

# **Driver's Ed Study Guide**

**Driver's Ed by Caroline B. Cooney**

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## Overview

Two teenagers remove a STOP sign as part of a driver's education "class project," resulting in the death of a young mother at that intersection. The novel increases in emotional intensity as the teens reach the decision to admit and accept responsibility for their action, and come to terms with the finality of death.

## About the Author

A prolific and adept author of young adult books, Caroline B. Cooney's early career goal was to be a nurse because she loved reading the "Cherry Ames Student Nurse" series. However, she abandoned this course of study within one year.

She began and came to love writing while in college. She is an accomplished organist and choir director, and in *Driver's Ed*, she presents the celebration of Christmas within the church and its subsequent impact upon the characters with compelling authenticity.

The plotlines of Cooney's works involve romance, mystery, and adventure in varying degrees of intensity; however, she also addresses issues in contemporary, urban America relevant to young adults. In *Driver's Ed*, the issue is the vandalism of street signs. The novel received ALA Best Book for Young Adults, ALA Quick Pick for Young Adults, and a Booklist Editors' Choice in the year of its publication.



# Plot Summary

*Driver's Ed* by Caroline B. Cooney, is the story of two sixteen-year-olds, who fall in love and make a tragic mistake. Remy, a thin blonde girl who plays for the JV basketball team, and Morgan, the preppy son of a prominent politician, go to East Line High. Like the rest of the junior class, Remy and Morgan can't wait to get their driver's licenses. They are taking driver's education from Mr. Fielding, a careless teacher, who refuses to get involved in his students' lives or even to learn their names.

One day, while Mr. Fielding isn't paying attention to his driver's ed class, Remy's friend Lark suggests that all the kids should take a street sign before they go for their driving exams. Almost all the students agree that this sounds like a fun idea, and they make a pact that no one will get licensed before getting a sign.

Remy has a crush on Morgan, and he feels the same way about her. They are both new to dating, though, and don't know how to make initial contact. One time during driver's ed instruction, they briefly hold hands in the back of the student driving car, so each knows that the other one is interested. Stealing signs provides an excuse for Morgan and Remy to spend together outside of school. Remy, Morgan and Lark make a plan to go out on a sign hunt, but they need someone who already has a driver's license to drive them. They invite Nicholas Budie, a senior with a bad reputation, to be the driver.

On the night of the sign expedition, Lark cancels, because she has a bad feeling about Nicholas. First, the teens steal a "THICKLY SETTLED" sign from the woods for Lark. Then, Remy takes down a sign for "Morgan Road" to show Morgan how she feels about him. After that, Morgan and Remy share their first kiss. Finally, Nicholas chooses a stop sign at Cherry Road and Warren Street. Morgan helps Nicholas cut down the stop sign.

The next day in school, Remy and Morgan don't talk. Morgan just ignores her all day, because he feels uncomfortable. He doesn't have the nerve to call her in the evening, either. That night, both Remy and Morgan hear the news that a woman has died in a car crash at the intersection of Cherry Road and Warren Street. The woman's husband, Mr. Thompson, appears on the television news, making a plea for information about whoever killed his wife.

Remy and Morgan don't see each other again until Sunday, when they attend the same church. Remy is surprised to see Morgan's family at church, because they haven't attended services regularly since his father's last election. The Campbells are, in fact, just going to church, because it will help his gubernatorial campaign.

The rest of the novel traces Remy and Morgan, as they come to terms with their guilty consciences and take steps to help them resolve their guilt. After days of indecision, they make a plan to confess their crime to their parents, in spite of threats from Nicholas.



First, Remy confesses to Mr. Fielding, who is feeling his own guilt for having ignored the sign stealing plot. Later that evening, Morgan and Remy tell their parents. In both families, the mothers have a harder time forgiving their children than the fathers do. Mrs. Marland feels that she has failed as a mother to Remy, and she is angry that the daughter she thought was wonderful could have done something so terrible. Mrs. Campbell grows depressed, when she realizes that her family is not as perfect as she once thought.

The families contact Nicholas's parents, but the Budies do not admit that their son could have been involved in the crime. Mr. Morgan arranges a meeting between the kids and Mr. Thompson. Morgan and Remy apologize to him and try to explain why they stole the stop sign. They meet the dead woman's toddler and face the dire emptiness that now exists in the Thompson household.

Finally, Remy and Morgan visit Denise Thompson's grave with Mr. Fielding. He tells them that he also bears some responsibility for her death, and he tries to help the kids get past their guilt.

On Christmas Eve, Morgan stops by the Marland house to ask Remy's mother to let the baby, Henry, play Jesus in the Christmas pageant. She initially says "no," because it seems appropriate that the criche should be empty this year. Remy's younger brother Mac, however, urges her to continue loving Remy, and Mrs. Marland gives in to hugging both Remy and Morgan. At the end of the Christmas pageant, Mac talks to Mrs. Campbell and convinces her to keep loving Morgan, too.

## Chapter 1 Summary

Chapter One begins in a high-school driving class. The teacher, Mr. Fielding, calls off the names of the three students who will receive in-car driving instruction that day. Two girls, named Remy and Christine, sit near each other in class. Christine holds a laminated nametag on her lap. Christine is ready to give the tag to Remy, if Christine's name gets called. Ever since Christine broke down in frightened tears on the side of the road during her first day of driving with Mr. Fielding, she always gives up her lesson to Remy if Mr. Fielding calls Christine's name. Mr. Fielding does not know the difference, because he hasn't bothered to learn his students' names. He is not interested in his students. Mr. Fielding believes that his students' characters and personalities are "fluff."

Mr. Fielding calls Remy, Christine and Morgan to drive. Remy drops her books to distract the teacher, while Christine exchanges her nametag with Lark, a more adventurous girl. Remy is happy to be driving for two reasons. First, she likes to drive fast. Second, she wants to spend time in the backseat with Morgan, who is a handsome boy. Mr. Fielding leaves the rest of the class in a room off the library, under the supervision of Mrs. Bee, the librarian. Mrs. Bee resents having to monitor the driving class without extra pay. She lets the kids run free, while she stays in her office with the door closed.



Remy takes her lesson first. Meanwhile, Mr. Fielding looks out the passenger-side window. He listens to talk radio on a Walkman. As Remy drives, she and Lark discuss Remy's new car. Remy's parents have bought her a car, so that she can drive her younger brothers to their after-school activities. Remy has two younger brothers. Mac is an eighth grader, and Henry is a baby. When Remy's mother was pregnant with Henry, an ultrasound showed that the baby would be a girl, so Remy's family had not prepared a list of boys' names. When Henry was born, his family had the doctor write "Baby Boy Marland" on the birth certificate. After a few months of debate, the family has agreed to call him Henry. Remy's mother, however, calls him Jesus, a nickname that stuck after Henry played the baby Jesus in a Christmas pageant soon after he was born.

During her driving lesson, Remy makes a left turn without noticing a median on the street that she is entering. Flustered, she forces the car to drive over the median. The bottom of the car makes a loud scraping noise. Remy is embarrassed by her mistake, and she hopes that Lark and Morgan will keep the incident a secret from the rest of the class.

Then, Lark takes the wheel, and Remy joins Morgan in the back seat. Morgan comes from an attractive, ambitious family. His father is a politician, his mother a lawyer, and his younger sister, Starr, is the most popular girl in her grade. Remy expects Morgan to tease her about her pathetic driving, but he comforts her and squeezes her hand. Remy and Morgan continue to hold hands, as Lark drives.

Lark runs a red light, claiming that she did stop for the light, but "forgot to stay stopped." Morgan laughs at Lark, feeling superior, and takes over behind the wheel.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

From the start of the novel, Mr. Fielding seems to be a distasteful character. He does not care about his work or the students he is supposed to teach. He wishes he had a life without kids in it, especially kids with ridiculous names like Taft and Rembrandt. The students manage to make careless driving mistakes under Mr. Fielding's watch, because he is not giving them advice on how to maneuver the car or watch the road.

Remy's minor driving mistake of going over the median foreshadows the big mistake that she will later make. The car also symbolizes what will happen to Remy and Morgan. Like the car, they will survive their terrible experience with a small amount of damage. How Mr. Fielding handles Remy's driving mistake also foreshadows his later actions in the novel. When Remy drives over the median, she keeps going forward with a bad decision, because she can't think of a better plan. Mr. Fielding gives her no assistance at the time, but afterward blames her for doing the wrong thing.

Cooney provides another bit of foreshadowing in Mr. Fielding's attempt to comfort Remy. "Calm down," he says, "It's no big deal. Nobody's dead."



## Chapter 2 Summary

The students are in concert choir class. Mr. Willit, the conductor, instructs them to kiss and hug the air, while singing a love song. Lark complains that Mr. Willit is not normal, and the animated teacher retorts that no one in the room is normal. Then, he calls up Morgan, who has been studying a driver's manual tucked behind his music folder. Morgan walks to the front of the room, where Mr. Willit displays him as the closest thing to normalcy in the class. He teaches Morgan to give a royal wave, using just his wrists. He has Morgan wave to the class, while the other students applaud. Remy wishes that she could be Morgan's girlfriend to share in his applause.

Choir ends, and the students go to driver's ed, where the talk is of "mailbox baseball." Hundreds of mailboxes were trashed the previous night. Taft and Cristin explain to the other students that mailbox baseball involves driving around in a pickup truck, with one or two people swinging a bat from the truck bed.

Inspired by the mailbox vandals, Lark suggests that each student in the class steal a sign. A boy that she dated a long time ago used to steal street signs and traffic signs. A beautiful blonde girl named Alexandra Weymouth invites Morgan to help her take the "Weymouth Road" street sign that weekend. Then, she sits on Morgan's lap, and he puts his arm around her. He thinks, however, that Remy is a more attractive girl. Lark establishes a class rule that nobody can get a driver's license without taking a sign first. Christine is the only student who says that the rule is a bad idea.

Mr. Fielding enters the room and calls Joanne, Carson and Chrystal to drive. Nobody in the class has any of those names. Lark, Remy and Morgan step forward, and Morgan says he will take Joanne's lesson. The kids start calling him "Queen Joanne," on account of his taking Joanne's turn and waving like royalty in choir class.

Mr. Fielding instructs Lark, whom he thinks is Chrystal, to take River Road beyond the city and into the woods. Lark notes that a sign in the woods - THICKLY SETTLED - would look perfect in her bedroom. Then Lark drives. Meanwhile, Morgan thinks about his lack of wheels. He had expected a convertible for his sixteenth birthday, but his parents gave him a VCR instead. Morgan feels distant from his parents. Recently, for the first time in years, he can tolerate being in the same room with them. Still, Morgan avoids talking with his parents. Now, he hopes that they will give him a car on the day he receives his license.

Lark says that she will need help getting one of the THICKLY SETTLED signs off its post, and she asks Morgan whether he is still good friends with Nicholas Budie, a senior who has his own car. Morgan and Nickie had been friends, back when Morgan was in the fifth and sixth grades. Nickie, who was a year older than Morgan, "dropped" him in junior high. Morgan and Nickie used to sneak out at night and wrestle on the white line in the middle of the road. If a car came, they would have to drive into a ditch. Now, Nickie treats Morgan like a friend again, but Morgan avoids getting close to Nickie. Nicholas drives an old Buick with a fast engine.





In the driver's ed car, Remy is also thinking about stealing signs. She knows that the one she wants is for Morgan Road. She could never get her parents' permission to go riding with Nicholas, though. Nobody's parents approve of that kid.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

Mr. Willit, a teacher that Morgan truly cares about and respects, calls Morgan to the front of the class to demonstrate what it means to be normal. Morgan realizes that his "normalcy" has more to do with his family than himself. To outsiders, the Campbells seem like a perfect family. They can boast two successful lawyers, including one politician, plus two attractive and popular children. Morgan, however, realizes that he has no special qualities, and that his sister Starr owes her "popularity" to being very mean to other girls. Morgan's perfect parents don't seem concerned that their son doesn't really talk to them.

Morgan's elementary-school activities with Nickie prove that he is not altogether "normal." Morgan knows that the games the two boys played were reckless, but he would have continued playing them if Nickie hadn't ended their friendship. The dangerous road game played by Morgan and Nickie foreshadows another dangerous situation that they will create together soon in the spirit of "fun."

## Chapter 3 Summary

Last period is current events class. Morgan is bored, because the country whose war he has been assigned to monitor, Guatemala, has been relatively peaceful. Morgan yearns for danger and wishes he could use a machine gun, like a Bosnian teenager.

On the way to the bus after school, Lark, Remy and Morgan make a date to steal signs together. Lark instructs the others to tell their parents that they will all be going to Lark's house to watch movies. Mr. Willit, who has school-bus supervision duty, sees Remy and Morgan together and decides to set them up romantically by making Remy "normal" next week and giving them a duet to sing. When Nicholas Budie slouches by, Mr. Willit averts his eyes. Nicholas is the only kid Mr. Willit can't bring himself to like, because he knows that Nick uses his Buick to run over stray pets. The teacher is saddened to see Morgan hop into Nickie's car.

Morgan returns home to his family's impressive house. His father plans to run for governor, so the kitchen has three TVs set up for news watching. Over dinner, Starr, Morgan's thirteen-year-old sister, spews junior-high gossip. Later, she tells Morgan that their father's political campaign will mean a return to church for the family. Mrs. Willit, the wife of the choir teacher, is the minister at church. Morgan dreads having to spend another year attending church, but he thinks that it will be fun if he gets to run the Christmas pageant. He promises to make Starr one of the wise men.

Later that night, Nicholas and Morgan pick up Remy, who sits in the car's back seat. Remy has bought a great deal of new makeup for the occasion. The three kids go to Lark's apartment complex to pick her up. Lark is not waiting outside. Remy runs in to get



her and returns with a report that Lark has to stay home with her mother, who has the flu. When Remy returns, Morgan moves left, to the middle of the first seat, so that he and Remy can sit next to each other. Soon, they start to hold hands.

The car stops in the woods near Lark's THICKLY SETTLED sign. The boys have brought several tools, a ratchet, a hack saw and bolt cutter. Remy wonders why Lark decided not to come. The story about a sick mother was a lie made up by Remy. Lark had simply told her that she had changed her mind. The boys remove the sign for Lark with ease.

Remy announces that she wants to take MORGAN ROAD, and Morgan's heart leaps. Suddenly, he can no longer hide how he feels about her. Remy sees his facial expression and knows that Morgan is as "gone" on her, as she is on him. After Remy and Morgan unscrew the sign, while standing on top of Nickie's Buick, they kiss. Then, Nickie drives to Cherry Road and Warren Street to steal a stop sign. Morgan cuts the sign off its post for him.

### Chapter 3 Analysis

Morgan's thoughts about his current events assignment prove that he is not emotionally mature. He wishes that he were a Bosnian teenager, fighting for his life in a civil war, showing no understanding of what it really means to live a life of danger and crisis.

Morgan's family seems to use religion to suit their purposes. For the Campbells, attending church is a public relations stunt. Morgan's parents, Rafe and Nance, know that voters will be more likely to choose a gubernatorial candidate, who goes to church regularly. Similarly, Morgan decides that he will direct the Christmas pageant because that will be less boring than sitting in church, not because he has strong religious feelings.

### Chapter 4 Summary

Remy has hidden MORGAN ROAD behind the bushes by the front door, and Mac is grilling her about her evening. He knows that she was out with Morgan and Nickie, and he tells their parents that Remy is interested in one of the two boys. Since Remy cannot hide her disgust toward Nickie, her family realizes that she likes Morgan. Remy's mother approves. She says that she would not mind having Morgan for a son-in-law. In fact, says Remy's mother, she was planning to volunteer to work on Mr. Campbell's campaign.

In school the next day, Morgan ignores Remy, even though she is the only thing he is actually aware of in school. By the end of the day, when Remy reports to her JV basketball game, she feels miserable, because Morgan no longer seems interested in her. Suddenly, she sees Morgan and Lark sit down in the bleachers, and Remy is overjoyed. No boy has ever previously attended a girls' JV basketball game. Remy's father starts harassing a referee, and she fears being embarrassed by her father in front of Morgan.



Lark is happy to escort Morgan to the game, so that he can see Remy. Lark thinks about how she backed out of the sign hunt, because when Nickie called her earlier that evening. She had sensed something truly criminal in his voice.

While watching the game, Morgan thinks that he should call Remy that night. He should tell her that he was stupid for not talking to her in class. He knows, however, that he probably won't do either. Later that evening, when Morgan has failed to call her, Remy wonders what the point of having a God is if He can't make the phone ring. She dreads going to church on Sunday (dreads it even more than usual, that is,) while she is feeling annoyed by God.

The Campbells gather around the T.V. to watch the evening news. They always watch for news about state politics. A top story tonight is the vandalism of mailboxes. The newscast transitions into a related act of vandalism. It says that it's a theft of a street sign that has had "terrible results." The newscaster reports that the previous night, there was a fatal car accident at the corner of Warren Street and Cherry Road. A truck hit a car driven by a 26-year-old woman, named Denise Thompson. Mrs. Thompson did not know to stop at that dangerous intersection, because there was no stop sign. The woman was killed after dropping off her two-year old child's babysitter. Morgan's father announces that, whoever took that sign, should be shot.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Chapter Four begins with an account of awkward teen romance that is lighthearted and almost comical. The novel has an omniscient narrator, who writes from the third person but enters the minds of various characters, including Remy and Morgan. In this way, the reader knows that both teens are feeling equally infatuated. Therefore, there is little real tension on the reader's part about whether Morgan will eventually convey his interest to Remy. The nervousness the teens feel toward each other throughout the school day acts as a calm before the storm. It heightens the shocking effect of the newscast on the reader, as well as on Remy and Morgan.

## Chapter 5 Summary

At home with his family, Morgan tries not to think about the sign that is in the garage and the fact that he is the person who removed it from its post. He is afraid that Starr will recognize guilt in his eyes, so he tries not to think about what he has done. Morgan worries that one of his fellow driver's ed students will guess that he was the one who took the sign and call the information hotline for the police that was included in the news report.

After the eleven o'clock news ends, Remy gets a call from Lark. For the first time in her life, Remy doesn't sleep all night.

Now, it is Saturday. While crawling on the stairs with Baby Henry, Remy realizes that Denise Thompson's boy is close to Henry's age. While Remy babysits her baby brother Henry, he says his first word, "Me," and pats her. She realizes that he has spoken her



name. The moment is both happy and tragic for Remy. Ironically, the girl who is a like a loving magnet for young children, has been responsible for leaving a toddler motherless. She even thinks that maybe she can pay for her crime by babysitting the Thompsons' toddler. The obscenity of that thought shocks Remy, and then she says a prayer to God, rather than to one of her minor deities. Morgan moves the signs from the Campbells' garage to the cellar, where he thinks they will be better hidden.

On Sunday, Morgan listens to the sermon at church, hoping for guidance. The topic of the sermon is the unconditional love that God had for Jesus and that parents have for their children. Morgan remembers that his father said, that whoever took the stop sign should be shot. He doubles over in pain at the thought that his father would not love him anymore if he knew what Morgan has done.

When Remy sees Morgan's family at church, she is surprised. The Campbells usually just attend church on holidays. Remy thinks that they are in church, because Morgan has confessed his crime. Perhaps, the Campbells are there to seek advice from Mrs. Willit and the help of God. Remy dreads how Mr. Willit, who is the minister's husband, will treat Morgan and Remy in concert choir, once he finds out what they did. Then, Remy's parents joke that Rafe must be running for office again. Remy feels relieved that that is the reason the Campbells have appeared in church.

At Coffee Hour after the church service, Morgan chokes guiltily on cake, as Mac comes over and gives him a knowing smirk. Morgan fears that Remy has told Mac their crime. Morgan and Remy share a quick joke about how horrible her brother is, and then Morgan finds Mrs. Willit. He offers to run the Christmas pageant. The minister praises him as a "splendid dear, dear boy," and he feels reassured about his character.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Cooney uses irony to convey Remy's changing sense of herself. She thinks that maybe she can make up for her crime by babysitting the child of Mrs. Thompson, although of course, Mr. Thompson would think her a monster for getting his wife killed. Remy realizes that the notion that a killer would be trusted to keep another person safe is obscene.

## Chapter 6 Summary

On Monday, Remy reads Denise Thompson's obituary and learns that the woman's funeral was held on Sunday. On the way to school, Remy's mother and Mac notice that 43 mailboxes have recently been smashed. Mac is angry at the vandals, because he is the family member who always has to put up a replacement mailbox. Imogene, Remy's mother, says she would like to catch the delinquents who smashed the mailboxes with a shotgun. Remy wonders what her mother would do to her if she knew about the stolen stop sign.

In driver's ed class, Morgan again ignores Remy. This time, he does it because he wants to keep her safe from any known association with him, in case he should get



caught for stealing the sign. Mr. Fielding announces that instead of driving instruction today, the class will have a talk with a police officer on the school lawn. Outside, the class sees Denise Thompson's crumpled car, which has been pulled up by a tow truck. Morgan suspects that another student, Taft, has guessed his guilt from the look in Morgan's eyes. Several girls, including Remy, start to cry. The officer gives the kids a lecture, saying that teenagers do not always think before they act. He says that the car will be left on the lawn to remind them to think.

Morgan considers confessing to the police officer immediately, but he decides that would be the wrong action. His confession could implicate Remy, and Morgan's life would be ruined. No college would accept the application of a known killer.

Later that day, Nickie finds Morgan in the hallway. He says, "Weird, isn't it?... A person's alive and now she's not. We managed that." Morgan is distressed that Nickie seems to think killing someone is cool. He is relieved, however, when Nickie says they should never tell anyone. Nickie knows his parents won't see the car crash as a positive thing. Morgan feels sick and sits out in gym class. He starts thinking that he isn't to blame for Denise Thompson's death. Nickie is responsible. Suddenly, Morgan starts to feel better.

Lark fears getting caught with a stop sign, given to her from a long-ago boyfriend, in her bedroom. She notices that Remy looks visibly upset and decides to cool their friendship for a while. She decides to focus instead on maintaining her grades and extracurricular activities, so that she can get into a good college.

Remy and Morgan have a date at the mall on Monday night. They discuss whether to tell the authorities about their part in Denise Thompson's death. Both Morgan and Remy think that maybe they should get married to keep their secret safe.

Wednesday's newspaper runs a full-page ad from Denise Thompson's husband. He offers a reward for information on his wife's "murder." Morgan's father tears out the ad and leaves it on the coffee table. Guilt continues to haunt Remy and Morgan over Thanksgiving break. Remy and her family stay at her Aunt Marian's, along with Remy's large, extended family. Late at night, while her teenage cousins stay up talking about cars and driver's licenses, Remy crawls down into her sleeping bag and cries. The Campbells spend Thanksgiving vacationing in Bermuda. Morgan enjoys riding bikes with his sister, until he notices an absence of stop signs.

The principal of East Line High has hung Mr. Thompson's newspaper ad on the school bulletin board. In driver's ed., Mr. Fielding calls Taft, Chase and Remy to drive. As Taft leads the student car past the demolished Thompson vehicle on the school lawn, Remy cries again. Meanwhile, in the library, Alexandra flirts with Morgan, asking what she plans to buy him for Christmas. He informs Alexandra that he is going out with Remy. The class reacts with interest.

In the car, Mr. Fielding thinks about the fact that he had heard his students talk about stealing signs but had done nothing to thwart them. He feels remorse for having lost his passion for kids and for teaching. He tells Taft to pull over on Cherry Road, and then



asks the kids in the car who took the sign. "How would we know who took it?" Taft asks, guiltily eyeing his feet, as he speaks. Chase and Remy stay silent.

That night, after decorating the house for Christmas with his family, Morgan asks his father whether he believes in church or just goes for political reasons. Rafe answers that he is not sure of his beliefs, but he knows that the words of wisdom he hears at church are helpful to him. Rafe then recites a quote from the Bible about justice and mercy. Morgan wonders which one he would get from his father, if his crime were known.

As the Campbells watch the evening news, a television ad from Mr. Thompson appears. It features a home video of Denise playing with her son, Bobby. Morgan can't believe that Mr. Thompson would spend that kind of money to broadcast his message. Nance says that she agrees with her husband: Whoever took the sign should be shot.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

For Nance Campbell, Christmas is a very big deal. On the family tree, she proudly displays a collection of glass ornaments from around the world, and she fills the entire house with holly, wreaths and other decorations. The family goes to see a production of the *Nutcracker* ballet, throws parties, and sings carols. Their picture-perfect holiday is a symbol for their "perfect" life. Nance even says so to Morgan, as she uncharacteristically gives him a hug, while filled with Christmas spirit. She says, "I'm so happy...You know how sometimes your family seems perfect and the day was just right and Christmas is coming?" In spite of his hidden emotional crisis, Morgan takes part in all the holiday festivities, because he doesn't want to ruin Christmas or his mother's image of their perfect family.

## Chapter 8 Summary

Mr. Baily, Rafe's campaign manager, meets with Morgan alone in the Campbells' living room to make sure that Morgan has no skeletons hiding in the closet. He asks Morgan about drugs and alcohol. Morgan assures Mr. Baily that there is no potential scandal in his life.

It is Thursday afternoon, and Remy is in the car with her mother and brothers. They are on their way to church, where Remy will polish the church's Christmas silver, while Morgan directs Henry, as the baby Jesus, in the pageant rehearsal. Mac asks why Remy is free on a Thursday afternoon, and she says that she quit the basketball team. She claims that she quit, because she isn't a good enough player, but Mac can see through her lie. He thinks she quit the team to spend more time with Morgan.

After rehearsal, Morgan finds himself stranded at the church. He calls Nicholas and says, "I have to tell." Nicholas says that they need to talk it over first. He thinks that he may have to kill Morgan to keep him quiet.



When Remy gets home from the church, Mac tells her that Nicholas called and that "Morgan is going to tell." Remy refuses to tell Mac what that statement means. She immediately calls Morgan and asks him to keep the secret, because her mother would be sad if she knew that Remy had killed someone. Suddenly, Remy hears Mac gasp behind her. He has been in the room, listening to her conversation. "You took the sign?" he asks.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

Morgan and Remy have grown disconnected from other people. Remy has dropped out of her JV basketball team, because she wants to become invisible to the world. She is even trying to talk her mother into taking Henry out of the Christmas pageant to keep the family out of the spotlight. Somehow, at the end of his pageant rehearsal, Morgan finds himself alone in the church. Even his sister has gotten a ride home and left him there by himself. It is at that moment of complete solitude in a house of worship that Morgan decides to clear his conscience. He no longer wants to feel alone. He needs to know whether his parents will kick him out of their hearts.

## Chapter 9 Summary

Remy convinces Morgan to put off confessing to his parents until the next day, so that she and he can first talk in person. They devise a plan that Morgan will ask his father to drive them to the movie theater at the mall the next evening. They can talk in the food court. Mac promises Remy that he will keep her secret. He even pats her on the back and tries to comfort her with a hug.

In the Campbells' driveway, Nicholas is smoking a cigarette and threatening Morgan. He says that he will tell the police and Morgan's and Remy's parents that Morgan wanted the accident to happen, that he waited at the intersection to see the crash. Morgan worries that people will believe Nickie's story.

Inside the house, while Morgan's parents throw a Christmas party for their lawyer friends, Mr. Thompson's ad runs on T.V. again. Morgan asks one of the lawyers what is the penalty for that crime. He learns that stealing a sign is a misdemeanor that would just carry about a \$50 fine. However, if the thieves were also found guilty of reckless endangerment, they could serve one to five years in prison. Assuming that the criminals were kids, however, they probably would get a penalty of probation and community service, instead. Another lawyer tells Morgan that it would be illegal for papers to publish the name of a teen criminal. Rafe, however, wants to change the law so that the kids' parents' names could be released to the public.

The next night, Morgan and Remy talk at the food court at the mall. They decide that, although the legal consequences aren't harsh, telling their secret would still ruin both families emotionally. Later, Morgan gets a call from Remy's mother at home. He panics that Remy has already told their secret. Mrs. Marland is just calling to say that the family



has decided Henry is not manger-scene material this year, because he is too big and wild.

In choir class, Mr. Willit calls the "Normalcy Representative" to the front of the class. Morgan feels close to tears. Mr. Willit notices that something is wrong with Morgan and cuts his royal wave short.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

At this point in the novel, Morgan and Remy's predicament becomes a moral problem, rather than a legal one. They start to realize that, legally, there will be a negligible price to pay for their crime. Instead of thinking how their secret will damage their futures, they focus on how it will affect their families. For the teens, thinking about family responsibility seems to increase their maturity level. The real pain, they understand, will not come from a punishment that they will receive. Their pain will take the form of hurt inflicted on their parents.

## Chapter 10 Summary

Mr. Fielding goes with Remy to the Department of Motor Vehicles office for her driving exam. He tells her that he thinks Kiersten stole the sign. Mr. Fielding quotes the conversation that he overheard when the students first made their pact to steal signs, except that he has matched the quotes with the wrong students' names. Remy wonders whether he will go to the police with his theory, or perhaps contact Mr. Thompson for the reward. Remy realizes that even though Kiersten will not be found guilty for lack of proof, the accusation could damage her reputation permanently.

Remy passes her driver's test and poses for her license photo. As she and Mr. Fielding leave the DMV, she confesses to him in the parking lot. Remy says, "Just give me tonight to tell my parents."

Mac sits in his room trying to think of a way to help Remy. She walks in and tells him of her confession to the driver's ed instructor. She tells Mac that she will tell the police that she and Mac acted alone, without Nickie. Mac, who realizes that Remy doesn't have the strength to cut down a sign, says that is crazy, because she was only an accessory to the theft.

Morgan waits to be Remy's first passenger outside his house, with his thumb up in a hitchhiker's pose. He is surprised to see that Mac is in the car with her, but gives Remy a congratulatory kiss through the window, anyway. Remy says that she is about to tell her parents what kind of a daughter they really have.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

Caroline B. Cooney uses the characters of the two oldest Marland children to demonstrate that perception does not always equal reality. Mac is known as the bad kid





in the family. His parents have tried taking away his radio, his telephone, and even his bed to discipline Mac. However, the child who has made a terrible judgment call is "good girl" Remy. The siblings' roles have completely switched by Chapter Nine, when Mac proves to be a thoughtful and sensitive brother to Remy, devoting his sly mind to figuring out a way to help her.

## Chapter 11 Summary

Morgan enters his father's study and breaks down. At first, his father is distracted by his work, and Morgan can't seem to get his attention. Rafe looks up from his writing tablet when he realizes something is terribly wrong, and then he hugs his son firmly. Morgan says that he took the stop sign. Morgan's father holds him in his lap and tells him that he is still loved.

At the Marlands' house, Remy has told her parents. Imogene screams at her furiously, wondering how she raised a child who would do such a terrible thing. Remy's father weeps. In the midst of the Campbells' shouting and crying, Morgan, Rafe and Nance pull up in front of the house in their BMW.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

The confession scenes contain strong irony. It has taken a great deal of maturity for Remy and Morgan to own up to their role in Denise Thompson's death. Still, they both regress to young childhood, when they tell their parents of their guilt. Remy calls her mother "Mommy," and Morgan sits in his father's lap, while his father strokes his hair as if her were a baby.

Baby Henry serves as a symbol of his family's strife. The Marland household is flooded with drama after Remy tells her secret. Remy's mother screams insults at her, Remy's father sobs and argues with his wife to stop yelling at Remy, and Remy begs for understanding. Henry refuses to go to bed or to eat and acts more "cranky and obnoxious" than usual. All the other family members force themselves to hold back their desire to smack him. For the first time, Henry affects others negatively. This is far different from the way he is presented in earlier chapters. Earlier, Henry was such a calm and loving baby that the nickname "Jesus" seemed to fit.

## Chapter 12 Summary

Both families have gathered in the Marlands' kitchen. Rafe calls the parents of Nicholas Budie to get them involved. They explain that their son would "never participate in any sort of crime," Rafe says. The Budies also claim that Nickie was home on the night the stop sign was stolen.

Mr. Marland suggests calling the police, but Mr. Campbell says he would prefer to handle the matter privately. Then, Mr. Fielding arrives to say that the kids need to pay for their crime.



Rafe explains that, according to law, Morgan and Remy will face a fine of up to two hundred fifty dollars. Mr. Campbell puts one hand on Remy and one on Morgan and declares that tomorrow he will see Mr. Thompson, and let Mr. Thompson decide what should happen to the culprits.

On the way home, Morgan's mother instructs Rafe to drive to a car dealership on Warren Street. There, Nance shows Morgan the convertible that she has already bought for him. She says that she wishes that she could destroy the car with a tire iron.

In school the next day, Mr. Fielding cancels driver's tests, in order to lecture the class on the importance of learning to be careful in cars. Both he and the students acknowledge that he has finally become a teacher to them.

It is not yet Christmas, but Morgan's mother has already taken down the Christmas tree that was filled with lovely ornaments the family had collected on vacations. She avoids being in the same room with Morgan, and she no longer comes home to eat dinners with the family.

## **Chapter 12 Analysis**

In Chapter 12, two characters go through large changes. Mr. Fielding, who previously was so ineffective as a teacher that his teaching methods bordered on comedy, suddenly admits that he has to take an interest in his students, in order to prevent future deaths. He changes, from someone who paid no attention to his job, to someone who is giving his work all his energy. Nance, likewise, has become a totally different sort of person. When her life stops being perfect, she transforms from the life of the party into someone who avoids other people, including her husband and children.

## **Chapter 13 Summary**

Rafe, Remy and Morgan arrive at the Thompson residence. It is a small, humble home with mismatched furniture. Two-year-old Bobby is excited about Christmas. Only two stockings hang from the chimney. Mr. Thompson says that he has thought about punishments for Remy and Morgan, such as forcing them to get Denise's name tattooed on their arms to serve as a reminder of their crime. He says he thought of bringing a civil suit against the kids to smear their names, even though he knows he could not win the court case.

Remy and Morgan explain how and why they stole the sign, and they apologize sincerely to Mr. Thompson. He does not accept their apologies. "The only reason you kids are here is to put it behind you," he says bitterly.

Bobby crawls into Remy's lap and plays with her charm necklace. She says that he can keep the necklace, but Mr. Thompson refuses the gift. He says that his family already has enough souvenirs of what Remy did to them. He admits that Morgan and Remy will probably have to forget about his wife in order to live with themselves, but he tells them to remember Denise on every Thanksgiving and every Christmas.



In the car on the way home, Morgan asks Rafe whether he can still run for governor, and his father says he can. He doesn't say it with enthusiasm, though. Morgan wonders whether the Campbells have paid Mr. Thompson to keep him from taking the case against Morgan and Remy to the authorities.

### **Chapter 13 Analysis**

Meeting Mr. Thompson together has not removed the gulf that separates Morgan from his father. Rafe has brought Morgan and Remy to meet Mr. Thompson, because he knows it will be an important part of their emotional recovery process, and because it was the right thing to do. However, because Rafe has strong political savvy, Morgan is left doubting whether his father bribed Mr. Thompson into dropping the case. Morgan cannot bring himself to ask his father about that, though. Even after going through this ordeal together, Rafe and Morgan remain distant from each other.

### **Chapter 14 Summary**

In driver's ed, Mr. Fielding calls Remy and Morgan to practice driving. Instead, he drives them in his car to visit Denise Thompson's grave. He tells them that he is the one at fault, because he was the grownup in charge. The teens realize that Mr. Fielding just wants to make the emotional healing easier for them, and Morgan thanks him for that.

On December 24, Morgan shows up at the Marlands' house and asks Imogene to let Henry be the baby Jesus, because Henry's substitute has an earache. She responds, with hard sadness, that an empty manger seems fitting this year. Remy tells her mother that she needs her love. Mac tells her that he also needs reassurance that his mother can love him through anything. Finally, Mrs. Marland breaks down and hugs all the kids, including Morgan.

As Morgan's family heads to the Christmas Eve service, Starr asks Nance whether she still loves Morgan. Nance answers, "I'm working on it."

After the pageant, Nance congratulates Morgan on the production and then leaves quickly. Mac follows her outside the church and reminds her that Morgan needs his mother. Inside, Morgan tells his father that he doesn't deserve love, and his father agrees. Rafe points out that love exists, regardless. Then, Nance walks back into the church, heading toward Morgan.

### **Chapter 14 Analysis**

Cooney takes a close look at parent-child relationships in Chapter 14. In both families, it is the mother, who has a harder time forgiving the child. The narrator speculates that the fathers might have been able to forgive Remy and Morgan, because they had taken part in similar pranks when they were younger. Perhaps, they feel more betrayed than the fathers, because Nance and Imogene know they have spent more time with their

children over the years. Therefore, any character flaws must point more directly to the mothers.



# Characters

## Morgan Campbell

Morgan Campbell, a sixteen-year-old junior at East Line High, is highly regarded by his teachers and peers. He has blond hair and a muscular build from lifting weights in his family's basement. Morgan comes from a wealthy family. His father is a popular state politician, who plans to run for governor. Morgan is proud of his parents, who are successful lawyers and leaders of the community, but he does not have a loving relationship with them. When his parents kiss him goodnight, he offers his cheek as a minimal response.

Morgan is very attracted to Remy. They have known each other since elementary school. The last time Morgan's father ran for office, the Campbells went to church regularly for a few years, so Remy and Morgan saw each other in Sunday school, every week.

Never before has Morgan had a girlfriend, and he doesn't know exactly how to interact with girls romantically. He might never have the courage to ask Remy out on a real date. Morgan's strong feelings for Remy lead him to make plans with Nickie, a person he finds distasteful, and who has hurt him in the past. Morgan is excited about getting to spend time with Remy out of school on the sign expedition. Therefore, he doesn't think too hard about the reality of what they are doing.

Morgan's feelings toward Remy get stronger, as their crisis brings them closer together. Before Denise Thompson's death, Morgan thinks that he should not sit with Remy at church, because she may think he wants to marry her. After the car crash, he thinks that maybe he and Remy should get married, so that their secret will be safe. At the beginning of the novel, Morgan is unsure of what to say, or how to act around Remy. By the end, Morgan and Remy are very comfortable sharing their inner thoughts with each other. While Morgan shows only stiff affection to his parents, he kisses and hugs Remy, frequently and with ease.

## Remy Marland

Remy Marland is a sixteen-year-old high school junior, who usually tries to be very good. She has a very loving mother, who builds up Remy's self-esteem by telling her she is the most brilliant, wonderful, talented and interesting girl in America. Remy hates to be disciplined, and she is likely to break down in tears, simply because her mother starts counting to three.

Remy's full name is Rembrandt. She was named for a great artist, because her mother expected great things from her. Remy, however, prefers blending in over striving for greatness. She has blonde hair that she wears in a popular short cut. Remy is thin and



likes to wear sweatshirts, like most of the girls at her school. She takes a lot of care with her appearance, and she usually wears makeup and earrings.

Remy has an unusual way of looking at religion. She prays to many gods, including the God of High Schools, the God Who Restrained Music Teachers, and the God of Driver's Education. Sometimes, when Remy finds herself in the worst situations, she just prays to the singular deity. When it seems that God hasn't answered her prayer to have Morgan call her, Remy takes it personally and gets annoyed with Him. She has decided that there is no point in going to church, and she vows that *her* children will get to play soccer on Sunday mornings instead. When guilt wears her down after Mrs. Thompson's car crash, Remy turns to God, but senses that He is suffocating her with vengeance.

## Mac Marland

Mac Marland, a middle-school student, shows all the signs of growing up to be "pond scum." Mac is the kind of kid, who takes his parents' discipline very lightly. If his mother starts counting to three, Mac will join in gleefully with "Four!" The Marlands generally agree that their son is rotten and worthless. To shape up his behavior, they have taken away his television, and then his radio, and then phone privileges. They have tried confining him to his bedroom, but Mac was happy lying in his bed and doing nothing. Finally, Mac's parents take away his mattress. After a couple nights of sleeping on the floor, he becomes less "rotten and worthless."

Remy often thinks of her brother as a parallel figure to Nicholas Budie. However, Mac proves to be less rotten and worthless than people give him credit for. Unlike Nickie, Mac feels terrible about the death of Denise Thompson and thinks that stealing the sign was a foolish thing to do. Until Mac finds out that Remy took the stop sign, he never enters her bedroom or speaks to Remy, unless it is to taunt her. When he knows that she is in trouble, though, Mac becomes a very loving brother and often visits Remy's room to give her words of comfort.

## Starr Campbell

Starr is Morgan's thirteen-year-old sister. Morgan feels that she is selfish and mean spirited. Starr rules over the other eighth-graders as the most popular girl in school, mainly by gossiping and scaring the other girls with her bossy attitude. When Morgan directs the Christmas pageant, Starr demands that she be given the role of wise man, and that she get the most fancy costume.

## Nance Campbell

Nance Campbell, Morgan's mother, is a successful lawyer with a lovely family and an impressive house. She has her children do their only laundry in their own separate laundry rooms. Wherever she goes, Nance turns on her charm and finds followers. She wields considerable influence over her family and her community. Christmas is very



dear to Nance, as it is a symbol of the perfect joy that she finds in being a wife and mother. When Morgan fails to live up to her image of perfection, Nance finds it hard to continue loving him.

## Rafe Campbell

Rafe Campbell is the father of Morgan. Rafe is a popular state politician, who plans to run for governor. He is a trained lawyer with a strong understanding of the legal system. He watches the news on three television sets every night, to keep current on government issues and current events. Rafe doesn't seem to mind that he doesn't share a close relationship with his son. When Morgan gets into trouble, Rafe arranges a meeting with his son and Mr. Thompson and probably gives Mr. Thompson money, so that Morgan won't get arrested. Rafe has a lot of money, as evident in his grand home and the BMW that he has bought with cash.

## Imogene Marland

Remy's mother, Imogene, is a chubby woman, who serves as the center of her family. She has three children, ranging from one to sixteen-years-old. Imogene tries to support Remy by attending her basketball games and giving her many compliments. She has had trouble disciplining her son Mac, but believes that she can always trust Remy to do the right thing. Imogene gives Remy a lot of responsibilities, including babysitting Henry and driving Mac to his after-school activities. Imogene has faith in God and takes her children to church every weekend. When she learns that Remy has committed a terrible mistake, Imogene blames herself for not providing the right guidance as a mother. She finds it very hard to act lovingly toward Remy and to forgive her daughter for stealing a stop sign.

## Mr. Fielding

Mr. Fielding is a driver's ed teacher. He used to teach math, but he finds teaching kids to drive easier. Mr. Fielding dresses badly and drives an old Pontiac. He is overweight and wears his keys on his belt.

Mr. Fielding believes that driver's ed is largely self-taught. He provides inadequate driving instruction, leaving most of the class in the library with no work to do, while he takes a few students driving in the school's driver's ed car. Mr. Fielding does not pay attention to the students as they drive. Instead, he listens to talk radio on his portable radio's headphones and looks out the passenger side window. The teacher has not learned his students' names, and to him, they all look alike. He scoffs at this generation of teenagers, because they seem so trivial to him and have unusual, pretentious names.

Denise Thompson's death causes Mr. Fielding to reconsider his character and the quality of work that he does. He assumes some of the guilt for Remy and Morgan's



crime, because he should have monitored his students' activities better. Mr. Fielding also wants to make it easier for Remy and Morgan to forgive themselves.

## Nicholas Budie

Nicholas Budie, a senior in high school, is the only character in the novel who seems to be one hundred percent evil. Teachers, parents, and other teenagers think of him as "pond scum."

Nickie is very tall and thin. He has outgrown his clothes, so that his hairy wrists and ankles are exposed. His facial features are described as "ratlike," and he has teeth that resemble fangs. Nickie smokes cigarettes, and he drives an ancient Buick, that is very large and fast.

Nicholas likes to play dangerous games. When he and Morgan were in fifth and sixth grade, they would play chicken in the road. In the middle of the night, the boys would wrestle on the white line, and if a car came, they would have to hurl themselves into a ditch. Morgan and Nicholas also chased each other around the neighborhood with a rule that they couldn't stop for impediments, such as broken glass or someone's pet dog. Now, Mr. Willit knows, Nickie plays games in his car, aiming it as a weapon against stray animals. He even looks for cats and dogs with tags and collars, and swerves to hit them, if he can.

It is Nicholas's idea to steal the stop sign at a dangerous intersection. He is thrilled by the results and thinks that killing Denise Thompson was "cool." Her car crash gives him a sense of accomplishment. However, he realizes that other people won't respect what he has done, so he orders Morgan to keep his mouth shut about their crime. When Morgan says he will tell people, Nicholas threatens to say that Morgan hoped for a car crash and even stood on the corner of Cherry and Warren to watch it happen. If anyone stood on that corner, it was surely Nickie.

By the end of the novel, Nickie has not grown from his experience. He is the only major character, who does not change in some way as a result of Denise Thompson's accident. Mr. and Mrs. Budie, who flatly deny that their son could have taken part in a crime like that, are partly to blame for Nickie's lack of growth.





# Objects/Places

## Remy's Hair

Remy's blonde hair is cut in a fashionable style. She works hard to maintain the same hairdo, as most the other girls in her class. After Denise Thompson's death, Remy notices that a strand of hair has grown too quickly, and she cuts it off with embroidery scissors. She thinks about cutting all her hair off, so that she will look hideous, ridiculous and guilty. Remy doesn't mangle her hair, though; in spite of her guilt. She still wants to fit in with the crowd.

## Laundry

Morgan's crime is potentially "dirty laundry" in his father's campaign for governor. Curiously, the Campbells live in a house, where each bedroom has its own attached laundry room. Nance's decision not to get involved in her children's laundry mirrors her distance from their emotional lives.

## The School Library

Mr. Fielding leaves his students unsupervised in the school library. It is there that they make a pact to steal signs.

## Mrs. Thompson's Car

The police leave Mrs. Thompson's car on the high school lawn to serve as a reminder to think before they act. The car is crumpled after a collision with a truck on Cheery Road and Warren Street.

## Remy's Necklace

Remy has a necklace that has musical notes and chairs on it. It is a "musical chairs" necklace. She tries to give the necklace to Bobby Thompson, but Mr. Thompson rejects the gift.

## The Morgan Road Sign

Remy chooses to take the sign for Morgan Road, in order to show Morgan that she has a crush on him. She hides the sign behind the bushes at her parents' house. Her family doesn't know that they have a stolen street sign on their property. Remy fears that



displaying the sign in her room will alert her parents that she was involved with taking the stop sign at the intersection of Warren Street and Cherry Road.

## **Mr. Thompson's Ad**

Mr. Thompson places a newspaper ad in an attempt to gather information about his wife's crash. He also airs an ad with the same message on T.V.

## **The Woods**

Mr. Fielding absentmindedly leads Lark, Morgan and Remy beyond town and into the woods during driving instruction. As they leave civilization, they begin to think outside of civilization's rules. In the woods, Lark spots a "THICKLY SETTLED" sign and decides that she needs it to decorate her bedroom.

## Setting

A contemporary urban landscape functions as the backdrop of Driver's Ed. School, home, and church are alternated throughout the novel. The homes that driver's education classmates Remy Marland and Morgan Campbell come from define their families' socioeconomic presence in the community. Remy's blue-collar family lives in a small ranch with a small kitchen containing old, "gold," mismatched appliances. Clutter makes this kitchen homey; the refrigerator is decorated with school pictures and accomplishments of Remy and her scummy but "lovable" kid brother Mac. Morgan's professional parents, two lawyers with one aspiring to become governor, live in an upscale, luxurious home with a spacious (but seldom used for cooking) kitchen gleaming with stainless steel appliances. Everyone has his own phone line and private space, including Morgan's bratty, middleschool sister, Starr. Both families attend the same church, from which they eventually draw spiritual and moral direction in responding to their older children, who technically are considered juvenile vandals.

## Social Sensitivity

Cooney is sounding a wake-up call for adults as well as kids. Adults need to react to this form of vandalism, not ignore or accept by silence the trophy road sign in the bedroom. This neglect is as egregious as participating in the vandalism. Remy's mother is as angry with herself as Remy, because she saw the Budie Buick on that November evening but decided to trust Remy's judgment. The church and its message of "unconditional love" starts the healing process between parent and child for both Remy and Morgan, but they know they will have to live with their transgression for the rest of their lives. As Remy polishes the tarnished silver pieces to be used in the Christmas pageant, she feels as "tarnished" as these objects, only she will remain tarnished. Morgan, as volunteer coordinator for the Christmas pageant, feels he will never know the "heavenly peace" alluded to in the carol "Silent Night." They will always live with the memory of Denise Thompson for the rest of their lives. This bittersweet experience of living with one's deficiencies is part of the moral, human condition that evolves in this novel.

The publication of *Driver's Ed* in 1994 preceded the February 1996 incident in Florida when the vandalism of a STOP sign resulted in the deaths of three teenagers.

The young adults who vandalized this sign were tried as adults, convicted of manslaughter, and sentenced to prison. The circumstances and appeals related to this May 1997 trial received sustained attention through Court TV and Larry King Live. Although Cooney explores the law and the potential for prosecution in her narrative, she expends her literary energies on the testing of the moral integrity of her protagonists, which makes this novel a compelling reading experience.



## Literary Qualities

Alternating the viewpoints of the two central protagonists after they learn of the fatal crash involving Denise Thompson provides increasing tension and momentum to the plotline. Cooney allows the reader to feel the increasing anxiety and guilt pressing upon Morgan as he watches the late news with his parents. Remy tries to distance herself from involvement with the accident until the following afternoon when she associates her beloved baby brother Henry with Denise Thompson's young son.

Remy stayed home with Henry while everybody else was out. . . Sometime in the middle of the afternoon, when they were crawling backward down the stairs, which was his new thrill of the week, she thought: Denise Thompson's little boy isn't much older than this. She isn't crawling backward down the stairs with her baby son. She's dead. She'll never see her son grow up.

Remy began sobbing, first soundlessly and then with huge bawling groans. . . Her little brother was stunned. He was the one who cried. Not his big sister! His world split open and he clung to Remy.

His tiny hands patted her cheeks. "Me?"

he said frantically "Me?" It's his first word she thought, and it's not me, it's Remy.

He's saying my name. Bobby Thompson would be calling his mommy today, trying to find her. . . Oh God! thought Remy.

Why weren't you there? Why didn't you stop me?

This quiet domestic scene escalates into emotional chaos as Remy realizes that death is final. The joy of Henry's first spoken word is undercut by Remy envisioning the Thompson child calling his mother's name.

The power of the writer through word and event evokes a bittersweet epiphany for both the character and the reader. Adeptly Cooney brings painful moments of illumination to her characters' moral conscience.



# Themes

## Real Religious Faith versus False Faith

The Marlands always go to church, and Remy's parents have taught her to have faith in God. At the beginning of the novel, however, Remy turns to her own made-up gods. whenever she wants something. She prays to the God Who Restrained Music Teachers to keep Mr. Willit from embarrassing Morgan, and she prays to the God of Driver's Education, when she wants to get called to drive the student driver car. Remy volunteers to polish silverware at the Church. Her mother thinks that is a generous act of religious faith, but really Remy just wants an excuse to see Morgan, who will also be at the church.

Although Mrs. Marland is apparently devout in her religious practices, she creates a shocking nickname for her baby, Henry, after he plays Jesus in the Christmas pageant. She calls him "Jesus," and other characters note that this seems sacrilegious.

The Campbells go to church, only when it is politically advantageous to them. Now that Rafe is running for governor, the family shows up at church. Rafe tells Morgan that he does not have firm beliefs about God, but he does value Biblical wisdom. Morgan runs the Christmas pageant, just because he thinks it will be fun. He is also pleased, when the minister praises him for that work. Starr is involved in the pageant, mainly to wear a shiny costume.

## Normalcy

Mr. Willit decides that Morgan is the closest thing to normal in the junior class, and he uses Morgan as a humorous model of normalcy. Part of the attraction Remy feels for Morgan is the draw to be "normal" by associating with him. People assume that Morgan is normal, because he lives in a nice house, wears preppy clothes and doesn't get into any obvious trouble. They don't realize that he secretly longs to be involved in a dangerous war, and that he used to play scary games late at night in the streets with Nick Budie. After Denise Thompson's accident, Morgan manages to keep up his appearance of normalcy, except in Mr. Willit's class when doing the "normal" wave makes him feel that he will start to cry. Morgan fears that his hopes for being truly normal have been cut short by his crime. He suspects that he will not get into college, once he is branded a criminal.

## Unconditional love

Mrs. Willit preaches that, in the Bible, God praised Jesus before he had even started gathering disciples. She identifies this ability to love someone even when they haven't done something good unconditional love, the love that parents have for the children. Morgan and Remy's crime tests the strength of their parents' unconditional love.



Imogene, for instance, named Remy after Rembrandt, because she expected her daughter to be special and wonderful. When Remy confesses that she has killed someone, Imogene realizes that Remy isn't always special and wonderful. She finds it extremely hard to continue feeling positively toward her daughter. Morgan's father, on the other hand, acknowledges that Morgan doesn't deserve his family's love, but he continues to care for his son.

## **Taking Responsibility**

Most of the conflict in "Driver's Ed" centers around the issue of taking responsibility for one's actions. Morgan and Remy try to pretend that they are still innocent, good kids, but they are losing sleep and hating themselves more every day for killing Denise Thompson. Owning up to their crime to Mr. Fielding, Mr. Thompson, and their parents helps Morgan and Remy begin to emotionally heal. It is clear that they will be much more careful in the future. On the other hand, Nicholas Budie admits no responsibility for his actions. He does not suffer the pain of almost losing his parents' love, but he also does not feel the relief of letting other people love you for the person you really are. It seems likely that Nickie will not be any more careful in deciding his future actions than he was, when he chose to steal the stop sign.



## Themes/Characters

Remy's crush on Morgan is so well known that her classmates willingly reshuffle the driving schedule so she can be in the car with Morgan. The taking of road signs becomes the "class project" for this section of Driver's Ed with Remy wanting the sign "MORGAN ROAD." A classmate states that adults tolerate this activity if they don't know about it. "Parents don't mind seeing the sign in your room, but they don't like knowing ahead of time that you're going to take it." Remy, Morgan, and an older kid in school, Nicholas Budie, who has a driver's license, go out on a late November evening to take road signs. Morgan is excited by "the risk of getting caught," while Remy is excited about being with Morgan, thankful that her prayer to "the God of True Love" has been answered.

Who wouldn't be infatuated with a girl whose laughter "erupted, as if she had been carbonated. Bottled with love." This description closely follows their first kiss after Morgan holds Remy's ankles so she can stand on the roof of the old black Buick to remove the bolts holding the sign MORGAN ROAD. Remy briefly thinks "We're stealing . . . the word landed on her like a mosquito.... It's just a sign . . . a silly old sign." Morgan is preoccupied with touching as much of Remy as would be appropriate on a first date. "[He] puts his hand on the back of her neck, touching the bristly back of her hair. It did not feel the way he had expected: it was silk." Little wonder they are nearly oblivious to taking the road signs when their physical presences are so overwhelming for the other. They are nice kids: they get good grades, sing in the school choir, and go to the same church, but on this particular mid-November evening they do not think clearly, and what results turns them into fascinating characters.

Both of these kids are saturated with their hormones, ignorant and oblivious to the consequences of taking the last sign for this particular evening, the octagonal STOP sign at the corner of Cherry and Warren Roads. Two days later Remy and Morgan learn of Denise Thompson's death at this intersection. Although they remain together as a couple, they become preoccupied with confronting their families and Denise Thompson's husband with their admission of collusion. Budie, their driver, denies any involvement.

The most explicit statement of theme for young adults in Driver's Ed comes from the policeman being interviewed for television coverage at the scene of Denise Thompson's death. When asked who had taken the STOP sign, the officer responds: "'Kids.' He had seen it before, he would see it again.

'They don't think. They like the shape of stop signs, you know. We hafta replace them all the time. Kids probably figure whoever's driving here will figure it out.

You know, stop whether the sign's there or not. Kids don't stop to think.'"

This interview has a profound impact on Morgan as he watches the eleven o'clock news with his parents, knowing this sign is on its side in their garage. "Morgan was screaming





on the inside. It was soundless, yet so loud that jet engines might be taking off in his brain.... Morgan's mind burned.

His heart seemed to catch fire. He felt so hot and dry, he felt blistered. Nobody died he thought. Not because of me. I'm a nice person. It was only a sign." This confrontation with the consequences of his action intensifies as the remnants of the twisted, wrecked car are displayed on the front lawn of the high school campus and fullpage newspaper and television ads paid for by Denise Thompson's husband offer a reward for information concerning his wife's death. Haunted and hounded by these images, and in spite of his desire to protect Remy, he admits his involvement in this accident by telling his father, Rafe Campbell. Morgan demonstrates he has a moral conscience by accepting responsibility for his actions.

After everyone is informed, Morgan asks his father if this tragedy will impact his political future: "This isn't a skeleton in your closet?" Morgan asks. "No, it isn't Morgan," said his father quietly. "It's a skeleton in your closet." Both Remy and Morgan are morally correct in publicly admitting their involvement and will remain the living, guilty survivors of this tragedy from this time forward. They have become the victims of their own thoughtlessness.

Accepting responsibility for one's actions (or rather inaction) expands into an adult character: the driver's education instructor, Mr. Fielding. "Year after year he [Fielding] and they [the current class] mindlessly drifted through eight week sessions." His indifference to his class, failing to know their names, ignoring their weak driving skills (in favor of looking at Dunkin' Donut signs), neglecting to take action when he knows of their "class project" ahead of time, forces him to admit his part in Denise Thompson's death. "You're all brats, one way or another. I don't exempt a single one of you.

But I'm worse, because I didn't care....

She's dead. Denise Thompson. She's dead.

You kids are always mentioning life and death . . . getting into college is life and death. Getting your driver's license is life and death. Having a date is life and death.'

He waited for them to look up. 'Only driving is life and death. Holding a steering wheel is life and death. Choosing to control Driver's Ed 101 a car is life and death.'" It takes courage and moral determination to stand before these kids to admit his ineffectiveness as a teacher and an adult.

Two other young adult characters represent the moral antithesis to Remy, Morgan, and Mr. Fielding. The foil characters of Lark and Nicholas Budie look out for their own interests even though both are involved directly and indirectly in the taking of the STOP sign that results in Denise Thompson's death. Of the two, Budie is more directly involved and resembles a traditional villain. To use Cooney's community vernacular, Budie is known as "pond scum" or "slime" who, once having a car, "began running over animals. He had a personal road kill count." It is Budie who encourages Morgan to remove the STOP sign (with his help) and to hide it in the Campbell garage (not his).



Little wonder Budie thinks of Denise Thompson's death as an act he "managed." "It's the ultimate cool, isn't it?" But he will deny being part of it, with his parents providing an alibi for him on that particular Thursday evening. He is manipulative, sadistic, and amoral.

Lark is an instigator; she is the one in the driver's education class who makes the rule "Nobody gets a license without taking a sign first.... Nobody would get into trouble. Everybody takes signs." She points out, "You don't go to prison for stealing signs....

It's a little itty bit of wood and paint. All you do is pay a fine." Lark organizes the sign-stealing escapade, but drops out from going at the last minute. Lark's parents are nonexistent in her life. "They never came to anything, even teacher conferences. They had basically skipped Lark's life. She didn't mind. She made a life of her own." She's the one who calls Remy about Denise Thompson, but she will have nothing to do with accepting any part of Remy and Morgan's dilemma. "Lark did not want to get involved with some sort of murder thing. She was a junior. Time to think about college."

She looks out for herself for no one else will.

She is a pathetic person who deserves understanding but not exoneration from her detrimental manipulation of her classmates.



# Style

## Point of View

The novel is told in third-person point of view. The narrator is omniscient and can jump into the minds of various characters. Mostly, the story is told from the thoughts of the two central characters, Morgan and Remy. By varying the storytelling in this way, Caroline B. Cooney created a story to which either a boy or a girl can relate. Sometimes, the fact that the narrator knows different characters' thoughts adds to the story's excitement. For instance, the reader knows that Nickie considers killing Morgan, although Morgan doesn't know it. When Nickie confronts Morgan in his family's driveway, the reader realizes that the conversation is potentially dangerous before Morgan does. When Morgan and Remy confess to their parents, Cooney intersperses the two scenes. The reader experiences a moment from the Marland's perspective, then the Campbell's, then returns to the Marland's. This technique enables the author to contrast how the two families deal with the situation, and it adds to the excitement of the unfolding emotional drama.

## Setting

The first setting of the novel is East Line High School's library, where the students sit at library tables waiting to get called to drive. Other school settings include the choir room, the hallway, and the lawn outside, where Denise Thompson's demolished car is left to frightened the teen drivers. Much of the novel's action takes place in cars. The driver's ed car is a basic sedan. The kids steal signs while riding in Nicholas Budie's big black Buick, which is very old but fast. The fact that the Buick has been known to hit many family pets makes it a particularly ominous setting, and that is where the worst deed in the novel gets committed. The family car is the place where Mac and Remy act most tenderly to their baby brother, adjusting his seatbelt and gently lifting Henry from his car seat. The Campbells ride in a shiny BMW, and Mr. Fielding drives the kids to the cemetery in his beat-up Pontiac.

The kitchens of the Marlands and the Campbells illustrate the different values of the two families. Rafe and Nance value following the news, and they have three televisions that on, simultaneously. Nance uses her large sleek kitchen to prepare gourmet meals. The Marlands, on the other hand, have a kitchen table strewn with old newspapers they haven't bothered to read. They focus their energies on instead interacting with each other. They haven't spent a lot of money on decorating, and their phone has an old-fashioned rotary dial.

## Language and Meaning

The language employed is not difficult to understand, since most of the narration comes from the thoughts of teenagers. There is little figurative language in the novel, but it is



inventive when used. An example of this is when Morgan says that blame can't be spread like peanut butter. The words used by each character add rich characterization. Remy frequently prays to one of her gods. Rafe tends to use legal jargon. Imogene, deeply disappointed in her daughter, speaks in bitter sarcasm.

The language of the novel is generally casual, with a lot of pronoun usage for implied subjects. For instance, Mr. Fielding tells Remy and Morgan, "I'm trying to make it easier for you," rather than "I'm trying to make the process of emotional healing easier for you."

## Structure

The novel is comprised of fourteen untitled chapters. The main storyline focuses on the planning, execution and disastrous aftermath of the plot to steal street signs. The sign gets stolen, and Mrs. Thompson gets killed by the fourth chapter. Throughout the remainder of the novel, Remy and Morgan deal with their guilt, search for a way to take responsibility for the crime, and make amends with their families. In the novel, a secondary plot line traces the growing romance between Remy and Morgan.



## Quotes

"Calm down, said Mr. Fielding. 'It's no big deal. Nobody's dead.' That was the dividing line between big deal and little deal? Death?" Chapter 1, p. 15

"Kid,' proclaimed Mr. Willit in a huge, rolling voice, "this is your year. I am going to make you normal. Nobody else here is going to achieve this pinnacle of success." Chapter 2, p. 22

"My parents know nothing,' said Nickie. 'Never have, never will.'" Chapter 3, p. 52

"Do they let killers run pageants? Thought Morgan The thing is not to think about it. If I think about it, somebody might see it in my eyes. Be able to tell what I did. So I won't think about it." Chapter 5, p. 75

"I was like Lark, Morgan thought. I stopped, but I didn't stay stopped." Chapter 6, p. 93

"I don't want to tell,' said Remy. 'I don't want anybody to think that's the kind of person I am.'" Chapter 6, p. 101

"Don't sleep tonight. Lie there/Think about my wife./Think about my motherless son./REWARD!/Tell me who murdered my wife." Chapter 7, p. 104

"Oh, dear God, he thought, when did I stop being a teacher?" Chapter 7, p. 111

"*Oh, God!* She thought, and it was no prayer to a little local deity, it was to the real one. The big one. But there was no answer." Chapter 8, p. 124

"You're lying, Morgan. And if you say I had anything to do with this, I'll ruin you." Chapter 9, p. 132

"I told Mr. Fielding, Morgan. And now I'm going home to tell my parents what their great and different daughter is really like." Chapter 10, p. 153

"You wanted danger, he said to himself, you got it, you worthless whimpering cipher. Denise Thompson didn't want danger. She wanted to live." Chapter 11, p. 155

"God did not let Mrs. Thompson die. God doesn't have wrenches and hacksaws. He doesn't supervise dangerous intersections. That's your job." Chapter 11, p. 157

"I let this class be a joke," said Mr. Fielding. 'I let myself be a joke, I let driving be a joke. That's the joke, guys. Because this is the only class you'll ever take where you can go out and kill somebody if you're not careful.'" Chapter 12, p. 172

"It isn't peanut butter,' said Morgan. 'Blame doesn't spread.'" Chapter 14, p. 191



## Topics for Discussion

1. Rafe Campbell reviews the legal responses to taking road signs. Review these responses found in chapter 12 of *Driver's Ed* and evaluate their equity.

Are these responses too lenient? Explain.

2. Remy and Morgan should make some kind of compensation for their involvement with the STOP sign. Describe the compensation (community service) that should be assigned. Develop three examples for this discussion.

3. Why are the mothers angrier with Remy and Morgan than the fathers? Would your parents respond in the same way?

Explain why or why not.

4. Siblings can be a pain, but Remy makes some interesting discoveries about Mac.

Make a list of three and explain.

5. Robert Frost said in his poem "The Death of the Hired Hand," "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." Is this similar to "unconditional love" in *Driver's Ed*? Read the poem and formulate a response.



## Essay Topics

The mothers of Remy and Morgan find it harder to forgive the teens for stealing the stop sign than their fathers do. What factors might explain this difference?

When Lark runs a red light during driving instruction in Chapter One, she says that she stopped but "forgot to stay stopped." In Chapter Two, Morgan says that he is like Lark, because he also stopped but forgot to stay stopped. What does this sentence mean for Morgan? How does it describe his actions on the night the stop sign was stolen?

Three people were involved in stealing the stop sign: Nickie, Morgan and Remy. Who do you think was most responsible for the crime? Why?

Will apologizing to Mr. Thompson help Remy and Morgan forgive themselves for their crime? Why or why not?

Mr. Fielding heard the driver's ed class talking about stealing signs, and Mr. Willit saw Morgan get into a car with Nicholas Budie. What could these teachers have said to Morgan and Remy to stop them from committing a crime? Would Morgan and Remy have paid attention to teachers' warnings, or not?

Neither Starr nor Mac are liked by their older siblings, as the novel starts. Describe how these characters are similar, and contrast their differences. How do Starr's and Mac's characters develop, as the story progresses?

## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Consult Court TV Online—Stop Sign Hearing Updates. Summarize the trial of Florida v. Miller, Cole, and Bailie "The Stop Sign Case" and compare/ contrast this 1997 trial and its circumstances with that of Remy and Morgan in Driver's Ed. Summarize the ongoing petitions concerning the original verdict.
2. In American popular culture, narratives that involve a journey by a form of mechanical transportation often are called road works. These journeys are really about the personal growth of the protagonist. Read either Gary Paulsen's *The Car* (1994) involving Terry Anders, or Joan Bauer's *Rules of the Road* (1998) involving Jenna Boiler, and compare/ contrast their maturation to either Morgan or Remy.
3. Keeping a secret, especially when it compromises your integrity, is a humbling yet illuminating experience. Read Paula Fox's *One Eyed Cat* (1982) and compare/contrast Ned's experiences with Remy and Morgan. Does Ned have more of a challenge because his father is a minister? Explain.
4. Destroying a life and accepting responsibility for it is the focus of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Compare/contrast the way in which the mariner comes to closure to that of Remy and Morgan. To what extent does religious belief influence these characters?



## Further Study

Caroline B. Cooney. <http://www.dellbooks.com/teachersbdd/caro.html> (June 1999).

A brief look into Cooney's childhood and young adulthood with her early career goal of wanting to become a nurse.

A brief look into Cooney's childhood and young adulthood with her early career goal of wanting to become a nurse.

"Cooney, Caroline B." In *Something about the Author*, vol. 80. Detroit: Gale Research, 1995, 55-57. Briefly assesses representative titles up to the publication date of this reference text.



## Related Titles

Romance, vandalism, and villainy link Driver's Ed with Robert Cormier's *We All Fall Down* (1991), although the romance between Jane Jerome and Buddy Walker in the latter is more poignant than that between Remy and Morgan. Buddy is one of four young males who vandalizes the Jerome home and tries to apologize for this act of vandalism by calling Jane but not identifying himself. Eventually when they meet by chance at the mall she reaches out to him for his being vulnerable and lonely, the same emotions she feels since the trashing of her home. When she learns of Buddy's involvement in this act she feels emotionally vandalized and victimized by him.

This betrayal shatters the love she had for him and is replaced eventually with pity.

Law and prosecution have a much more frustrating outcome in *We All Fall Down* because Harry Flowers, the mastermind of the trashing of the Jerome home, manipulates the system by blatantly lying to escape going to jail. As one of the lawyers in Driver's Ed says, "law and morality don't always cross paths," and this is certainly true in *We All Fall Down*.

Driver's Ed would be the more appropriate novel for classroom discussion, especially when comparing the lenient young adult prosecution in the novel to recent litigation in Florida.



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## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996