, and they go running off together.

Chapter 29 Analysis

There is another distinctive difference now with Antonia's mother. Earlier in the story Antonia looked at old photographs of her mother when she was happy and functional; then Antonia saw her mother huddled under the bed covers, afraid of the world. Now, the reader sees Patrice as drastically improved. Not only is she looking physically better, but she is enthusiastic and responsive, more like she was in her younger photographs. When Antonia gets the invitation to Jazz's competition, she is the one to suggest going as a family, which she could not do when she was unwell. The change is a happy one for her, Antonia, and the whole family.



Chapter 30

Chapter 30 Summary

The girls wander off to a nearby playground and get over their previous argument. Jazz admits that she had given in on wearing the dress in order for people to listen to the music, not watch her. They both admit that they have helped each other out. They think about getting revenge on Dr. DiLeo for setting them up, but they decide against it since they feel the peer counseling program will help a lot of other people. Jazz goes on to tell Antonia how she and her mother are starting to get along a little bit better. Their relationship is not completely healed, but they are working on it.

Chapter 30 Analysis

Both girls reconcile their differences and acknowledge how much the peer counseling program has helped them. Even though their sessions were over, they made the decision to keep a friendship going. They have finally accepted each other as they are. When Jazz invites Antonia to her swim party, it demonstrates that she not only accepts Antonia as a friend, but she has let go of her worries about what her other friends will think. Jazz knows that her true friends are going to be those that accept her for who she is, not what she looks like or the hobbies she has.



Characters

Antonia Renee Dillon

Antonia Dillon is a fourteen-year-old girl with a lot on her plate. She shows a great deal of self control throughout the story, as there are many times where she feels like she is going to break down, but does not. She is most afraid of failing and letting people down. Her mother is clinically depressed and spends almost all of her days in bed, refusing to go out into the world. Her father left years before, so she and her brothers need to fend for themselves, more or less. Since her father is gone and her mother is incapacitated, Antonia has stepped into the parenting role. She takes care of her two younger brothers, all the housework, and her own homework at the same time. She is an "A" student and takes her studies very seriously as she views it as her ticket to college in a few years.

As part of her extracurricular activities she volunteers for the peer counseling program. However, it is because of her own problems at home that she has problems initially getting through to Jazz. She sees judges Jazz as a misfit, druggie, and complete loser. It is only as they open up to one another that they realize that they are both going through issues at home. Although Antonia believes that she is counseling Jazz, she comes to look forward to her sessions with Jazz because their developing friendship helps her to cope with her problems at home. When things reach a fevered pitch at home, Antonia relies on Jazz to help her through. She soon realizes that people are not what they seem on the surface. Ultimately, they are able to help each other with their problems.

Jasmine "Jazz" Luther

Jasmine is a young girl in junior high with a penchant for dramatic clothing and accessories. At first glance, she is an angry and seemingly antisocial person. Her initial conversations with Antonia are forced and go nowhere. She has no apparent desire to work on any dialogue and appears to be the complete opposite of Antonia. However, as the two of them get to know each other a little better, they discover they actually like each other. This is first demonstrated when Jazz invites Antonia to her house for swimming lessons.

Jasmine lives in a house that is enormous. It is so big that there is an indoor pool. She has all the creature comforts that Antonia does not have. Aside from the wealth, Jazz also has both parents living at home, which Antonia also does not have. Her relationship with her parents is not great. She is frequently at odds with them. Jazz marches to the beat of her own drummer and does not want to be "proper" as her parents want for her. She wants to make her own mark. This stubbornness almost costs the piano she loves. After a dispute over a dress for a piano competition, she threatens to quit for good. Once her mother finally acknowledges how beautiful Jazz's playing is, Jazz's mother



acquiesces and tells Jazz she can wear what she wants. It is only at this point that Jazz then gives in a little on her end and chooses to wear the dress in the end.

Jazz turns out to be a surprise friend for Antonia. Jazz also drops her preconceived notions of Antonia as a do-gooder as well, once she learns more about who Antonia is. Not only do people misjudge Jazz because of her appearance, Jazz does the same for others who appear otherwise to be "normal."

Chuckie Dillon

Chuckie is Antonia's little brother. Since he is not old enough to go to school yet, he goes to day care every day. Of the three siblings, he seems to be young enough to not really know what is going on yet. When the children are sent to live with the Abeytas, Chuckie handles the transition the best. He is happy to be there, as he is equally happy to be going home at the end.

Michael Dillon

Michael is the middle sibling in the Dillon family. He is in the second grade. Although Antonia is the one saddled with most of the responsibility, Michael does not adjust well to his mother's situation. He is angry, confused, and scared. He is angry at Antonia for getting Mrs. Luther involved in the family situation. He does not understand the pressure on Antonia as the oldest child and is afraid that they will lose their home. Michael feels a lot of resentment against his mother. He feels abandoned and blames her for the problems she is having. When the Abeytas take the children in, Michael warms to them immediately. They provide the type of home that Michael wants. He sees Luis and Tillie as the parents he has always wanted. They give him the attention and care he longs for.

Patrice Dillon

Patrice is Antonia's mother. She suffers from clinical depression and has for some time. After her husband left she got worse. Antonia mentions that she was bad from time to time even when her father was still around. She also mentions that her mother's illness is the primary reason that her father left them. Patrice is probably in her late thirties with blonde hair. Her illness causes her to remain confined to her bedroom where she sleeps for days on end. Even when she shows signs of getting better, her anxiety gets the better of her and she lapses right back.

When Patrice takes Michael and Chuckie out to the motel, she is well enough to go out, then quick lapses back into an almost-vegetative state. She remains curled up like a ball in the corner of the motel room. Help finally comes when Mrs. Luther arrives with Jazz and takes them out of there. Once in the psychiatric hospital she gets the care she desperately needs. Unfortunately, she does not recover as quickly as everyone wants her to. She has a hard time adjusting to the medication they give her, until she gets the one that works best for her. Once she is well enough, she goes home and the children



return. The Patrice at the end of the story is quite different from the one in the beginning. At the end, Patrice is happier and healthier. She is then well enough to care for her children.

Dr. DiLeo

Dr. DiLeo is the school psychologist. He is in charge of the peer counseling program at the Oberon Middle School. Both Jazz and Antonia make fun of the fact that he constantly eats peppermint Tic Tacs. They remark how he always smells like peppermint. Dr. DiLeo makes each girl believe that they are the peer counselor in charge. He knows that both of them are having problems at home and thinks that they can help each other. He is right, since they become good friends by the end. It is concern that motivates him to set them up together.

Mrs. Marsh

Mrs. Marsh is the Dillon's neighbor. She is the one that the children go to when they need an extra hand or babysitting help. When they need an adult, they go to Mrs. Marsh. However, as Michael mentions when Chuckie is in the hospital, she begins to ask questions. They know that she is well aware of their situation. Mrs. Marsh truly means well. She is one of the individuals who come forward to Dr. DiLeo expressing concern over Antonia. She is one of the reasons that he got Antonia into the peer counseling program. Dr. DiLeo also indicates that Mrs. Marsh had been concerned for some time and wanted to have Social Services intervene, but they were unable to.

Laurent Luther

Laurent Luther is Jasmine's father. He is a wealthy and successful businessman. His relationship with his daughter is a strained one, although not as strained as the one his wife shares with Jazz. He is a little more lenient and laid back about Jazz than his wife is. However, he does exhibit a short fuse with her every once in a while, such as when they are at the restaurant and Jazz yells to the waiter for the ketchup, and when she gives him a hard time about breakfast when Antonia and her brothers are there. He wants her to use the manners that he has tried to teach her.

Marguerite Luther

Marguerite is Jasmine's mother. She is a nice and proper woman, who wants to see her daughter straighten out. She is a stubborn woman like her daughter. This is evident when their standoff occurs over the dress issue at Jazz's first piano competition. Marguerite is also a compassionate woman. When she takes Antonia to the motel to get her mother and brothers, she does not make any comment or pass any judgment. Her interest seems to be merely in getting the children to a safe place and getting immediate medical attention for Patrice. She is concerned about the children's welfare and knows



that she cannot take them all in, and so she calls Social Services. When the children leave the Luthers' house she generously packs them each a bag of new clothes to take with them.

Mrs. Bartoli

Mrs. Bartoli teaches math at the Oberon Middle School. She is also Antonia's favorite teacher. As the math teacher, Mrs. Bartoli also runs the math club, in which Antonia is a member. It is when Antonia drops out of the math club and starts missing assignments that Mrs. Bartoli expresses concern. She notices the drop in Antonia's performance and knows that Antonia is having problems at home. Dr. DiLeo mentions to Antonia at the conclusion of the peer counseling sessions that Mrs. Bartoli had also gone to him to see what can be done to help.

Kurt Dillon

Kurt is Patrice's ex-husband and Antonia's, Michael's, and Chuckie's father. He is an out-of-work roofer and the children refer to him as dead. Even when Karen contacts him to let him know what is going on, he makes no move to reclaim the children or come back to help them. He has completely abandoned them as well as their mother.

Tamra Dundee-Kelso

Tamra is one of Antonia's friends. Antonia does not have many friends and because of her growing responsibilities, does not have the opportunity to keep them. When she calls Tamra on the phone, it is the first time she is talking to her in over a year. Antonia discovers that Tamra's sister, Shelley, has died. By this time, Tamra has moved on and become one of the popular crowd at her new school, and she is trying out for the cheerleading squad.

Gregoire St. Jacques

Gregoire is Jazz's piano teacher, upon whom she has a crush. He is a tall and thin French man. He has blond shaggy hair, which he wears in a ponytail. When Antonia sees him she also notices that he has a bald spot. Jazz declares that she hates Gregoire when he sides with her mother over the issue of wearing the dress at the piano competition. This angers and upsets Jazz because she feels betrayed.

Karen Millbrook

Karen works for Social Services. She arrives at the Luther's house to pick up the children and take them into foster care. When she takes Antonia out for McDonald's at one point, Karen tells her about her job. Working for Social Services, she has to do a lot



of dirty work, going in to bad situations where children are in potentially dangerous situations. She admits to Antonia that she was also clinically depressed like Antonia's mother is. She tells Antonia this so that Antonia feels hopeful that her own mother will improve.



Objects/Places

Oberon Middle School

This is where Antonia Dillon and Jasmine Luther attend school.

Oberon School Counseling Center

This is where Dr. Dileo has his offices. Although the peer counseling sessions are held in the faculty conference room, the peer counseling program is run in this center.

The Faculty Conference Room

The conference room is where Antonia and Jazz meet for their peer counseling sessions.

March 19

This date is Antonia's parents' wedding anniversary.

The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle

This is a book that Antonia reads for a class assignment. She does not really like the book, except for the ending where Charlotte runs away from her family.

Cherokee Reservoir

This is the place where Antonia's family used to picnic when her mom was still feeling well enough.

The Lucky Lady Saloon

This is the bar that Mrs. Dillon stops at by the airport when she brings Michael and Chuckie to the hotel room.

The Wayfarer Motel

This is where Mrs. Dillon takes Michael and Chuckie when she has her final break down. Mrs. Luther helps them when she arrives with Antonia to pick them up.



St. Joseph's Hospital

This is where Mrs. Luther takes Patrice after picking everyone up at the motel. Mrs. Dillon remains there under a doctor's care until she is well enough to leave.

Juilliard

Juilliard is a school for the performing arts. It is Jazz's dream to be accepted here so that she can continue to play the piano.

Bethel Hall

This is the hall where Jazz has her piano competition. Everyone in Antonia's family attends.

Setting

Much of the action in the novel takes place in Oberon Middle School, a suitable setting for a novel about judgment and acceptance. Middle school is a place where cliques rule the social structure and where teenagers learn to define themselves and discover their place in the world. Oberon Middle School is a typical middle school where kids tend to judge others by how they look and the friends they choose. It is difficult to make friends from other cliques or friends who do not seem to fit anywhere.

So Peters removes Antonia and Jazz from the middle school halls to the peer counseling office where they have a chance to get to know each other.

Visiting the homes of both Antonia and Jazz helps put the girls' issues in focus and reveals what lies beneath the exteriors they choose to present. So much judgment goes on at school that teens often take on personas that combine their need to fit in with their need to protect themselves. They know that in middle school image is important, so they adopt an image that works to their advantage. The true picture of a person's life comes into focus when they are seen outside the controlled environment of the middle school. Once Antonia and Jazz visit each other's homes and learn about their interactions with their families, they begin to see each other in more depth. Antonia's home reveals a deeply disturbing situation and helps explain her repression and lack of friends. Jazz's home reveals the conventional life she strives so hard to not conform to—an environment where certain behaviors are expected and appearances mean everything.

Social Sensitivity

One of the first things the reader notices about Antonia is how repressed she is and how she appears to have no real friends.

Having no friends makes life difficult for a teenager; not only is it uncomfortable to sit alone at lunch and painful to be excluded from parties and social events, but it prevents self-exploration and self-discovery.

People learn from interacting with others, and they gain perspective by observing how others think and act. Antonia's family responsibilities prevent her from making friends but the peer counseling program provides an opportunity to talk with other teens that have similar concerns and feelings. Dr. Dileo knew what he was doing when he goaded Antonia into counseling, and he knew what he was doing when he paired her with Jazz Luther. It is no surprise that Antonia benefits from the counseling sessions. She longs for interaction with her peers, and Jazz offers a view of life Antonia has never experienced.

The need to interact with others is a basic human need, magnified in the teen years by the social pressure to be popular. Jazz is popular. She has a large circle of friends who dress like her and act like her and have thus come together in their own clique.

Antonia could never be included in the punker clique, yet Jazz finds it easy to relate to Antonia even though she appears to have nothing in common with her at all.

Most teenagers struggle against labels and they often find it difficult to prevent the assigning of labels to people. In middle schools, kids often fall into cliques by accident rather than by choice, then before they know it they find it nearly impossible to break out of their stereotypical roles. They play sports and find themselves labeled as jocks, or if they enjoy math they find themselves labeled as nerds. It takes maturity to recognize that each person is multi-faceted; it takes maturity to look beyond appearances and allow someone to reveal their true self. Peters recognizes that in middle school, it also takes courage to allow someone to reveal their true self and to penetrate a clique that by definition excludes them.

Once Jazz knows Antonia as more than a nerd, and once Antonia knows Jazz as more than a punker, they still have to conquer the embarrassment of being friends in public.

At the end of the novel when Jazz introduces Antonia to her friends and when Antonia notices that the punker boy Ram who Jazz introduces to her is cute, they have broadened their scope and successfully bucked middle school convention.

Literary Qualities

Peters writes realistic fiction and she creates characters with whom kids can easily identify. Her realistic dialogue gives Jazz and Antonia depth and meaning to the issues that concern them. She also uses humor to help define her characters but does not allow her lighthearted tone to detract from the meaning of the text. Teenagers often laugh and joke about serious issues to cover up their sensitivity toward them. So Peters uses humor to make her characters more human and more likeable.

This humor and lightheartedness also helps support her theme of the deception of appearances.

Though many authors have centered their novels on contrasting characters, Peters's characters seem fresh and their concerns timely. She explores new angles to age-old themes, such as introducing the peer counseling program as a safe way to allow her characters to reveal their feelings. Because Antonia narrates the story, her first person perspective naturally makes her feelings and insights Peters' first concern. Yet Jazz emerges as an equally strong character. The peer counseling program engages both Jazz and Antonia as equally active participants, and the lively exchanges between them work to emphasize the value of learning to communicate with those who have opposing concerns and viewpoints.

Though Peters succeeds in making Antonia and Jazz complex and believable characters, she does not develop fully the secondary characters in the book. The reader gets a fairly clear picture of Mrs. Luther and Mrs. Dillon, but their characters come into focus primarily as Jazz and Antonia understand them. Mrs. Luther plays a more active role in the book than Mrs. Dillon because Mrs. Luther takes an active interest in Antonia's life. Perhaps because Mrs. Luther serves as a positive role model, Peters allows Antonia to give more of her insights into the behavior of Mrs. Luther than she allows Jazz to give into the behavior of Mrs. Dillon. Antonia's brothers, Jazz's father, and the teachers at Oberon Middle School never gain much depth and never reveal much about their motives or feelings. It does seem, however, that Peters uses Mrs. Bertoli to show how Jazz responds to the way she is treated.

Mrs. Bertoli likes Antonia because she conforms and dislikes Jazz because she does not conform, so both of them respond to Mrs. Bertoli in opposite ways.

Subtle foreshadowing leads to the surprise near the end of the book when Antonia discovers that Dr. Dileo tricked her into being counseled by Jazz. All along Jazz seems to ask Antonia questions about her life, and Antonia responds to her, opening up aspects of her dysfunctional home she never revealed before. Jazz helps Antonia in numerous ways, including providing familial support when Antonia's mother is taken to the hospital.



Themes

The Idea of Normal

Antonia has a predetermined idea of what normal means. When she first meets Jazz Luther, she has this idea already in her mind that Jazz is a druggie, a loser, and a delinquent - all based solely on Jazz's appearance. Antonia believes that Jazz is the farthest thing from normal. However, the more she learns about Jazz, the more she begins to rethink her belief, especially when Antonia goes to Jazz's house and sees how Jazz lives. Compared with her own life and problems, Jazz has it good; a big house with every comfort imaginable and two parents that love her. When Antonia meets her parents, she sees a very normal environment. This is the type of environment that Antonia wants. After she gets to know Jazz, Antonia realizes that Jazz is more normal than Antonia ever gave Jazz credit for.

Another instance of this comes when Antonia meets Karen Millbrook of Social Services. Karen appears to be a normal woman with a job that looks out for the needs of others. Antonia is startled when she learns that Karen has clinical depression just like her mother. This does not fit in with the picture of normal that Karen otherwise paints of herself.

Antonia believes that her life is not normal. She knows that other families do not have the issues with parents that she has. It is not up to the children to run the household and carry the responsibilities that she carries. On the outside, however, she looks like everyone else. This is what throws Jazz off when she meets Antonia for the first time. She also has a set idea of what normal is and believes that Antonia is it - until she gets to know her and witness firsthand what her home life is like. Getting to know Antonia changes Jazz's idea of what normal is.

Fear of Failure

With Antonia's family life in pieces, she has had to step up to the plate and accept a significant amount of responsibility. Since she is the oldest child, she feels it is her place to make sure that her family is taken care of. She knows that if she does not make it work, then everything will fall apart. To Antonia this means failure; she is obsessed by it.

Some other examples of this are seen in her academic performance. More specifically, in her math class when she misses questions on a test and gets a "C" instead of her usual "A." Antonia is devastated because she sees this as a failure. When Mrs. Bartoli asks her about it, she is asking out of concern because she knows there is something going on at home. Antonia however, takes it as a defeat and feels like she is getting in trouble with her teacher.

Another example of this is when Antonia goes to Jazz's house for swimming lessons. Even after she chokes from swallowing too much water, she refuses to quit. She feels



that if she is able to continue, she should continue. Stopping to catch her breath would be failing, since she had not accomplished her goal of learning how to swim. Yet another example is the peer-counseling program she is involved in. After she and Jazz start having problems and confront Dr. DiLeo, Antonia is determined to stick it out because if she does not then, it will mean she has failed as a peer counselor, and she will be letting Dr. DiLeo down. Her need for perfection stems from her family situation that she is desperately trying to hold together.

Friendship

The theme of friendship is an important one in this story. At the outset, both Antonia and Jazz claim they have friends. As it turns out, their respective friends are not what they are cracked up to be. For Antonia, the two friends that she names are no longer her friends. The first girl she names, Lindy Meeks, has moved and Antonia was not even aware of it. Antonia realizes that it had been months since she had spoken Lindy. If there was a real friendship there, they would have spoken on a more frequent basis. Tamra is another friend that Antonia mentions. However, when she calls Tamra on the phone, she learns that Tamra's sister died over a year prior to their conversation. She would have known that if she actually spoke to Tamra. So the two friends that Antonia claims are not very close friends at all.

Jazz, on the other hand, does have a group of friends. However, because of a fear of being ostracized, she keeps secrets from them. Jazz and her friends are hung up on appearances. For example, they make fun of Antonia and think she is a geek for the way she dresses. Jazz does not need to worry about her friends and her appearance, but she is afraid they will drop her if they find out that she plays the piano, which her friends view as a geek hobby. It is Antonia that brings this to her attention when she says that if they are her true friends, they will not care if she plays the piano. Ultimately, it is the friendship that Antonia and Jazz forge that becomes a true relationship. They already know the other's story; there are no secrets. This is the basis of a friendship that can stand the test of time.



Themes/Characters

What strikes the reader first about Antonia and Jazz is how different their appearances are and how differently they react to the world. Antonia is all about convention and Jazz screams anti-establishment. Antonia would never dream of wearing black lipstick or having tattoos like Jazz, but Jazz seems quite comfortable and confident showing up to school with one side of her head shaved and often changing the color of her hair. She bucks convention to express herself as an individual, while Antonia plays by the rules.

Jazz may find Antonia's style nondescript and her attitude boring, but Antonia finds Jazz's appearance and mannerisms quite offensive. In fact, Antonia hesitates to attempt to relate to someone who appears to stand for everything she herself is against.

Antonia is an honor student at Oberon Middle School, and when Dr. Dileo asks her to become a peer counselor, she believes that he considers her an appropriate role model for kids with obvious problems.

But she is not prepared for Jazz Luther.

When Antonia first meets with Jazz, she cannot believe that she can possibly get through to someone who she finds so outrageous looking or even stand to be in the same room with her.

Jazz does look rather outrageous, but she is much less critical of Antonia than Antonia is of her. Jazz is hesitant to open up to Antonia and seems to resent the idea of peer counseling, but she seems more comfortable and less judgmental with their exchanges than Antonia does. Jazz appears to care nothing about how Antonia thinks and acts or about what Antonia thinks of her.

Jazz has no intention of changing her ways for anyone. In the first counseling session, it seems that Jazz operates largely on shock value. This works on Antonia and this conventional honor student is both shocked and repulsed by Jazz, and she tells Dr. Dileo after that first session that she cannot possibly continue in the peer counseling program with such a difficult student.

As the two girls continue their sessions, however, a friendship develops between them, and each of them finds themselves opening up to the other about their troubled lives. Both Antonia and Jazz have problems, but these problems are as different as their appearances, and as time goes on, each sees aspects of the other's life they find enviable. Antonia lives in a poor, single-mother household and she takes on much of the responsibility of housework and childrearing. Antonia's mother has sunk into a deep depression and cannot function well enough to get out of bed, let alone to care for her home and family. So Antonia acts responsibly and takes care of her brothers, even though this kind of responsibility prevents her from experiencing the normal life of a teenager. Antonia spends so much time acting in an adult role that she has no time for extracurricular activities, socializing with friends, or for expressing herself.



She worries about her family, and she feels ashamed of her run-down house and her despondent mother.

Jazz feels ashamed of her parents too, but for entirely different reasons. Jazz lives in what Antonia considers to be a mansion: with groundskeepers and maids and an indoor swimming pool. Jazz's parents spend time at the country club and dining out at expensive restaurants, yet they devote their attention to Jazz too. In their own way, they want to give their daughter the best life they can offer her.

Jazz finds her home life just as distasteful as Antonia finds hers, and the girls begin to see that oddly, this puts them on common ground. Jazz does not appreciate her upper-crust lifestyle and rebels against it by dressing and acting in ways that clash with her parents' conventions. Antonia has never had time to consider rebellion of any sort.

Jazz considers her parents too materialistic and far too concerned with appearances.

Antonia has not had the luxury of considering appearances; she is not allowed the time to get to discover herself or her own means of expression.

Jazz's problems may seem insignificant compared to Antonia's, but Jazz is not truly ungrateful and spoiled. She simply needs to be an individual and she resents that her parents expect her to conform to their standards. She sees her parents' attention as controlling, so she does everything she can to rebel against them, including giving up the piano, which she adores. The fact that Jazz's parents frown on her style only encourages her to carry it to extremes. This intensifies the friction between Jazz and her parents and blinds her to the recognition that her parents are truly on her side. Jazz becomes aware that her parents are on her side after experiencing life through Antonia's eyes. While Jazz finds it annoying that her mother gives her too much attention, Antonia finds it insufferable that her mother neglects her. Jazz has a support group she fails to appreciate and Antonia has no one to count on but herself.

As Antonia and Jazz continue to reveal more and more about their lives, themes emerge that drive the plot in new directions. Both girls are searching for their place in the world, trying to discover who they are and how they fit into their parents' mode of existence. Rebellion is a natural reaction to breaking free of parental control, and in this sense it is a normal part of growing up. Realizing that rebellion in some form is a part of growing up forces the reader to question the definition of normal and to consider how normal people express themselves and react to the world around them.

Peter's concern for the word "normal" creates a theme she carries throughout the novel: appearances can be deceiving. Neither Jazz nor Antonia come from backgrounds the other expects. Jazz seems to cry out for attention, which teenagers often do when they get no attention at home, even though her parents make it a priority to spend time with their daughter and they encourage her to build confidence in her abilities. Antonia seems to have a calm, stress-free life. She projects an appearance of a stable girl from a "normal" family, but the reality is that Antonia is deeply troubled and her family dysfunctional.



As Peters develops these two characters, the reader begins to see that they both have narrow views of the world and by interacting with each other, they learn to see beyond the images others project. Antonia is shocked to discover that Jazz does not do drugs and abhors smoking. In Antonia's narrow vision, anyone who dresses and acts as Jazz does likely engages in irresponsible behavior and illegal activity. Antonia is also surprised to discover that Jazz plays the piano beautifully. The more Antonia knows about Jazz the more she admires her, and this allows her to look beyond the punker image and see the real person.

As the friendship grows between these two outwardly opposite people, they each gain depth in the other's eyes. No longer are they "priss" and "punker," but two complex people with remarkably similar needs and feelings. Labeling people based on their appearance seems grossly unfair and disallows individuals to move beyond their assigned roles. Jazz may dress strangely according to convention, but her problems with authority stem from the fact that authority figures expect her to have problems.

Recognizing how teachers treat her, she struggles with school and has difficulty with grades. Jazz believes that teachers hate her, so she acts hateful to them in retaliation and defense. She rebels against her parents in much the same way; they react negatively to her, so she continues to act negatively and provoke them. Certainly, Jazz looks like a punker and Antonia looks like a "priss," but these labels have behaviors attached to them that may or may not fit.

When the reader begins to wonder why Jazz and Antonia dress and act as they do, they begin to wonder if people largely live up to what others expect of them.



Style

Points of View

This story is told in the first person point of view: Antonia's. It is written as a fourteen year old would write it. It uses the type of language that would be appropriate for a girl of Antonia's age. She has a distinct view of the way she sees things. There is no question as to what she is thinking or feeling at any one time. The text is written so that it is obvious to the reader what Antonia is going through. Even though it may not be obvious to Antonia, the reader feels for her when she is upset.

Antonia casts a clear picture of Jazz in particular. Her feelings about Jazz are particular: She thinks Jazz is trouble and expresses this in great detail through her inner dialogue. It is also easy to see Antonia's fear over her mother's condition and her own ability to keep things together. There are many times, especially up until Mrs. Luther gets involved at the motel, where Antonia seems on the verge of having a breakdown. Also, because she comes from a background where she does not have a lot in the way of money or luxuries, it is easy to see how much she likes the Luthers' lifestyle. This is especially evident in the way she describes the lobster dinner with them.

Setting

The general setting is modern day, in a suburban area. The story takes place in a variety of places. Since both Antonia and Jazz are in junior high, much of the story takes place in a school setting. They attend Oberon Middle School and use the faculty conference room for the peer counseling sessions. Also important is the auditorium where the girls meet in order for Jazz to play the piano. The Dillon's home is another important place where the action unfolds. This is particularly important because much of what Antonia is feeling stems from the activities surrounding her physical home.

Other important settings within the story include the Wayfarer Motel, where Mrs. Luther drives Antonia to pick up her brothers and take her mom to the hospital. This is a pivotal moment in the story because, as Antonia describes it, she feels relief. This event needs to happen to this degree in order for things to get better for the Dillons. Finally, the Luthers' home is another important place. It is a large house, probably a small mansion, with an indoor swimming pool. This is where Antonia learns how to swim and where Mrs. Luther brings the children back to stay over night after she picks them up at the motel.

Language and Meaning

Since the story is told from Antonia's point of view, the language is typical of that of adolescent girls. Jasmine Luther's choice of language is particularly unique. She uses words that are slang and most likely only used by individuals at her age. It is so unique



however, that even Antonia has no idea what she is talking about when they first meet in the beginning of the story.

The rest of the language is straight forward. Since the story occurs in modern times, there is no confusing language or jargon to get used to.

Structure

The book is broken down into thirty chapters, all of which are brief. The story is continuous and relayed in a linear fashion. Antonia's family problems are already well-advanced by the time the story starts. The reader does not see a continual downward spiral with the mother's health as it is already very bad. However, it is easy to see the contrast in Antonia's personality between the beginning of the story and the end.

Each chapter is broken out in a similar way. There is typically a segment from school, a segment from home, and sometimes a segment of Patrice's health; whether bad or good. Sometimes there is just a combination of any of these.



Quotes

"She was hopeless. A punker. A druggie. A gang hanger. Peer counseling? Jazz needed long-term professional psychotherapy." (Chapter 1, page 2)

"As soon as I dropped off the boys at the neighbor's, I was out of there. If I didn't have to take care of Chuckie and Michael, I'd never come back." (Chapter 2, page 11)

"Yeah, everyone in the world needed my help. So who was helping me?" (Chapter 4, page 23)

"I hated giving up so easily, but Jazz and I were never going to make it past step one. She was so crazy, she was making me crazy. Pretty soon that'd be the one thing we had in common." (Chapter 6, page 32)

"She seemed to open up whenever we talked about friends or family. If I could keep her on the subject, we might make a major breakthrough. Like getting past step one." (Chapter 9, page 56)

"Okay, I reasoned to myself, what could go wrong? Maybe in the dark, through sheets of sleet, Jazz wouldn't see where I lived. Compared to her palatial mansion, my house was slave quarters." (Chapter 11, page 73)

"A sort of whimper rose from Mom's throat. A wounded-animal sound. Mrs. Luther approached and knelt down in front of Mom. She touched her shoulder." (Chapter 14, page 88)

"My jaw came unhinged. Awesome was the only word to describe her playing. She had a God-given talent." (Chapter 16, 101)

"It's typical of people like your mom. They don't feel better right away, or they get to feeling better and think they can make it without their medication, so they stop. And the depression just comes back. Worse every time." (Chapter 19, 125)

"That's how I feel, I thought. Like a star... a star in the sky. Distant. Detached. Blinking. On-off. On-off. It was just me now. Antonia Renee Dillon. No parents. No family. No home." (Chapter 20, 135)

"I understood. Even though it was beautiful music, it was painful for her. Associated with bad memories. Sort of like the smell of bacon for me." (Chapter 24, 156)

"Dr. DiLeo motioned me to sit. 'The whole setup was my idea,' he said. 'I didn't think you'd agree to counseling if I told you the truth, Antonia.'" (Chapter 27, 177)

"Seriously, Antonia," Jazz cut into my thoughts. "You really helped me too. My mom and I actually sat down and had a real conversation. About you." (Chapter 30, 193)

Adaptations

Julie Anne Peters's *How Do You Spell Geek?* focuses on teenage cliques and the effects of labeling when she pairs a middle school girl with a former homeschooler entering public school for the first time.

This book deals with the theme of competition among best friends as the new student, Lurlene, threatens to disrupt a long-term friendship in her attempt to be accepted in her new school. Peters's book *Revenge of the Snob Squad* is the first in a series of three books about the Snob Squad. This story focuses on four teenagers who have physical or emotional problems that make them outcasts in middle school. They form a group to get back at the kids that bully them, and Peters delves into the world of middle school cliques to expose the harmful effects of labeling.

Chris Crutcher's *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* among other books focused on teens who are treated as outcasts and the problems they have relating to others. Crutcher typically deals with more adult themes than Peters's, and centers on older characters with weightier problems, such as divorce, physical abuse, and suicide.

Carol Plum-Ucci's *The Body of Christopher Creed* is a mystery novel that deals with the effects the disappearance of a high school outcast, Chris Creed, has on the kids who bullied him and treated him badly. Told from the perspective of Torey Adams, a popular teenage boy, the novel brings to light the fallacy of appearances and the harm that can come from stereotyping.



Topics for Discussion

1. Do you think Dr. Dileo was wrong to trick Antonia into believing she was counseling Jazz? Why or why not? Who do you think needed counseling more?
2. Do you think that a person's dress affects how others perceive them? How easily is it for you to look beyond appearances and judge someone objectively?
3. How well do you understand how Jazz's mother and Antonia's mother relate to their children? How does this affect how these children relate to their mothers?
4. Jazz refers to Antonia as a "priss." What are some of the characteristics that Antonia has that make Jazz categorize her as such? What other kinds of labels do teens pin on their peers and how do they determine who gets these labels?
5. Who do you find more guilty of judging people by their appearances: Jazz or Antonia?
6. Why do you believe Jazz has so much hostility toward her parents? Does Antonia seem to have hostile feelings for her parents? Why or why not?
7. Do you think that Jazz has learning problems? Why or why not?
8. Why do you think Antonia might be a member of the math club?
9. Why do you think that people often react negatively to kids who choose to express themselves in outrageous ways?



Essay Topics

Knowing that Dr. DiLeo set Antonia and Jazz up to help each other out, do you think he knew for certain if the arrangement would work out? Why or why not?

At the end of the story, Jazz and Antonia become good friends. Do you think that they would have become friends under different circumstances? Under what other circumstances might they have become friends? Explain.

Antonia takes on adult responsibilities at a young age. Why do you think she made the choices she made? Why do you think she chose not to ask for help at home?

At the end of the story when Karen is dropping off Antonia back at her own house, Antonia suggests that Michael receive counseling. Since Antonia and Michael were facing the same family situation, why is it that the two of them did not see eye to eye? Explain.

Dr. DiLeo admits that he arranged for Jazz to be Antonia's peer counselor without her knowing. Are there any points throughout the peer counseling sessions that suggest that Jazz is working for Dr. DiLeo? Explain the instances.

Antonia begins to look forward to the peer counseling sessions with Jazz. At what point do you think the friendship began? Explain the hints that suggest Antonia views Jazz as more than a peer counseling assignment.

Antonia has a strong sense of family obligation. If being in a normal family situation is so important to her, why is she not more warm and grateful to the Abeytas when they do their best to provide a good home for her and her brothers?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Do you think that having too much responsibility leads kids to be recklessly irresponsible? How much responsibility do you believe is appropriate for kids to have?
2. Outline and discuss the harmful effects that result from labeling and stereotyping.
3. Discuss the effects of socioeconomic status and family life on self-expression.
4. Do you think schools should impose a dress code or in any way restrict a student's ability to dress as they like?

Are there limits? How do you think this infringes on a student's right to self-expression?

5. Compare the modern day punkers with the hippies of the 1960s and 1970s. How are these movements viewed by the establishment?
6. Come up with your own definition of the word "normal." What determines how society decides what is normal and what is not?
7. What motivates kids to ornament their bodies or engage in body modification of any sort? Are there degrees of body modification you consider appropriate?

What determines where you draw the limits?

8. Do you believe schools should encourage conformity to the norm, and how do you think nonconformity should be handled?
9. Discuss the advantages, or disadvantages, of peer counseling programs for teenagers.

Further Study

Ault, Kimberley. Review of Define "Normal." *School Library Journal*, vol. 46 (July 2000): 108. This review offers insight on the basic themes, writing, and character development in Define "Normal."

Franklin, Jean. *Booklist*, vol. 96 (May 15, 2000): 1739. This review offers insight on the basic themes, writing, and character development in Define "Normal."

"Julie Anne Peters." In *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2001. The entry provides biographical information on the author and their works. This essay on Peters hits the highlights of her career and offers insightful "sidelights" about her life as a writer.

Schulz, Cynthia. Review of Define "Normal." *Book Report*, vol. 19 (November/December 2000): 61. This review offers insight on the basic themes, writing, and character development in Define "Normal."

Related Websites

<http://julieannepeters.homestead.com> Accessed October 18, 2002. This is Julie Anne Peters's homepage which contains biographical information on the author, excerpts from reviews of her books, and copies of letters from readers. Because Peters devotes herself to helping teens who enjoy writing, her site also includes a selection of stories, poems, essays, and other writings by teens, and a wealth of information and links to writing resources for young adults.



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