

# **Eight Keys Study Guide**

**Eight Keys by Suzanne LaFleur**

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## Plot Summary

“Eight Keys” is a children’s novel by Suzanne LaFleur that follows the struggles of Elise Bertrand as she begins sixth grade, deals with a bully named Amanda, and does her best to make new friends while keeping old friends. When the novel begins, Elise lives with her Aunt Bessie and her Uncle Hugh, because her own parents have long been dead. Elise is eleven and just finishing up summer vacation. She and her best friend, Franklin, spend hours playing in the fields and woods of their farms. While playing Knights, Elise falls and cuts up her legs. She worries how she will look and how she will fit in at school the next day as a result.

When school begins, Elise is immediately targeted by her lockermate, Amanda, who is pretty, dresses stylishly, and is also very mean. Amanda makes fun of Elise for her legs and for playing pretend with Franklin. Franklin doesn’t care that Amanda - or anyone else - makes fun of him, but for Elise, this is troubling and painful. She slowly begins to put distance between herself and Franklin, telling him things like they are too old to play pretend anymore. Elise also struggles with school itself, for middle-school kids have greater responsibilities than elementary school kids. In particular, Elise struggles to keep up with her homework and falls far behind. Things are only complicated when Aunt Annie and her baby, Ava, move into Uncle Hugh and Aunt Bessie’s house.

Elise’s Uncle Hugh and Aunt Bessie worry about Elise, because they know something is wrong. At first, Elise is very hesitant to say anything, because she is embarrassed and doesn’t think her family will understand. At school, Elise begins to befriend a girl named Caroline, who turns out to be the longtime best friend of Amanda. Caroline explains that she doesn’t know why Amanda is being so mean, because she never was that way before. Elise’s twelfth birthday then rolls around. Uncle Hugh reminds Elise that as she gets older, with each year her responsibilities will be increasing. He encourages her to keep up with her homework, for example.

Each year at her birthday, Elise receives a letter from her dead father, having been written when he was dying of cancer nine years before. Elise is devastated to learn her twelfth birthday letter will be her last letter. In the letter, however, Elise’s father explains that she will soon come into possession of a key to another surprise. As it turns out, Elise will be given eight keys over the next few months. Each key will unlock a door on the off-limits second floor of the barn above Uncle Hugh’s workshop.

Working together with Franklin and Caroline, Elise begins opening each room to discover important things about herself, her life, and her father’s hopes for her life. For example, one room is full of photographs of Elise and her family, with a note urging her to get to know her family and to appreciate them. Another room is full of written questions, representing all the questions in life. Another room is empty, symbolic of Elise’s life and all that she will fill her life with. This gift helps Elise to better appreciate, and finally open up to her family about the troubles at school; it allows her to heal her strained friendship with Franklin; it also allows her to be able to handle bullying at

school because Elise is now a stronger, more confident person. As the novel ends, Elise begins to fill her own empty room with things important to her.



# Part 1, Chapters 1 – 5

## Summary

Part 1, Chapter 1, Why My Life Really Stinks – Eleven-year-old Elise is best friends with her eleven-year-old neighbor, Franklin White. Elise lives with her Uncle Hugh and Aunt Bessie. Elise and Franklin love to play Knights together in the woods. The day before sixth grade begins, a game of Knights results in Elise slipping and falling down a hill, cutting up her legs. She worries about how she will look at school, even though there will be hundreds of new kids Elise has never met before.

At the bus stop the next morning, Diana, the weird cat-obsessed girl in the neighborhood says good morning to Elise. Elise returns the greeting. As school gets underway, Elise's lockermate, a mean girl named Amanda Betterman makes fun of Elise's legs, calling her the "Bloody Queen of Scabs". Amanda has stylish, streaked hair and a very short skirt. Franklin suddenly appears to explain that Elise's injuries came from playing Knights. This causes Amanda and a group of kids to make fun of Elise for playing a pretend game.

Part 1, Chapter 2, One Last Visit to Summer – On Saturday, Franklin wakes Elise up early, asking her what she wants to do that day. She says she does not want to play Knights, but wants to help Uncle Hugh (a craftsman) with his woodworking and Aunt Bessie (a caterer) with her ice cream-making. Elise and Franklin walk over to the barn to help Uncle Hugh, but he is just finishing up and heading out on deliveries. He calls Elise "Cricket", her nickname from her toddler days when she learned to speak and wouldn't be quiet, like a cricket. Elise and Franklin then head to the stream to see if they can find any frogs. Unable to find any frogs, they take a sample of the water to look at under a microscope.

They then head over to Franklin's farm. His mother, Mrs. White, is warm and kind but a bad cook, and always makes Elise eat something. It makes Elise think about how her own mother died in childbirth, and how her dad died of illness when she was three. Elise thinks about her father wrote her a series of letters, with one to be delivered each year at her birthday by Uncle Hugh. Elise and Franklin then study the water and then head back to Elise's house to make ice cream with Aunt Bessie. Elise thinks about school and hopes that Amanda was only being mean because she was nervous about the first day of school. On Sunday, Elise and Franklin have a Star Wars marathon, during which time Elise forgets to do homework.

Part 1, Chapter 3, Things Get Worse – On Monday, Elise realizes that Amanda dresses stylishly every day. She also notices that more and more girls are beginning to dress the same way. Immediately, Amanda begins making fun of Elise by asking her if she played anything over the weekend, and then making fun of her scabbed legs. In each class, Elise is lectured about not having done her homework. After school, Elise and Franklin go to see Leonard, Elise's dad's best friend when he was alive. Leonard owns the town



hardware shop, and encourages Elise to give sixth grade a chance despite her saying it is yucky. Elise and Franklin then get ice cream at the parlor next door.

They are picked up by Aunt Bessie afterwards, then decide to build a castle from Uncle Hugh's wood scraps. Elise considers doing homework but decides she needs a break from school, so she keeps building. In the barn, she discovers a beautiful rocking chair she wants. She notices a key hanging on the wall, with a tag that says "Elise" on it. Elise and Franklin are intrigued by the key, having no idea what it goes to, but they go back to building. Franklin accidentally hits Elise's thumb with a hammer, causing it to bleed. Aunt Bessie rushes Elise to the hospital. Franklin feels horrible and apologizes repeatedly. Elise's finger is broken and put into a giant white bandage to heal. That night at dinner, Uncle Hugh announces his younger sister, Annie, and her 5-month-old baby, Ava, will be coming to live with them for a while.

Part 1, Chapter 4, Things Get Much Worse – At school the next day, Amanda makes fun of Elise's bandage, then drops her books on Elise's brown-bagged lunch. She then calls Elise and Franklin "retards". Half the kids in school make fun of Elise's thumb, while the other half worry about her and ask her how she is. Mrs. Wakefield asks Elise how she is doing. Elise explains her lunch was crushed by her lockermate. Mrs. Wakefield tells her it was probably an accident. Elise is also lectured again about her homework, so after school, she goes straight into doing homework. Still, she is unable to catch up. She feels lost in all her classes. Amanda continues to bully Elise, smashing her lunch again. Mrs. Wakefield doesn't seem to care. Elise becomes depressed, and misses the bus. She will have to be driven in by Aunt Bessie.

Part 1, Chapter 5, Feeling Stuck – Elise misses the bus again the next day, but notices that Franklin has, too. She imagines this is either because he is a good best friend, or he really did miss the bus. Uncle Hugh then appears to bring Elise and Franklin back to the house. There, Uncle Hugh gently reminds Elise and Franklin that, as they get older, they need to become more responsible. This is especially important for Elise, says Uncle Hugh, because she will turn 12 the following week. Mrs. White then picks Franklin up for school, while Uncle Hugh tells Elise she will be staying home to catch up on some of her work. He knows something is bothering her, and wants her to sort her thoughts out. Aunt Bessie then comes to talk with Elise. Elise doesn't say much, but thinks about how having Franklin as a friend has only given her trouble. Aunt Annie then arrives. Elise helps her bring her things in. After school, Franklin comes by with Elise's homework assignments and offers to help her with them. Elise hopes that being 12 will make her cooler.

## Analysis

"Eight Keys" is a children's novel by Suzanne LaFleur which follows the struggles of Elise Bertrand as she begins sixth grade, deals with a bully named Amanda, and does her best to make new friends while keeping old friends. From the start, the reader can clearly see the importance of family, making family itself an important theme that will continue throughout the novel. Elise's aunt and uncle are surrogate parents to Elise's



parents, who have died long ago. Uncle Hugh and Aunt Bessie deeply love Elise, and Elise deeply loves them. However, as the reader will note, she doesn't totally appreciate them the way that she could. She enjoys spending time with them, but knows relatively little about them, for example. Nevertheless, Elise and her aunt and uncle form a good family. Elise has excellent role models in her aunt and uncle, and has two people who will protect and care for her no matter what.

Elise also has tremendous support from her best friend, Franklin, who is as kind and supportive as Elise could have ever asked for. Friendship herein becomes an incredibly important theme to the novel. Franklin, however, becomes a source of embarrassment to Elise because Franklin isn't cool like the other kids at school, and because he serves as a source of Amanda's bullying. Still, Elise remains best friends with Franklin, though she tells him that they are too old to play pretend anymore. It is the beginning of Elise seeking to distance herself from Franklin.

The reader will note the scene in which Elise discovers a key on the wall with her name on it. Keys will become an important symbol in the novel, as they are equated to the metaphorical keys for life. It is no accident that Elise should discover such a key in her family's barn while playing with her best friend. But that it should come at a time when Elise and Franklin seem to be growing apart a little is also important.

The growing distance between Elise and Franklin isn't the only change Elise faces. Elise herself will do some growing up before the novel is over. Her appearance in sixth grade, the increased amount of homework on a daily basis, and the bullying of Amanda are all things which Elise has not experienced before. Elise is also unused to being publicly lectured about her homework issues, and is hurt to learn that teachers do not believe her about the bullying that she is enduring. With the adults at school not believing her, Elise struggles to imagine how the adults at home could believe her, either. Yet, the reader will notice that Uncle Hugh and Aunt Bessie take extra interest in how things are going for Elise at school, especially just before the arrival of Aunt Annie.

The themes of life and death also appear in small form at this early stage of the novel. In terms of life, the reader sees that things in Elise's life have indeed changed as she has gotten older. Life rarely ever stays the same. Things change, and Elise is struggling with this fact. Life is also changed by death. When she was three, Elise's father died of cancer, while her mother died shortly after birthing Elise. Elise's early years have been marked by death and sadness, but she has been given new life through Uncle Hugh and Aunt Bessie, wonderful parents in their own right. They will be instrumental in Elise's life, but they will be especially influential in the coming chapters of the novel.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Elise become embarrassed by her friendship with Franklin? Why does Franklin not seem to be bothered by Amanda at school?



## Discussion Question 2

Why do you believe Elise's teachers do not believe her about being bullied? What effect does this have on Elise when it comes to her aunt and uncle at home?

## Discussion Question 3

How is Elise's relationship with her aunt and uncle? In what ways do they appear to be a typical family? In what ways do they seem to be different? Do you think these differences matter? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

chivalrous, phantom, decapitation, renovated, preventable, miraculously, obtuse





## Part 1, Chapter 6 – Part 2, Chapter 10

### Summary

Part 1, Chapter 6, I Make it to School – Elise makes it to school on time. Amanda tells Elise where to put her things in their locker and mockingly calls Franklin Elise's boyfriend. Three girls who have become Amanda's crew – Kate, Lindsay, and Caroline – arrive. When Franklin accidentally runs into an eighth-grader and drops all his books, Amanda, Kate, and Lindsay laugh, while Caroline looks at Elise. Elise ignores Franklin, does not help him, and goes to class without him. In class, Caroline receives compliments from the teacher on her homework, embarrassing her in front of her group. Elise whispers compliments to Caroline, who smiles. After school, Elise visits Leonard, making sure he will be coming to her birthday party. At home during cooking time with Aunt Bessie, Elise is unhappy to learn they will be making baby food for Ava. Elise is then angered to learn the rocking chair she wanted to ask Uncle Hugh for is being given to Annie.

Part 1, Chapter 7, I Turn Twelve – It is Elise's birthday. Franklin and Leonard arrive. Elise tells Franklin she is a little excited to get her father's next letter that night. Aunt Sally and Uncle Beau also arrive. For her birthday, Elise receives a gift certificate to the movie store, a One Free Day Trip pass from Leonard, a cookbook from Aunt Bessie, a goal journal from Uncle Hugh, and a book of knot-tying techniques from Franklin. That night, before bed, Elise gets her father's letter. Aunt Bessie sadly explains it is the last one. Elise had hoped there would be a letter every year for the rest of her life, but this is not so. The letter was written while Elise was young and playing in the rain. The letter tells Elise that it will be the last, but that there is something else planned for her to be discovered and unlocked when she is ready, and that people must mold themselves. Elise's father tells her that they will be together again someday. Elise falls asleep thinking of her parents, and what her father had planned for her.

Part 1, Chapter 8, Being Twelve Is (Unfortunately) Just Like Being Eleven – The next morning at breakfast, Elise realizes she didn't do any of her homework the night before. At school, Franklin attends a lunchtime meeting for kids interested in student government, so Elise must eat alone. When she sees Caroline eating by herself, she goes to sit with Caroline. Suddenly, Amanda and her other friends show up, and demand that Elise move. Elise does her best not to cry, and eats alone at another table. After school, Franklin comes over to ask Elise to play, but Elise says they are too old now. They decide to do a jigsaw puzzle instead. Elise is so depressed she forgets to do her homework and study for a math test. At school the next day, a kid named Jason makes fun of Franklin for having Star Wars toys in his locker, then declares that Franklin is Elise's friend.

After school, Franklin suggests watching movies about the Apollo space missions, but Elise says she doesn't want to. Franklin says she is no fun anymore. Elise calls Franklin a baby and tells him he doesn't care about her, then she storms off home and doesn't



do her homework. The next day, Franklin barely speaks to her. Elise tries to catch up on homework during class. It is Caroline who ends up helping her. Caroline notices Elise is upset, asks her what is wrong, then gets made fun of by Amanda so Elise heads off. Elise wonders how someone as kind as Caroline ever became friends with Amanda. After school, Uncle Hugh talks with Elise about falling behind on homework again, and about her fight with Franklin. Elise says things don't seem to be getting any better. Uncle Hugh explains that sometimes people have to make things better. That night, Elise thinks about the words of her father and her uncle, and realizes that her father's letter and her uncle were both hinting at the key in the barn, and the eight locked doors upstairs in the barn that had always been off-limits.

Part 2, Chapter 9, The First Little, Secret Room – Elise heads out early the next morning to visit the barn before school. She takes the key, still hanging up, and goes to school. She wants to tell Franklin about the doors and keys, but decides not to. After school, Elise goes to the second floor of the barn to the hall of eight locked doors. The key unlocks the second door. The room is full of framed photographs, including photos of Elise's mom. On the floor is a note that reads "KNOW WHAT YOU COME FROM". In her mom's old favorite reading chair in the corner is her mom's old stuffed rabbit, Miles, with a note asking Elise to take care of him. She clutches the rabbit and looks at the photos for hours.

That night, Elise asks Uncle Hugh and Aunt Bessie about the keys and the doors. He explains they have been there for nine years. Elise asks her aunt and uncle to tell her about her mother. Elise wonders about what her father meant by knowing what she comes from. In school the next day, Elise and Caroline team up as lab partners, meaning Amanda is the odd one out. Caroline explains that hanging out with Amanda is fun, but then Amanda expects Elise to do her homework for her. She explains that Amanda has never been mean before. At home, Elise asks Annie about how much she loves Ava. Annie tells Elise never to doubt how much a mother loves her child, even before birth. Elise then goes to visit the graves of her parents. Crying, she apologizes for being a mess-up in life. She then plants flowers. At home, Aunt Bessie has rigged up the first key to be a necklace, which Elise happily puts on.

Part 2, Chapter 10, Another Surprise – In the morning, Elise finds another key on her windowsill. She has no idea how it got there, but it makes her happy. She figures either Aunt Bessie or Uncle Hugh must have put it there, but then wonders if maybe her dad was somehow responsible. At the bus stop, Elise and Franklin make up over a bottle of cream soda. She then tells him about the key mystery. Franklin is excited by this. In school, Amanda slams the locker door on Elise's hand. She is distracted through the day by her injured hand. She is also reminded that she must have ten books read by Thanksgiving as a homework assignment. At home, Elise opens the third barn door with the new key. Inside is an old desk and chair, with a note that reads "SEEK TO LEARN". The room is crammed full of books.



## Analysis

As the novel continues, the theme of family remains strong. However, family does not seem to be all that positive for Elise now that Aunt Annie and baby Ava have moved in. They are taking up more and more of Uncle Hugh and Aunt Bessie's time, which leads Elise to put more distance between herself and all of her family members rather than seeking to find ways to get closer to them.

Uncle Hugh and Aunt Bessie, however, recognize Elise's growing distance as something to be concerned about. They do not baby her, but they do comfort her and seek to understand what is bothering her. At last, Elise begins to explain some of her concerns to Uncle Hugh, including her fight with Franklin and how everything seems to be getting worse. With gentleness, Uncle Hugh explains that Elise has the power to make her life better if she so chooses, even when the changes of life don't seem so good.

Elise faces many changes in her life in this section of the novel. Among those is her turning 12, which she originally hopes will somehow make her automatically cooler and a better person. This does not turn out to be the case, much to Elise's dismay. Her life is something she must work at. Growing up does not come easy. This is clear when Elise gets into a fight with Franklin over his wanting to watch space documentaries and calling him a baby. Elise is taking out her own frustrations about growing up, and the bullying she receives, on the person closest to her – her best friend. The fight between Elise and Franklin is new, and is a part of both the ups and downs of friendship, and growing up.

Yet, it is through some uncertain moments that the strength of family shines through by virtue of Elise's father, aunt, and uncle. The last letter Elise receives from her father is bittersweet, but the discovery of the key mystery gives Elise a reason to be hopeful. Here, she has a direct connection with her father, even though her father is dead. Here, the dead speak to the living. Elise draws great comfort from her father's words and plans for the locked rooms. The first two rooms that Elise opens include one full of family photographs, with the idea that Elise must understand where she comes from – her family – to better understand herself; and a room full of books, in which knowledge is critical. So already Elise's father is essentially explaining to her that some of the keys to life include family and knowledge.

It is no accident that family comes first, for it is from family that all other things are possible in life. The reader should carefully pay attention to Aunt Anne explaining a mother's love to Elise, and how Elise breaks down in tears at the graves of her parents. This demonstrates just how emotionally vulnerable Elise is – and how important family will be to seeing her through her most difficult times still ahead. This importance of family is symbolized by Elise wearing the family room key around her neck and above her heart as a necklace.

While Elise may have beautiful experiences drawing on family, her experiences at school only seem to worsen. Amanda steps up her attacks on Elise, smashing Elise's



lunch and slamming Elise's fingers in the locker door. Elise is hurt deeply by Amanda's bullying and cruelty. Ironically, Amanda's own best friend slowly begins to become friends with Elise, asking her the pointed question of what is bothering her, and offering to be Elise's partner in class. This is stunning to Elise, especially when she learns from Caroline that even Caroline has her limits with Amanda.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why does Elise have a fight with Franklin over space documentary films? What does this tell you about Elise's emotions at the time?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why do you believe Caroline seeks to befriend Elise? How does Elise respond to Caroline's kindness? Why?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What are the first two rooms that Elise unlocks in the barn? What are these rooms meant to convey to Elise? How does Elise react to these rooms? Why?

## **Vocabulary**

disastrous, cranium, bustled, pulverized, telltale, systematic, infinite



## Part 2, Chapter 11 – Part 2, Chapter 15

### Summary

Part 2, Chapter 11, Books – At dinner, Uncle Hugh explains that Elise’s parents loved books. Uncle Hugh brings a lamp out to the library room so that Elise may do her homework and read there. He notices his brother’s old joke book, and another old book he’d like to read. Franklin comes to visit, and estimates there are about three thousand books in the room. Elise shows Caroline the room of books the next day, and tells her about the key mystery. Caroline is amazed. She and Elise look at the titles. Elise discovers a dusty key on the shelves. The key unlocks an entirely empty room. It confuses both girls. Elise invites Caroline to stay and hang out. Caroline reveals she lives above the deli in town, so has no yard of her own. Elise and Caroline decide to play in the autumn leaves outside. Uncle Hugh and Aunt Bessie are happy to meet Caroline and to have her over for dinner. Caroline is happy to be over, and happy to help out with baby Ava. Elise and Caroline discuss the mystery of the empty room. Uncle Hugh says that if his brother John locked an empty room, there was a reason.

Part 2, Chapter 12, Invisible Things – At school, Amanda becomes meaner with Elise, taking extra care to smash her lunch and the attempt to smash her fingers. She also begins to make fun of Caroline for hanging out with Elise and Franklin. Caroline doesn’t care, and continues to hang out with Elise and Franklin. Elise goes to see Leonard after school about the key mystery. Leonard says that if Elise’s dad locked up an empty room, there was a reason. That night, Elise helps to take care of baby Ava.

Part 2, Chapter 13, Knowing – Aunt Bessie and Uncle Hugh go out on a date, while Elise and Franklin hang out at home and eat a pizza. Franklin tells Elise he doesn’t trust Caroline because she is friends with the enemy. Elise, meanwhile, has been reading like crazy, spending much of her time in the library room. After school, Elise discovers a new key on the desk in the library room. The new room has a sign on the wall that says “CHOOSE TO LIVE, CHOOSE TO LOVE”, and has pictures of Elise and her dad all over it. In the middle of the floor is a dusty sketchbook with diary entries written to Elise about raising Elise. One entry speaks of how Elise’s father knows her heart will always be the same, and since he knows her heart, he will always know her. It causes Elise to cry.

She then goes inside to spend time with Annie and baby Ava. When Uncle Hugh gets home, Elise asks him about the sign in the room. He explains that after Elise’s mom died, he was very sad, but he dedicated himself to being a father to Elise instead, and to taking comfort in the love of his family and friends. He chose to keep living and loving, Hugh explains. Hugh goes on to explain that one should never shut out others, but to love them in the time they have together. Hugh then reveals that Annie’s father didn’t want to be a father, so he left her and Annie. Elise begins to wonder about the things that make people tick, and so she wonders about Amanda.



Part 2, Chapter 14, Spying on the Enemy – Elise pays careful attention to Amanda the next day, noting she only picks on her and Franklin, that Amanda does not like sports, that she does not wait for her friends to catch up to her, and that she is very rotten but very in control. Franklin suggests spying on Amanda outside of school since Elise already knows how Amanda behaves in school. Elise finds out from Caroline that Elise's brother sometimes picks Amanda up, but on the other side of school by the woods and the soccer field. There, Elise watches as her brother and some of his friends arrive in a car. They are smoking cigarettes, and Amanda refuses to smoke or get in the car. The car drives away. Amanda then sees Elise. She grins meanly at Elise. The next day at school, Amanda smears Elise's sandwich all over the floor, causing everyone to laugh. Caroline cleans up the sandwich, and asks Elise if anything like this has happened before. Elise says that it has. At lunch, Elise watches Caroline sit with Amanda and her crew.

Part 2, Chapter 15, I Wonder Whether Grown-Ups Understand at All – At home, Elise holds Ava and cries. A short time later, Uncle Hugh notices something is bothering Elise, who begins crying all over again. Uncle Hugh holds her and comforts her. At dinner, Elise finally comes clean about Amanda's bullying. Caroline calls, but Elise doesn't want to talk to her, wondering how she could be friends with Amanda at all. After dinner, Aunt Bessie puts an envelope on the table, postmarked California. There is a key inside. It opens a door to a room with a sign that says "UNDERSTAND THOSE YOU LOVE", and contains pictures and a journal about growing up with Uncle Hugh. She learns that Uncle Hugh's best friend was killed in the Army and that his favorite dog, Sadie, died. The next day, Uncle Hugh reminds Elise to tell an adult if Amanda continues bullying her. Aunt Bessie packs Elise's lunch bag with a big heart and happy face on it. Amanda smashes Elise's lunch in the back of the locker. Elise decides it is time to take action.

## Analysis

The keys and locked rooms become crucial to Elise in this section of the novel. To begin with, it draws her closer to her family. Family remains a dominant and important theme as Elise learns more about her father from Uncle Hugh – such as that her father and mother both loved to read. This helps encourage Elise to give reading a chance, and indeed, she begins to fall in love with the process. Another room opened by Elise, encouraging her to choose to live and love, also inspires Elise to finally warm up toward Aunt Annie and baby Ava. She does this in the model of her father, in the midst of great tragedy, refused to be drowned by sadness by taking comfort in the love of family, friends, and life instead. Elise, in the midst of her own struggles, decides to do the same. Elise takes to heart her uncle's advice that one should never shut others out. Even in the face of death, there is still a reason to live.

The mystery of the locked rooms also serves to bring Elise closer together with Caroline, and helps to temporarily repair the friendship between Elise and Franklin. Elise begins to wonder what motivates Amanda to be so cruel. She imagines that there must be a reason, and with Franklin's encouragement, she comes to discover that Amanda has a difficult home life thanks in large part to her brother who not only smokes





cigarettes, but seems to have no patience for Amanda, either. This is in sharp contrast to Elise's own family, which goes out of its way to ensure she is loved and protected. Despite Amanda's cruelty – which only increases toward Elise – Caroline continues to sit with Amanda at lunch.

Drawing on the contrast between her family and Amanda's family, and drawing on the lessons of the locked rooms and her uncle's advice, Elise finally comes clean about Amanda's bullying. This is a major step in growing up, in confiding in those one loves. This leads to yet another key and room, in which Elise is encouraged by her father to understand those that she loves. It is all a part of family. Aunt Bessie and Uncle Hugh have gone to great lengths to understand Elise; now, through the words of her father and through spending time with her aunt and uncle, Elise learns more about them – including the sadness of Uncle Hugh's own life. Still, there is much to learn about her aunt and uncle. Elise also comes to consider the mystery of the empty room – something which her uncle explains must clearly have had a reason, because Elise's father would have never done something without a reason.

Without realizing it, Elise is continuing to grow up. The reader will recall that previously, Elise hoped turning 12 would automatically make her cooler somehow – but that this was not the case. Yet, growing up is a process of good and bad experiences, successes, failures, greater understanding, and self-confidence building. Through the locked rooms and through her family, Elise is coming to better understand herself and the people who love her. She is clearly caught between childhood and her coming teenage years. Her issues with Franklin stem primarily from social experiences at school and Elise's own struggle between friendship and trying to force herself to grow up some while dealing with bullying at the same time. Nevertheless, Elise continues to remain Franklin's friend. One of Elise's shortcomings is that, despite her insistence on learning more about Amanda, Elise doesn't seem to want to understand much more about Franklin. This is a problem that will be remedied by the end of the novel.

## Discussion Question 1

At long last, Elise opens up about some of her problems to Uncle Hugh. Why does she finally do this? What does she tell him? What does she not tell him? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the importance of the room with the sign that says "UNDERSTAND THOSE YOU LOVE" in relation to Elise's friends and family? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Elise attempt to understand who Amanda is? What happens as a result? Do you believe that Elise's attempt was for the better, or for the worst? Explain.

## Vocabulary

obnoxious, hoodlums, expectantly, sleuthing, literal, floundered, defiant





## Part 2, Chapter 16 – Part 2, Chapter 20

### Summary

Part 2, Chapter 16, We Are All in Deep Dog Poo – Elise decides that Amanda’s lunch must be ruined. Franklin agrees to help her put shaving cream in Amanda’s lunch. When Amanda goes to remove her lunch, Elise slams the locker shut, causing shaving cream to explode all over both of them. Amanda is enraged and the two grapple. They are sent to the principal’s office. There, the principal, Ms. Hadley, demands to know how the shaving cream got into Amanda’s lunch bag. Amanda says that it was probably Franklin who did it. Ms. Hadley then calls Franklin to her office. Franklin takes all the blame for the incident. Elise feels horrible, but says she had nothing to do with it. Franklin is suspended.

Part 2, Chapter 17, I Am Garbage – At home, Elise continues to feel horrible. She explains to Aunt Bessie that she is garbage. Aunt Bessie says this is not true. Uncle Hugh suggests Elise finish the book about him. The book reveals that Uncle Hugh and Aunt Bessie got married and wanted to have children, but that Aunt Bessie couldn’t have children. Elsie’s father explains in the book that adopting Elise would give them the family they’d always wanted. Elsie then seeks out Aunt Bessie and tells her she is a good mom.

Part 2, Chapter 18, No More Franklin – Franklin, because he is suspended, is not at school the next day. Elise worries he hates her. Caroline sits with Elise at lunch, and explains she had a big fight with Amanda after what Amanda did to Elise the other day. She reveals that ending her friendship with Amanda – who she has been friends with since kindergarten – means ending her friendship with all the people who hang out with Amanda as well. Caroline apologizes for not truly believing Elise sooner. She also encourages Elise to reach out to Franklin. After school, Uncle Hugh encourages Elise to call Franklin. Elise sees Mrs. White later that day. She suggests Elise come over for dinner so things can be sorted out. Elise refuses. At home, Elise finds another key under her pillow. The new room it opens up is small, is full of things about her dad’s life and includes a sign that says, “TREASURE YOUR LIFE”. Everything from her father’s childhood train set to his high school trophies to scrapbooks and wedding photos. There are photos of Leonard among them. Elise goes to see Leonard, and says she is ready to cash in her day trip ticket to the old lake.

Part 2, Chapter 19, Thanksgiving with Leonard – Leonard arrives to pick Elise up on Thanksgiving Day to bring her to the old lake, an hour away. There, Leonard shows Elise the rocks that he and her father would come and sit on just to talk and take in the beauty of the place. Elise asks about Leonard’s friendship with her dad, and whether or not they ever fought. Leonard says they did, and explains that it is normal. He also explains that a good friendship sometimes has to be fought for to be kept. Elise explains she doesn’t like what she has become. He then asks Elise to tell him about everything that has happened to her, from the beginning. Elise does so.



Part 2, Chapter 20, Something to Believe In – Elise finds another key on her dresser the next morning. This key opens the door to a smaller room full of books about beliefs, from Christianity to Native American myths, and with a sign that says “BELIEVE”. Elise realizes the room is meant to tell her to believe in herself. At school, Elise asks Caroline about Amanda. Caroline tells her that Amanda was never this way before. After school, Elise calls Franklin, but he is busy doing homework.

## Analysis

The greatest challenge to Elise’s growing up comes in this section of the novel. Her friendship with Franklin and her friendship with Caroline are both called into question. Elise has a major falling out with Franklin over the shaving cream incident. Like a loyal friend, Franklin takes all the blame, but when given her chance to confess, Elise refuses to say anything at all. Meanwhile, Caroline’s continued friendship with Amanda leads to Elise imagining that Franklin was right – that Caroline simply could not be trusted to begin with. Elise recognizes she has made a major mistake in the way she has treated Franklin, in her blindness to better understanding Franklin, and in her refusal to stand beside him through the shaving cream incident. Franklin himself rightfully feels betrayed and as if his friendship with Elise is at an end.

Elise comes to her lowest point in growing up. She feels as if she is garbage, as if she is absolutely worthless. It is one of the more difficult parts of life. Finally, she comes clean totally and completely with her aunt and uncle about everything. She recognizes that these two love her deeply as though she was their own daughter, and she makes sure that they both know they are amazing parents to her. And as good parents, Elise’s aunt and uncle tell her that she needs to reach out to Franklin.

What is important is that, even in the midst of her lowest point, Elise is reminded by her father through the opening of another locked room to treasure her life, for all its ups and downs. Life is worth living, and sometimes life – like friendship – must be fought for. Elise learns that friendship has its ups and downs from her father’s old best friend, Leonard. It is an important lesson to Elise about her life, about friendship, and about the past.

Elise recognizes that, while her father’s death was a very sad time, it was not the end. Instead, it was only the beginning for a new part of her life, one which involved the people who loved and who knew her father, and who now love and know Elise. Their love of Elise and her life, as well as Elise’s better understanding of herself, gives her something to believe in. The things that her father valued most in life – including life, family, and friendship – are the very things that Elise is coming to understand and value just as deeply. For example, even when Elise thinks nothing of herself, and even despite Elise being wrong in the shaving cream incident, her family is still there for her. It is the kind of loyalty and love that Elise hasn’t realized she truly had before the key mysteries. And now, she seeks to make things in her life right.



## Discussion Question 1

What important information about her father and friendship does Elise learn from Leonard? What does this help encourage her to do?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Elise refuse to speak up when Franklin is blamed for the shaving cream incident? Why does Franklin take all the blame rather than placing blame on Elise?

## Discussion Question 3

What important things does Elise learn from the “BELIEVE” and “TREASURE YOUR LIFE” rooms? How does she apply these lessons to her own life?

## Vocabulary

retaliate, authorities, interrogate, symbolism, hypothesis, premeditated, contrary

## Part 2, Chapter 21 – Part 3, Chapter 23

### Summary

Part 2, Chapter 21, A Lifetime Supply of Questions – Elise reads her poem in English class. It is called “Hiding”, about things being different than they seem, and losing track of the important things. Mrs. Wakefield is very impressed. So are Aunt Bessie and Uncle Hugh. In Elise’s barn library, she finds the final key to the final room. In the room is a large sign that says “QUESTION”, and hundreds of little pieces of paper with questions written on them that vary from questions about lost sets of keys, shoes, what is being served for dinner, and so on. Each question recorded also has the name of the person who asked the question, including some from Elise as a toddler. Elise feels let down, wanting to have found the final answer to everything, but only having found more questions in the end.

The next day, Elise is asked to bring home Caroline’s homework. Elise is happy to do so. There, she discovers that Caroline has secretly been keeping a pet kitten. Elise arranges for Franklin to get Diana, who loves cats, to come to the deli. Elise and Caroline leave the baby kitten in a box with Diana’s name on it. Diana is thrilled. Elise invites Caroline over the next day to consider the room of questions. Caroline considers that Elise is merely meant to join in with questions of her own. She and Elise both add questions. That night, Elise studies all the messages and rooms, and realizes the empty room is intended for Elise to decide whatever she wants it to be.

Part 3, Chapter 22 – Elise gives Franklin a note the next day at school. The note is a list of ten reasons why Franklin is a good friend, and an apology for the past few weeks. Franklin accepts Elise’s apology, and comes over after school. They realize they can still be best friends, but have room for other friends and loved ones in their lives as well. At school the next day, Amanda accuses Elise of stealing her best friend. Elise fires back, telling Amanda she is mean and only cares about looking cool. Amanda looks stunned, then walks away.

Part 3, Chapter 23, Keeping the Keys – Christmas approaches. Elise, Franklin, and Caroline hang out together as often as they can. Elise buys a Christmas ornament for Ava, which Annie thinks is very sweet. At Christmas, Elise thanks her family for helping her father to put together the rooms for her, saying that they encouraged her to think about life differently and to value important things. She realizes now that each of her family members had some of the keys, including a family friend in California. She knows that two of the keys were left directly by her father nearly a decade before. Elise spends much of her Christmas vacation working on the empty room. Elise shows Uncle Hugh, Aunt Bessie, Franklin and Caroline her room, which is now full of photos of family, school projects, some of Uncle Hugh’s furniture, and so on. It also has a list of reasons why Elise is glad to be who she is – including how much she loves her aunt and uncle, and her friends. As they all head in for dinner, Elise leaves the door to her room open.



## Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, the themes of family and friendship remain critical. With the love and support of her family, Elise at last reaches out to Franklin and makes up with him, while at the same time, Elise and Caroline make up as well. The reader should note as well that the renewed friendships lead to becoming a better, more mature person, in the form of giving the baby kitten to Diana, an act of kindness for someone she barely even knows. The reader should recall that at the beginning of the novel, Elise was dismissive of Diana, calling her weird. Now, Elise has a better respect for others, and appreciate for the differences in people. Elise does not wish to become Amanda, and whether or not she will is a question that is answered. Her gentleness toward Diana is clear evidence that she is not.

Many questions remain unanswered, as demonstrated by the final room full of life's many questions. These questions vary from simple, everyday questions – such as where a set of keys was left – to more important, such as why the right thing to do is usually the hardest thing to do, to Elise's father wondering what his Elise will be. As Elise herself notes in the novel, she was hoping the last room would have all the answers she needed about life and what to do with her life, but instead, the room only had more questions. This reflects how some questions will be answered in life, but other questions never will be – and new questions will arise all the time.

This is symbolic of, and a reflection of life at large. Life is full of questions. Many are answered, while many never are. Even then, new questions appear all the time. It is proof that life is constantly changing, that people – including Elise – are always growing, and that the best one can do to approach such certainty is to remember the eight keys – from believing in oneself and understanding those who love that person, to learning to value life even when things don't go right.

One mystery, however, is solved for Elise. This is in regard to the empty room discovered earlier in the novel. The empty room is symbolic of a human life. Like an empty room, the human life is meant to be filled up with important things. Elise takes this to heart, filling her room with important things about her family and friends, as well as herself. And she makes sure that her family and friends know about this, so that they can understand just how much she truly does appreciate them, and so they can understand just how much they mean to her.

## Discussion Question 1

What does the empty room turn out to be intended for, and symbolic of? How does Elise decide to use her empty room?



## Discussion Question 2

What does the room of questions demonstrate to Elise? What does she learn from this room with respect to her own life?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Elise finally make up with Franklin and Caroline? Why is their friendship so important to Elise?

## Vocabulary

self-reflection, furious, scowled, plumpness, debating



# Characters

## Elise

Elise “Cricket” Bertrand is the main character and narrator of the novel “Eight Keys”. Elise is the adopted daughter of her Aunt Bessie and Uncle Hugh, as her parents have been dead most of her life. Elise is the best friend of Franklin, and becomes friends with Caroline over the course of the novel. Elise turns 12 during the course of the novel, and is a very sensitive girl who struggles with her time in sixth grade as she is unused to the new responsibilities thrust upon her, such as daily required homework.

Elise is also bullied relentlessly by Amanda through most of the novel, leading Elise to doubt herself and nearly ruin her friendships with Franklin and Caroline. When Elise turns 12, she begins to receive keys left behind for her from her father. Each key opens a room on the second floor of the barn workshop. Each room is a life lesson of some kind for Elise, which she takes directly to heart. Through the novel, Elise learns to more deeply appreciate those who love her, to love life, and to believe in herself.

## John

John Bertrand is the father of Elise. Only ever mentioned or present in the things he left behind, John has been dead of cancer for nine years when the novel begins. John was a very kind and loving man who had a love of reading, puzzles, and family. John had a very sad life, losing his wife after giving birth to Elise and then being diagnosed with terminal cancer himself. John wanted Elise to have a good life, and wanted to be as instrumental in her life as he could through her childhood, so he ensured his brother and sister-in-law, Hugh and Bessie, would adopt Elise. He also ensured that Elise had a letter for each birthday up to the age of 12, and then had a set of keys and mystery rooms to figure out in relation to her own life.

## Franklin

Franklin White is the best friend of Elise, and is the son of Mrs. White. He lives on the farm directly neighboring Elise’s, and the two have grown up together. Franklin is utterly loyal, patient, and kind to Elise, and has a great interest in science, reading, the outdoors, and in playing pretend. Franklin’s interests, however, are made fun of by Amanda, which creates distance between Elise and Franklin. Franklin nevertheless sticks by Elise through disagreements and fights, and Franklin even goes in on the shaving cream plot with Elise to get Amanda back. When the plot backfires, Franklin accepts responsibility for the crime, refusing to name Elise as part of it. This nearly ruins their friendship, as Elise refuses to step forward to accept blame or to defend Franklin. However, Elise and Franklin later resume their friendship when Elise apologizes to him.



## **Amanda**

Amanda Betterman is a pretty girl who dresses stylishly and has streaks in her hair at school. She is mean, controlling, and makes fun of Elise to no end. She even becomes physically bullying of Elise, smashing Elise's sandwich and slamming the locker door on Elise's fingers. Amanda seems to be acting out due to trouble at home, apparently coming from her brother who appears to be a reckless teenager.

## **Caroline**

Caroline is best friends with Amanda when the novel begins, but their friendship ends when Caroline discovers Amanda is being so cruel to Elise and when Amanda begins demanding Caroline do all of their schoolwork for them both. Caroline befriends Elise over the course of the novel, growing close enough to become one of her two best friends. Caroline herself is incredibly kind and perceptive, and recognizes early on that something is bothering Elise. Caroline later helps Elise to unravel the mystery of the keys and the locked rooms.

## **Uncle Hugh**

Uncle Hugh is the husband of Aunt Bessie and the adoptive father of Elise. Hugh is the brother of Aunt Annie, and is also the brother of Elise's father, John. Uncle Hugh earns a living as a craftsman, building beautiful pieces of furniture. Hugh is a very kind and patient man who deeply loves his family. He does his best to be a good father to Elise, who later comes to make sure Hugh knows how much he means to her. Hugh reminds Elise that life is worth living, that responsibilities should be embraced as she grows older.

## **Aunt Bessie**

Aunt Bessie is the wife of Uncle Hugh and the adoptive mother of Elise. Bessie is the sister-in-law of John and Aunt Annie. Bessie makes a living as a caterer, and loves to spend time with Elise cooking. She does her best to be a good mother to Elise, who later comes to make sure Elise knows she is really good at being a mom. Bessie helps remind Elise that she can open up to her family, that they will always be there for her, and encourages her to reach out to Franklin following the shaving cream incident.

## **Aunt Annie and baby Ava**

Aunt Annie and baby Ava come to live with Elise, Uncle Hugh, and Aunt Bessie early in the novel. Aunt Annie is in her early thirties, is very kind, and is very pretty. Her husband has left her and baby Ava on their own, leading Annie to move in with Hugh and Bessie





for the time being. Annie and Ava slowly grow on Elise, who ultimately comes to warmly and fully accept them as a part of her family.

## **Mrs. White**

Mrs. White is the mother of Franklin. She serves as something of a second mother to Elise, encouraging Elise to eat something whenever she is over and visiting. Elise loves Mrs. White, but does not love her cooking.

## **Leonard**

Leonard is the best friend of John, family friend of Hugh and Bessie, and a friend and mentor to Elise. Leonard owns and runs the local hardware store, where he is often visited by Elise and Franklin. Leonard becomes a vital source of information for Elise about her father, and about the importance of friendship.

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# Symbols and Symbolism

## Knight swords

Knight swords are made by Uncle Hugh from wood when Elise and Franklin are six years old. They play Knights in the woods with the swords for the next five years until middle school begins. The swords become symbolic of childhood, and therefore symbolic of childhood being left behind as Elise and Franklin enter middle school.

## Locker 2716

Locker 2716 is the locker shared by Elise and Amanda at school. The locker is how Elise and Amanda first meet, and where Amanda first begins to bully Elise, beginning with her legs and playing pretend with Franklin. Elise comes to fear her time at the locker when Amanda is around, for Amanda does everything from smashing Elise's lunch in the locker to slamming the locker door shut on Elise's hands. The locker is later ruined when the shaving cream plot backfires, exploding shaving cream everywhere inside and outside the locker.

## Birthday letters

Birthday letters are written from Elise's father to Elise when Elise is a toddler. A total of nine letters are written to see Elise through the age of 12. Each letter is a testament of love for Elise from her father, and contain wishes and prayers that she will enjoy and do well in life. The final letter that Elise receives is bittersweet because it is from her father, but it is the last letter she will receive from him. The final birthday letter tells Elise to expect her next surprise, which will be a key to her life.

## Eight keys

Eight keys are delivered to Elise from friends and family over the course of the novel. The keys unlock rooms on the second floor of the barn. The keys themselves become symbolic of the things the room contain – the important things in life – and so become keys to life. The first key that Elise receives is symbolic of family and love, for it opens a room about Elise and her family. The key is turned into a necklace by Bessie and worn by Elise above her heart.

## Photographs

Photographs appear in several rooms on the second floor of the barn. But the most notable photographs for Elise are family photographs found in three rooms: the room about her family in general, the room about her father and her in particular, and in the



empty room that Elise begins to fill up with things about her own life. These photographs matter most to Elise because they are photographs of family, and reflect the love and understanding family has for one another. The photographs of Elise and her father matter tremendously to Elise because they are representative of everything she no longer has, while the photographs of Elise and her aunt and uncle are representative of everything that she has gained.

## Books

Thousands of books are left behind by Elise's father for Elise in two of the locked rooms. The larger of the two rooms contains books on all subjects as well as novels and children's books. The smaller of the two rooms contains books specifically about beliefs, about everything from Christianity to Native American myths, with the idea that whatever Elise chooses to believe in, she must also believe in herself. The books in the larger room are intended for knowledge and pleasure, and they are a way for Elise's father to share with Elise something that he loved to do.

## Questions

Questions written on slips of paper – in the hundreds – are found in the final room to be opened by Elise. Elise explains in the novel that she was hoping to open the final door to have all her questions answered, only to find more questions instead. These questions are representative of the questions in life, from daily questions about lost keys to deeper questions about what Elise will make out of her life. Life is full of questions. Some are answered, but some never are. And all the while, new questions continue to arise.

## Shaving cream

Berry-scented shaving cream is sneaked out of Franklin's mother's bathroom by Franklin to be put into Amanda's lunch bag. It is a plot of revenge hatched by Elise and Franklin to get Amanda back for always smashing Elise's lunch. However, the plot backfires when Amanda slams the door to the locker, trying to hurt Elise but catching the lunch bag instead. The shaving cream explodes everywhere, leading to a physical fight between the girls, and resulting in them and Franklin being brought before the principal.

## Apollo documentaries

Apollo space program documentaries are watched frequently by Franklin. Franklin's love of these things, which Amanda and other kids at school consider to be nerdy and cause Franklin to be made fun of creates distance between Franklin and Elise. Elise ends up calling Franklin a baby for wanting to watch the documentaries, leading to their first major fight ever.

## Homework

Homework is assigned on a daily basis to Elise in sixth grade. It is a responsibility she is not used to, and she quickly falls behind in school as a result. Homework is symbolic of growing up and the greater numbers of responsibilities that Elise will be faced with as she grows older.

# Settings

## The second floor of the barn

The second floor of the barn above Uncle Hugh's workshop contains a small hallway of eight locked rooms. These rooms have all been off-limits to Elise for the past nine years, but after turning 12, Elise is given keys to open the rooms one at a time. The rooms themselves are symbolic of human life and the important things in human lives, and serve as lessons for Elise about her own life. Elise comes to spend much of her time on the second floor of the barn, especially in rooms where she feels a very close connection to her father, such as the library room.

## **CHOOSE TO LIVE, CHOOSE TO LOVE room**

The CHOOSE TO LIVE, CHOOSE TO LOVE room contains a sign that says CHOOSE TO LIVE, CHOOSE TO LOVE, and dozens of photographs of Elise and her father. This room is especially important to Elise, because it is a record of the brief time that she knew her father. It also matters greatly because the room, as Uncle Hugh explains, is symbolic of Elise's father's life choices and serves as an example to Elise. Rather than losing himself to sadness and grief over the death of his wife and his cancer diagnosis, John devoted himself to living life and loving his daughter and his family. Elise should not dwell on the negative things in life, but should devote herself to things like living and loving.

## **KNOW WHAT YOU COME FROM room**

The KNOW WHAT YOU COME FROM room is the first room that Elise finds a key to unlock. The room is full of photographs of Elise and her family, including her father, aunt, and uncle. The room is intended to demonstrate that family is crucially important in anyone's life, and that family is the foundation from which a life grows. The room essentially encourages Elise to love, appreciate, and understand her family.

## **Library room**

The library room is a room full of some 3,000 books, as estimated by Franklin. The room contains a desk and chairs belonging to Elise's parents, and is a way for Elise's parents to share their love of reading with their daughter. The room itself also becomes representative of the knowledge and the thirst for learning – about everything possible in life – that Elise's parents hope she will someday develop. The library room is one of the places where Elise feels an especially close connection to her father, so she ends up spending much of her time in this room.



## Question room

The question room is full of hundreds of questions written on tiny slips of paper. The questions themselves vary from simple, everyday questions – such as where a set of keys was left – to more important questions, such as Elise’s father wondering what his Elise will be in life. As Elise herself notes in the novel, she was hoping the last room would have all the answers she needed about life and what to do with her life, but instead, the room only had more questions. This reflects how some questions will be answered in life, but other questions never will be – and new questions will arise all the time.

## Empty room

The empty room is one of the first rooms that Elise opens, and it poses the greatest mystery. While every other room contains something, the empty room contains nothing. Uncle Hugh explains to Elise that if the room was empty, Elise’s father had an important reason for doing so. As Elise later comes to learn, the empty room is symbolic of human life. Like an empty room, the human life is meant to be filled up with important things. Elise takes this to heart, filling her empty room – and thereby her life – with important things about her family and friends, as well as herself. And she makes sure that her family and friends know about this, so that they can understand just how much she truly does appreciate them, and so they can understand just how much they mean to her.





# Themes and Motifs

## Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “Eight Keys” by Suzanne LeFleur. Family, thematically, involves the love, compassion, loyalty, encouragement, and support of and between individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who act in accord with the traditional family unit. Family proves to be tremendously influential, and invaluable, to Elise as the novel unfolds.

When the novel begins, Elise loves her life with her Aunt Bessie and Uncle Hugh, who are her surrogate parents. Elise’s own parents are long dead, but as Elise later learns, her father made sure that his brother, Hugh, and his sister-in-law, Bessie, would adopt Elise and raise her as their own. She learns that Bessie was unable to have children, so she has been a blessing to Hugh and Bessie. Elise loves her aunt and uncle dearly, and loves to be in their company –whether she is helping them out in the barn or in the kitchen.

Yet, she knows relatively little about them personally. It is only later that she learns about Bessie’s inability to have children and how Hugh’s best friend died in a war. Elise becomes much closer to her aunt and uncle, seeing them as people as well as adults, and knowing that they, too, have endured hardships in life. She comes to love and appreciate them all the more as a result. Aunt Bessie and Uncle Hugh, as Elise comes to tell them, are amazing parents. There is no shortage of the love and kindness that they give Elise throughout the novel, from helping her to grow to comforting her in times of trouble, such as when she fights with Franklin and when things get really bad at school with Amanda.

Based on the encouragement of her father’s family room in the barn, Elise strives to get closer with her family, to make time to genuinely spend time with them and to understand them. Family, her father writes to her, is the key to knowing how a life begins and where someone comes from. This includes Elise’s efforts to get to know her Aunt Annie and cousin, baby Ava, better. Taken together with her father’s advice to choose to live and love, Elise focuses on the good things in her life, including and especially, family.

## Friendship

Friendship is an important theme in the novel “Eight Keys” by Suzanne LeFleur. Friendship proves to be incredibly important to Elise in the novel, as friendship is one of the things that helps her to weather difficult times that she experiences. Friendship also proves to be a place for Elise to grow and understanding herself better as well.

When the novel begins, Elise is best friends with Franklin. The two do everything together, including playing pretend. But when Amanda makes fun of Elise and Franklin



for this, Elise pulls back. She stops playing pretend with Franklin, beginning to put distance between herself and Franklin rather than taking comfort in her friendship with him. Friendship, Elise suddenly believes, must have limits, or else she will be made fun of by Amanda. She tells Franklin they can no longer play pretend because they are growing up.

As the novel continues, Franklin remains loyal to Elise, even when Elise calls him a baby and refuses to accept blame with him for the shaving cream incident. This leads to a period of weeks where Elise and Franklin do not speak, with both of them feeling horrible about it. Ultimately, Elise apologizes to Franklin, and restores their friendship. Elise's efforts to make things right are a sign of her growing up and better understanding who she is as a person – kind and humble.

Elise is encouraged to make up with Franklin by her aunt, uncle, and Leonard. Elise gathers good advice from Leonard about friendship during their lake trip. Leonard was best friends with Elise's father, and he explains that all friendships have their ups, downs, good times, and fights, and that these things are all normal. Leonard goes on to explain that sometimes friendship, like life, is worth fighting for. Elise's friendship with Leonard thus becomes instrumental in her choosing to fight for her friendship with Franklin.

Amanda, however, has no such convictions about her friendship with Caroline. Amanda takes advantage of her friendship, forcing Caroline to do all the schoolwork for them both, and expecting Caroline to do whatever she says. Caroline sours on her friendship with Amanda because of this, and because of the way that Amanda treats Elise. Ultimately, Caroline and Elise become friends, realizing they have many things in common, and in realizing that in each other is a good person. Caroline comes to help Elise unravel the mystery of the locked rooms, and helps Elise to repair her friendship with Franklin through the kitten.

## Growing Up

Growing Up is an important theme in the novel "Eight Keys" by Suzanne LeFleur. Growing up is very similar to coming of age, though growing up focuses on younger characters, and involves new ideas, actions, and ways of behaving as the characters get older. Like coming of age stories, stories about growing will also include growth in terms of character as well. In the novel, it is primarily Elise who experiences growing up.

When the novel begins, Elise and her best friend, Franklin, have no cares in the world. They are playing pretend as Knights in the woods between their farms at the end of the summer. But their childhood is interrupted by their entrance into middle school. Elise is exposed to Amanda, who has streaks in her hair and dresses very stylishly and very much like an adult. Amanda makes fun of Elise and Franklin for playing pretend. Faced with such humiliation, Elise suddenly feels like a child rather than a girl nearing the age of 12. She later tells Franklin they are growing up, and now are too old to play pretend anymore.



School in general also serves to be a source of growing up for Elise. For the first time, she is confronted with bullying and an increased amount of homework. Amanda's bullying is vicious, from verbally abusing Elise to smashing her lunch to slamming her fingers in the locker door. Elise has experienced nothing like it before, and so at first does not know how to respond except to shut out or lash out at those closest to her. Likewise, the amount of homework Elise has now she has never had before. She struggles to keep up with the homework, and then is depressed by being lectured on a daily basis for not keeping up.

When she turns 12, Elise hopes she will automatically become more mature and cooler, but this does not happen. As Uncle Hugh explains, such things have to be worked at. He reminds Elise that as she grows up, she will have more and more responsibilities, and that she should embrace these things. He encourages her and tells her that she has the ability to handle growing up, and the new responsibilities that come with growing up. He reminds her that she is a wonderful person, and that her family will always be there for her. Encouraged, Elise finally makes strides in catching up on her homework, while she learns to take comfort in, and put value in life despite the bad parts, such as Amanda. Those bad parts are simply a part of growing up.

## Life

Life is an important theme in the novel "Eight Keys" by Suzanne LeFleur. Life, including all the things that make a life a life, is something which Elise comes to deeply value and love by the end of the novel. Elise follows the example of her father in the loving of life, and in all the things that life means.

Though he is dead, Elise's father still speaks to her by the letters, keys, and rooms he left behind for her. These parts of her father encourage Elise to embrace life, and teach her important lessons about life. The letters are testaments of love and encouragement for Elise, while the rooms help influence her. As Uncle Hugh explains, Elise's father could have lost himself to sorrow over the death of Elise's mother, and her father's own diagnosis with cancer, but he chose not to. Instead, Elise's father chose to live and love.

Elise's father chose to live and love in various ways. He turned his grief to joy by focusing on being a father to Elise, and by focusing on the love of friends and family. Elise uses her father as an example by taking refuge in her friends and family when things get bad at school. Elise's father encourages Elise to learn more about herself and her family, which is the foundation of her life. This she does, and it results in her becoming more confident in herself as well as helping her to grow closer to her family.

Elise's father's advice also helps Elise to grow closer to her friends. Uncle Hugh, Aunt Bessie, and Leonard all encourage Elise to reach out to Franklin after the shaving cream incident. Leonard explains to Elise that friendships have ups and downs, and that friendship, like life, is worth fighting for. He explains that his friendship with Elise's father was definitely worth fighting for. Life is too short, otherwise. As a result, Elise takes great lengths to make up with Franklin, and to make sure he is always a part of her life.

## Death

Death is an important theme in the novel “Eight Keys” by Suzanne LeFleur. Death in the novel serves not only as the end of life, but also serves as a motivation for life. Elise’s life, and the lives of those she loves, is beset by, and inspired by death.

The single most overarching death in the novel is the death of Elise’s father. When the novel begins, Elise’s father, John, has been dead for more than nine years, having died of cancer when Elise was only three. Her memories of her father are therefore vague and blurry, but she relishes them. She also relishes the things he left behind – including the letters, photographs, keys, and locked rooms. It is a way for her father to speak to her even though he is dead.

John’s death also affected Elise’s life – and the lives of those who loved John – in important ways. John’s brother, Hugh, and sister-in-law, Bessie, were never able to have children. As John was dying, he determined that Hugh and Bessie should have custody of Elise. This meant that John and Elise came to live with Bessie and Hugh, giving them the chance at being parents – and giving John the chance at caring for Elise through his final days. It also gave John the chance to write letters and prepare the rooms and keys for Elise. This also meant that John’s best friend, Leonard, would become a friend and mentor himself to Elise. It also meant that Elise would grow up with Franklin as her best friend.

Death also appears in other places in the novel as well. Elise ends up adopted by her aunt and uncle because her mother died shortly after giving birth to her. Among the reasons that Uncle Hugh sometimes seems sad is the fact that his own best friend died in a war many years before. Uncle Hugh also lost his favorite dog sometime after that. Leonard himself appears deeply changed by John’s death, for his best friend is dead and he seems to spend most of his time running his store. Yet as a result, Leonard has essentially been made family by Elise and her aunt and uncle, ensuring that he has people who love him and care about him.



# Styles

## Point of View

Suzanne LeFleur tells her novel “Eight Keys” in the first-person, limited-omniscient perspective from the point of view of main character, Elise. Elise explains up front at the very beginning of the novel, the trouble all began with the last time she and Franklin played Knights. This reveals that Elise is going to be telling her own story, and that the story being told at some point after the events of the story occurred. This is especially important that Elise tells her own story, because she is not very forthcoming to others about her thoughts and feelings, especially once the troubles of school and growing up begin. Only by Elise’s firsthand account of events is the reader able to truly know what is in her heart and what is on her mind during the events of the novel. The limited-omniscient aspect of the narrative helps create a sense of believability, as no 12-year-old kid can know everything at once. It also adds a sense of mystery in keeping with the mystery of the locked rooms, allowing the reader to only know about things as Elise herself came to know about them.

## Language and Meaning

Suzanne LeFleur tells her novel “Eight Keys” in language that is simple and straightforward. This is done for at least two reasons. First, the story is told in the first-person narrative mode by an 11-year-old girl. It is therefore fitting and proper that the language used would be reflective of both Elise’s age and level of education. Secondly, the story is geared toward an audience of older children and preteens. It is only natural therein that the language used is reflective of both the age range and level of education of the target audience. This makes the story easily readable, accessible to, and relatable to readers.

## Structure

Suzanne LeFleur divides her novel “Eight Keys” into three primary parts, with each part subdivided into numbered, chronological chapters. The first part of the novel deals with Elise’s life as it had been, and how it changes with her new experiences in school. The first part of the novel leads up to Elise’s twelfth birthday, and the first key. The second part, which makes up the bulk of the novel, deals with Elise’s changing life, including the opening of the rooms, the fight with Franklin, and the new friendship with Caroline. The third part concludes the novel, and is where Elise makes things right with Franklin and makes sure her family and friends know how much they mean to her. Each chapter in each part of the novel deals with a specific set of circumstances or situations relating to the broader extent of the plot in that part of the novel.



## Quotes

The trouble all started right before the first day of sixth grade, the last time Franklin and I played Knights.

-- Elise (Chapter 1 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** When the novel begins, Elise explains how much she and her neighbor, Franklin, love to play Knights. During one game of Knights, Elise trips and falls, and cuts up her legs badly. Though she is alright, her legs look gross to her. This will lead to Amanda meanly commenting on Elise's legs and beginning a period of bullying and a growing distance between Elise and Franklin.

It didn't matter how many new kids there were at school. It took only one to ruin my life.

-- Elise (Chapter 1 paragraph 47)

**Importance:** Elise worries how she will look and how she will fit in with all the other new kids at the middle school. As the school day gets underway, Elise is confronted by Amanda, who makes fun of Elise for her legs and for playing pretend. This is only the beginning of the cruelty that Elise will have to deal with thanks to Amanda.

Monday totally sucked.

-- Elise (Chapter 3 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** As Elise heads back to school on Monday, things only get worse for her. Having forgotten to do homework over the weekend, Elise is lectured in every class about remembering to do homework in the future. She is further bullied by Amanda, who continues to make fun of Elise for the scabs on her legs and for playing pretend. Elise comes to the conclusion that Monday has sucked, and that sixth grade in general is yucky.

I'm leaving something else for you, to discover and unlock when you are ready.

-- Elise's dad in her twelfth birthday letter (Chapter 7 paragraph 67)

**Importance:** Before Elise's father died, he wrote her twelve letters to be delivered each year on her birthday. His final letter is delivered and speaks of something else planned for her instead of the letters. It speaks of something waiting to be discovered and unlocked when she is ready, an allusion to the key in the barn with her name on it, and an allusion to the locked doors on the second floor of the barn.

Remember that while others can help, in great part we mold ourselves.

-- Elise's dad in her twelfth birthday letter (Chapter 7 paragraph 67)

**Importance:** Before Elise's father died, he wrote her letters to be delivered each year on her birthday. His final letter is delivered when she is 12. The letter not only explains he has something else planned, but also notes importantly that as Elise grows, she must determine how she wants to be. No one else can do it for her. Only she can figure



out who she is meant to be, and how she wants to be as a person. This will be incredibly important as Elise must deal with bullying and cruelty at school.

Well, sometimes things don't change on their own. Sometimes we have to change them.

-- Uncle Hugh (Chapter 8 paragraph 109)

**Importance:** When Elise's grades start slipping, and when Elise falls behind on homework again and has a fight with Franklin, Uncle Hugh intervenes again. He talks with Elise about these things, to which Elise explains that nothing is getting better. Uncle Hugh, like Elise's father, insists that things don't always get better themselves, and that sometimes, people have to make things better themselves. It is important advice for Elise, and for readers in general.

The way John liked puzzles... if he locked an empty room, there's a reason.

-- Uncle Hugh (Chapter 11 paragraph 134)

**Importance:** The third key and door that Elise opens with Caroline's help is an empty room. Elise is very puzzled by why her father would lock up an empty room. In discussion with Uncle Hugh about this, Uncle Hugh insists it is intentional. He explains that Elise's father loved puzzles, and that if Elise's father locked up an empty room, there was a reason. Elise will later learn that his room is intended for.

You will change without me... But I remind myself that I know you. I know your heart, and that will stay the same, so I will always know you...

-- Elise's dad's diary to Elise (Chapter 13 paragraph 68)

**Importance:** As Elise's father dies, he continues to raise Elise as best he can, relying on Hugh and Bessie for help. He keeps a record of this in a diary written directly to Elise. He includes thoughts and feelings about Elise, such as how he knows she will continue to grow without him even when he is gone. But, he notes that he knows she has a good heart, and so he will always know her. This is an important reminder of moral conscience to Elise, and indicates just how deeply her father loved her. It is the kind of love she has needed to know she had from him.

I am garbage.

-- Elise (Chapter 17 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** Elise reaches her lowest point in this chapter. She and Franklin work together to prank Amanda with shaving cream in her lunch bag, but the prank backfires. Franklin takes all the blame for the episode, and is suspended. Elise feels as if she has betrayed her best friend by denying involvement, and feels as if she is garbage. It is the worst she has ever felt about herself, not because she was picked on, but because she didn't do the right thing.

They always should have been parents, and in some light, because life seems to have a mind of its own, maybe you were destined to be their chance to have a family.





-- Elise's dad's diary to Elise (Chapter 17 paragraph 42)

**Importance:** As Elise learns more about those who love her, she discovers that Aunt Bessie could never have children, so she and Uncle Hugh could never have the family that they wanted. Elsie's dad writes that he considered who to give guardianship of Elise to, but in the end, it wasn't even a question of where Elise would go. Elise's father contends that Elise is the chance that Bessie and Hugh never had to have a family. This brings Elise closer to her aunt and uncle, telling them they are good parents.

I was also supposed to believe in myself.

-- Elise (Chapter 20 paragraph 11)

**Importance:** In one of the final rooms to be unlocked, smaller room full of books about beliefs, from Christianity to Native American myths, and with a sign that says "BELIEVE". Elise realizes the room is meant to tell her to believe in herself. This means that Elise must truly believe she is a good person, worthy of love and friendship, and responsible for doing good things. This encourages her to heal her friendship with Franklin, and find out what is truly making Amanda so mean.

And then I realize: that was the point. I knew what the eighth room was for. It was for me to decide. It could be whatever I needed it to be, whatever I wanted it to be. And the truth, I suddenly understood, was that so could I.

-- Elise (Chapter 21 paragraph 162)

**Importance:** Elise learns what the empty room is intended for. It is representative of her life. The room can be whatever she wants it to be, while her life can be whatever she wants it to be. The things that fill up the room make up the room, while the things that fill up a life make a life.