

The Face on the Milk Carton Study Guide

The Face on the Milk Carton by Caroline B. Cooney

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Overview

A typical school day shatters for fifteen-year-old Janie Johnson during lunch period as she stares at the picture of a kidnapped child on the milk carton that she recognizes as herself. This incident trips a series of flashbacks where Janie Johnson (actually Jennie Spring) begins to remember her family and the circumstances surrounding her abduction. With support from her confidante and boyfriend Reeve, Janie eventually confronts her parents and learns that she was left with them by their daughter Hannah. The Johnsons believe Hannah, who tells them Janie is their granddaughter, and that both Hannah and Janie are being pursued by a religious cult that Hannah joined when she ran away from home. When Hannah deserts the Johnsons and Janie, they take their granddaughter and flee their former life—moving to Connecticut, changing their last name from Javenson to Johnson—to avoid being discovered by the cult. But the Johnsons only know part of the truth regarding Janie's true identity.



About the Author

Caroline B. Cooney began her writing career as an unpublished historical novelist but switched to writing novels for young adults when her short stories for this age group found a market in magazines like *Seventeen*. Cooney's enthusiasm for her career and audience is quite apparent. "I love writing and do not know why it is considered such a difficult, agonizing profession. I love all of it, thinking up the plots, getting to know the kids in the story, their parents, backyards, pizza toppings."

Mystery, adventure and romance in varying combinations preoccupy many of Cooney's young adult novels. For example in her recent work *Burning Up* (1999), fifteen-year-old Macy discovers disturbing secrets about her family and their community as she discovers the truth concerning a 38-year-old fire and an innocent victim. Her novels can be about supernatural creatures like vampires or time-slip fantasies. (See selected books: *The Vampire's Promise* and *Both Sides of Time*).

Topical issues also attract Cooney. In *Operation Homefront* (1992) she writes about a young wife and mother of three who is called up for National Guard duty during the Gulf War. *Drivers Ed* (1994) deals with teenagers who steal a STOP sign that results in the death of a young mother. Cooney is a writer of breadth and depth who is worthy of her audience.



Plot Summary

Fifteen-year-old Janie Johnson's life is turned upside down when she notices the picture of a missing girl on the back of a milk carton. A girl named Jennie Spring, with red hair much like her own, was kidnapped twelve years ago. Janie wonders if she could be this face on the milk carton when other questions about her own past begin to arise. Why has she never seen her own birth certificate? Are her parents not really her parents?

Janie tries to ignore these persistent thoughts, until she starts having strange memories. She remembers being left alone in a shopping mall, sitting on a stool, when a woman came up to her and offered her ice cream. She remembers spilling milk in a kitchen that was definitely not her own, surrounded by unfamiliar faces. She remembers a dog, and a prayer, and a family that is not the one she has known for most of her life.

Janie investigates her theory and uncovers more evidence that she might be the face on the milk carton. In her attic, Janie finds the same polka-dot dress worn by the girl in the picture. She realizes there are no pictures of her before she was three years old, and her mother refuses to take her to the bank to get her birth certificate. Janie also discovers a mysterious locked trunk that is marked "Hannah," a name that she has never heard her parents speak of before.

Janie finally confronts her parents with all of her questions. Janie's parents tell her that Hannah is their daughter and Janie's real mother. They tell her how they lost Hannah to a cult, but she showed up one day at their doorstep with Janie. The Johnsons changed their name and moved around to protect Janie, raising her as their own daughter. Janie is relieved to hear this, but the next day she realizes that their story still does not explain her connection to the missing girl on the milk carton.

With questions mounting, Janie turns to her neighbor, Reeve, for comfort. Janie and Reeve's relationship blossoms into love after she shares her secrets with him. He tries to help Janie by driving her to see the Spring family in New Jersey. When Janie sees other red-headed children walking into the house, she can no longer deny that her memories are real and they are her siblings. Janie and Reeve leave without facing the Springs.

Reeve enlists the help of his sister, a lawyer who reasons that Hannah must have kidnapped Janie from the shopping mall. He also tries to convince Janie to tell her parents. Janie accidentally loses a letter that is addressed to the Springs, forcing her to confront her parents with everything. After a lengthy and emotional discussion about how to handle the situation, Janie finally phones the Spring family to reveal she is their long-lost daughter.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Fifteen-year-old Janie Johnson has just finished her essay for Mr. Brylowe's English class. Janie daydreams about getting her driver's license, changing her name to Jayne Johnstone, and growing up to have two little girls named Denim and Lace. Everyone at school except Janie drinks milk with their lunch; she is allergic. She notices Reeve across the cafeteria. Janie's friend, Sarah-Charlotte, is hoping that Reeve will ask Janie out because Janie has never had a boyfriend. Janie wonders if her parents would ever let her date, although she doesn't really think that Reeve will ask her out. Pete, another one of Janie's friends, mentions that the pictures of missing children on the milk cartons are all hype. After finishing her peanut butter sandwich, Janie wants to wash it down with milk despite her lactose intolerance. She takes a sip of Sarah-Charlotte's milk and notices the picture of the little girl on the back of the carton. Not only does the girl resemble Janie with her trademark red hair, but Janie suddenly has a memory of the same dress as that of the girl in the picture. Janie remarks that she could be the girl on the milk carton, but her friends laugh at the thought.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Janie's relationship with her parents is established as loving and caring. Although her parents disagree over whether Janie is ready to get her driver's license, it is clear that they love her and are trying to protect her. Her father feels that Janie is still a child, while her mother argues that Janie is growing up. However, the reader will later learn the true reason that Janie cannot get her driver's license is that she does not have a birth certificate. The driver's license issue sets up one of the main questions Janie will ask herself after discovering her face on the milk carton: "Why can't she see her own a birth certificate" Ironically, Janie feels that her name is boring and undistinctive, and wishes she could change it. Of course Janie Johnson is not her real name. It is an inconspicuous name her parents chose, and her real name is Jennie Spring.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Janie continues the school day, but her mind cannot escape the thought she may be the missing girl on the milk carton. After school, Janie is standing outside in the rain when a car pulls up to her. It is Reeve, who offers her a ride. While Reeve drives, Janie borrows his penknife to cut out the picture from the milk carton, which she places inside her notebook. Reeve casually comments on her milk collecting hobby, but Janie does not discuss the picture with him. They drive to the Scenic Overlook, also known as the Sexual Overlook, where teenagers go for some action. Reeve is insecure about graduating from high school because he is considered the underachiever in his family. He talks to Janie about his siblings, but Janie's mind is still focused on the face on the milk carton. The two decide to go for ice cream. After ordering two fudge sundaes, Janie suddenly remembers sitting on a stool, eating ice cream, when a strange woman came up to her and lead her into a parking lot. At this point Janie becomes dizzy and Reeve takes her home without finishing the ice cream.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Janie's memories are a recurrent motif throughout the book. She is unsure if these are actual memories or merely daydreams. The author plays on the thematic idea of fantasy versus reality through these images. This theme is also seen as Janie continues through her normal school day routine, while her mind races with thoughts of what might have happened to her in the past. Janie's relationship with Reeve also begins to develop in this chapter. Although she is reluctant to tell him about the milk carton, Janie will later confide everything to him. There is a contrast between Reeve's family and Janie's family. It is almost as though Reeve feels he is not related to his family because he is not as smart as his siblings. On the other hand, Janie feels very close to her parents, to whom she may not be related.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Janie's parents are not there when she arrives at home. Examining her home, Janie realizes that there are no baby pictures of her. Her parents had told her before that they did not buy a camera until Janie turned five, but she now doubts this explanation. Janie is uneasy in her own bedroom, so she goes next door. Janie asks Reeve's mother if she remembers when her parents moved next door, and Mrs. Shields recalls that Janie's mother was very strict.

While watching *Lassie*, Janie notices an apron and has another memory of retrieving candy from a woman's apron, but her own mother does not wear aprons. Janie finally returns home, but her mother arrives late, upset that the whole family will not be together for dinner. Janie's father returns home from soccer practice just as Janie and her mother leave for cake decorating class. While at cake decorating class, Janie has another memory of tiny white shoes. This leads to even more questions.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The theme of fantasy versus reality continues with Janie's memories of the white apron and the white shoes. The cake that Janie is decorating when the memory occurs also features the color white, as the cake is frosted with icing. The color white symbolizes purity and innocence. This conflicts with Janie's later belief that she was not an innocent child when she was kidnapped. She feels responsible for leaving her real family for an ice cream sundae. The contrast between Janie's family and Reeve's family is further developed with Reeve's mother referring to her children as "wild animals." Consistent with this theme, the family on the television show, *Lassie*, serves as a symbol for the perfect family. The introduction of Janie's parents in the novel shows them also as loving individuals, making it as difficult for readers as it is for Janie to imagine them as kidnapping monsters.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Janie sleeps well and does not remember having any dreams the night before. She looks up the word "daymare" in the dictionary and thinks about the demon that is controlling her thoughts during the day. At school that day, Janie helps Adair study for her driver's ed test. Jason says that the first time he saw his birth certificate, he thought it had the wrong birth date. When Janie arrives home, she asks her mother for her birth certificate. Mrs. Johnson tells her it is in the safety deposit box at the bank. Janie wants to go to the bank the next day, but it is closed on Saturday. Her mother disappears into the study for the rest of the afternoon, skipping their usual snack time together. While fixing herself a bowl of ice cream, Janie has another memory, or "daymare" of spilling milk in the middle of a large room. She abandons the ice cream and goes outside to where Reeve is raking leaves in the yard. Janie asks Reeve if an 800 number can trace a call. He wonders why she is asking him such a question. Janie helps Reeve rake, and the two fall down together in the pile of leaves.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The image of spilled milk in Janie's memory has many implications. It alludes to the cliché of not crying over spilled milk, meaning that Janie should not be upset over a situation for which she was not responsible. Milk is also something that Janie is not supposed to have, just as she feels that she is experiencing memories that she is not supposed to be having. The relationship between Janie and her mother starts to unravel when Janie brings up the subject of her birth certificate. Mrs. Johnson is clearly upset and has something to hide. Janie also becomes further isolated from the normalcy of her friends, who all have birth certificates and are looking forward to getting their driver's licenses. She feels as though she is losing her sanity. The word "daymare" is also significant. Day and night are blurred in a similar manner to fantasy and reality. Janie cannot control her own daymares the way she could once control her daydreams. She feels as though she is asleep when she is awake and cannot tell what is real and what is not real.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Reeve unexpectedly kisses Janie. They are interrupted when Mrs. Shields calls Reeve inside for a phone call. Janie waits for Reeve to return, but he does not. She goes home to find her mother with a sheet cake that she has decorated for an upcoming football game, which Janie and Sarah-Charlotte will be attending along with their families. Janie can't stop thinking about Reeve and considers calling one of her friends to tell them about the kiss. She nearly calls Sarah-Charlotte or Adair, but she realizes they will tease her and tell everyone at school. Instead, Janie takes out the milk carton and decides to try calling the 800 number that is listed on the carton for reporting missing children. She begins dialing the number. Gasping for breath, Janie hangs up before she finishes the last two digits. She tries to call her friend Adair, who is talking to Pete on the other line. Janie thinks about what would happen if she really called the 800 number.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Janie's growing loneliness takes shape throughout this chapter as she feels very alone with her thoughts. As she gets closer to Reeve, Janie feels abandoned and confused by their kiss. She wants to reach out to her friends, but she is afraid of how they might react upon learning of the missing girl on the milk carton. The theme of adolescence and adulthood begins here. Janie wants to do normal teenage things like kissing boys and then calling her girlfriends to talk about it. However, Janie's mind is obsessed with thoughts of the milk carton, forcing her into a much more grown-up world including things like kidnapping. Janie is also afraid of hurting her parents, which is why she could not bring herself to make the phone call. It is ironic that Janie feels she has no one in the world, when in fact she may have more family than she ever imagined. She is afraid to explore her past if it means that she will disrupt her present.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The Johnson, the Shields, and the Sherwood families drive together to attend the football game at an upstate college. Janie begs to drive, and her parents reluctantly agree. Janie notices that Reeve's sister, Lizzie, is home from law school. Janie doesn't care for Lizzie but knows that her presence will make Reeve more anxious to go off alone with her. The families enjoy a picnic lunch upon arriving. Janie, Reeve, and Sarah-Charlotte explore the campus, and then watch the game away from their parents. Janie and Reeve begin acting like a couple as she feeds him by hand. After the game, Sarah-Charlotte spends the night at Janie's house and teases her about Reeve. On Monday morning, Sarah-Charlotte tells Janie about an upcoming school trip to Spain, but Janie does not have passport. Reeve waves at Janie but does not talk to her. Adair announced that she has received her driver's license and invites everyone to go for a drive after school. Janie says she must ask her mother first because she really wants to go to the bank instead to get her birth certificate.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The theme of adolescence versus adulthood continues to play out in this chapter. The football game lets Janie feel like a normal teenager again. Janie is thrilled to be able to drive without worrying about how her lack of a birth certificate prevents her from getting her license. Janie's relationship with Reeve continues to grow, offering her a temporary distraction from what may have happened in the past. Sarah-Charlotte represents the typical carefree teenage girl as she encourages the idea that Reeve may become Janie's boyfriend. Janie is still hesitant, however, to fully explore a love relationship with him. The burden of her past continues to hold her back. When Adair gets her license and Sarah-Charlotte mentions her passport, Janie is reminded of her birth certificate and the fact that she is not a normal teenager like her friends. Janie's thoughts return to the milk carton and she is suddenly anxious to go to the bank to retrieve her birth certificate. Once again, Janie is reluctantly pulled toward adulthood, despite her attempt to remain her age.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Janie arrives to an empty house. Her mother is volunteering at the hospital that day. Janie begins to look around the house for clues to her past. Wanting to find the key to the bank safety deposit box so that she can get her birth certificate, Janie rummages through the filing cabinet and realizes that the bottom drawer is locked. Worried about what secrets her parents may be hiding, Janie finds an excuse to go up to the attic, where she starts to look through the dusty old boxes filled with Christmas sweaters, Halloween costumes, and her father's ski boots. Among the boxes of jigsaw puzzles and fishing equipment, Janie finds a locked trunk that is labeled simply as "H." The lock on the trunk breaks, and Janie discovers old school papers from someone named Hannah. She finds a picture of Hannah, who is unfamiliar. At the bottom of the trunk is an old dress with white cloth and polka dots, the very same dress that the girl on the milk carton is wearing in the photograph.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The symbolism of the color white is again noted in the white dress that Janie finds. The white dress has been tarnished by dust and dirt. This mirrors Janie's own loss of innocence upon discovering all of these mysteries of her past, scarring the memories of the happy childhood she believed she had. Secrecy mounts with the locked files and the hidden trunk in the attic. Janie's relationship with her parents is crumbling, although her parents are still unaware of what she has discovered. While confronted with concrete evidence that her parents are hiding something, yet Janie still tries to protect them in her own mind. Janie does not want any of these facts to be true, but it is difficult for her to justify the existence of the polka-dot dress in the trunk. Janie continues to question everything around her as she uncovers more and more of these mysteries.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Janie's mother makes a pot roast for dinner that Janie refuses to eat. Her father asks about school, but Janie is reluctant to make conversation. She is unable to silence the thought that her parents might be monsters who kidnapped her. After dinner, Janie goes upstairs to pick out her clothes for the Honors Breakfast the next morning and is struck by yet another memory. She remembers clothes shopping with her mother, then wandering off by herself to the ice cream parlor where she met the woman who bought her a sundae. Janie's father comes to her room later that night to ask about her attitude, but Janie still does not mention Jennie Spring or her memories.

The next day at school, Reeve shows up at the Honors Breakfast but does not sit with Janie. Janie tries to flirt with the boy sitting next to her to make Reeve jealous. After school, Reeve gives Janie another ride home. He tries to make her jealous by saying that all the girls flirted with him. Janie nearly tells Reeve about the secrets that she has uncovered, but she feels he is too close to her family to be objective. Instead, Janie goes inside her house and finally confronts her parents about the missing baby photos, the trunk upstairs containing Hannah's things, and her lack of a birth certificate.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Dinner is used as a symbol for the state of the family's relationship. At the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Johnson is upset that her family cannot eat together because she feels that having dinner keeps them close. Now, although the family spends dinnertime together, it can no longer hold them together because of what Janie has discovered. The memory that Janie has in this chapter is one of the most vivid. It links the previous memories together, and she actually recalls her mother referring to her as Jennie. The relationship with Reeve stalls, due in part to Janie's fear of telling him the truth. She is also afraid of starting a future with him when she has yet to reconcile her own past. The turning point of the novel occurs at the end of this chapter when Janie finally confronts her parents with the questions that have been haunting her. Janie can no longer hold the questions inside and ends up blurting them out in the dramatic last scene of this chapter.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

After a prolonged silence, Janie's parents reveal that they are in fact her grandparents. Janie is relieved that they are still related by blood. Frank and Miranda tell the story of their daughter, Hannah, who joined a religious cult when she was sixteen years old. They wrote to Hannah after she moved to California to live with the Hare Krishnas. A few years later, a letter informed them that Hannah had wed another man in the cult. Then, one day, Hannah arrived at her parents' front door holding Janie's hand. Despite trying to escape, Hannah ultimately decided to return to the cult, leaving the Johnsons to care for Janie as their daughter. The Johnsons realized that the cult would look for them, so they moved constantly for several years before settling into their current home. In an attempt to disguise their identity, they changed the family name from Javensen to Johnson. The Johnsons eventually stopped trying to contact Hannah, fearing that the cult might try to get Janie back. After the story is told, Janie cries with her grandparents for what they have all been through.

Chapter 9 Analysis

This chapter employs the story-within-a-story device. Hannah is central to the overall novel, although she appears only in past flashbacks. The theme of families also plays out in a different way through the struggle of Hannah to separate from her parents, which leads her to seek a new family in the cult. Janie can again see her parents as the loving people who raised her because they are no longer at fault for what happened. Instead, she can now view them as saviors, giving her a loving home and a loving childhood. With her life returning back to normal, Janie realizes that her parents were just as afraid of losing her as she was of losing them after confronting them about her questions from her past. Janie returns to the mindset of a child and an adolescent, relieved and willing to let her parents take over now that everything is out in the open.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Emotionally and physically exhausted, Janie wakes up from her sleep feeling the burden of new and additional questions. The relief that Janie felt the night before disappears when she wakes up the next day. Janie realizes that the story that her grandparents have told her still does not explain Jennie Spring's picture on the milk carton. Janie wonders if her grandparents were so distraught by losing Hannah that they kidnapped her to replace their real daughter. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson are apprehensive now that Janie knows everything. They are still worried about Janie's reaction, especially now that she has had the chance to think more about the situation. At breakfast, they ask if she has any more questions, but Janie does not ask anything else. The family attempts to regain a sense of normalcy as they leave to face their separate days. Reeve offers Janie a ride to school. Janie gets inside the car but then asks Reeve if he will skip school with her to go to New Jersey.

Chapter 10 Analysis

This time it is not a nightmare that forces Janie to confront the truth. Janie comes to the logical realization on her own that the story her parents told cannot be entirely true. Although the Johnsons should be relieved that all of their secrets are now out in the open, Janie is still harboring doubts that prevent her from fully believing them and returning to life as normal. Janie is torn between what she wants to believe and what she feels is the truth. This internal conflict finally leads her to take drastic action by confiding in Reeve and going to New Jersey to find the Spring family. Food again serves as a symbol for the state of the family unit. It is the central point for bringing the family together or exposing their separation. In this chapter, the conversation held over breakfast reveals the mutual lack of trust between Janie and her grandparents.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Reeve thinks that Janie is overreacting to the milk carton, since there are millions of little girls with the same polka-dot dress. Janie ignores him and studies the map of New Jersey. During the drive, Reeve opens up to Janie about his childhood and growing up in the shadow of his siblings. Janie does not comment on what Reeve has said because she is too wrapped up in what she is about to do. When they finally arrive in New Jersey, they stop at a gas station and look up the Springs' address in the phone book. Janie intends for them to drive past the house, but instead they are stopped behind a school bus only a block down the street. Three boys with red hair, much like Janie's hair, get off the school bus and walk to the Springs' home. Janie is upset that these boys might be her brothers, so she asks Reeve to drive home. Realizing that they will be home late, they consider stopping at a motel to spend an intimate night together.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Reeve and Janie's blossoming relationship is contrasted by the collapse of Janie's family life. Janie is slowly realizing during the trip that she loves Reeve, and she believes that he loves her too. However, she cannot focus on what might happen between them because of what is happening to her own family. When Janie sees the red-headed boys, it is clear that they are her brothers. She is constantly remembering more details about her former life, such as a large dog and twin siblings, that make it impossible anymore for her to deny that these memories as anything but real. The theme of fantasy and reality climaxes with this chapter, as Janie confronts faces from her past.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Janie and Reeve cross the state line back into Connecticut. They drive past the suburbs and find an isolated motel. Reeve checks them in by using his father's credit card. He uses his own name on the motel registry. The motel is old and dirty. Janie quickly realizes that they can't stay there because she wants it to be special when they spend the night together. Reeve doesn't argue with her and is pleased that Janie has used the word "when," to indicate that she wants to spend the night with him in the future. Janie is upset that she has worried her grandparents by running off to New Jersey and by coming home late. Reeve realizes that their parents will find out about the motel because the charge will show up on his father's bill. They return home to find both of their parents waiting for them, screaming outside over their sudden disappearance.

Chapter 12 Analysis

The contrast between a new love relationship building and an old familial relationship breaking down is further explored in this chapter. Though he wants to help Janie, Reeve also wants to pursue his relationship with her. Janie again has trouble focusing on the potential of what could happen with Reeve. Tempted to spend the night, she is still too worried about what might happen with the Spring family. She cannot pursue an adult relationship with Reeve because she is dealing with other adult issues. Holding on to her sexual purity is Janie's attempt at holding on to the last part of her youthful innocence. Reeve shows that he is a typical teenager when he uses his father's credit card, not thinking that his father will find out about it when he gets the bill. Reeve lives in the present while Janie is stuck in the past. Janie has also promised her grandmother that she would not do what Hannah did, yet Janie has already run away as Hannah ran away.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Janie's grandparents and Reeve's parents are all angry at them for running away. The Johnsons have explained the situation with Hannah to the Shields. When Janie explains that Reeve was helping her, Reeve's mother is then proud of him. Janie's grandparents are relieved that she has returned home, and all is forgiven. Janie's grandmother makes her promise that she will never hurt her as Hannah did. Janie wakes up in the middle of the night still thinking about Jennie Spring. The next morning, Mrs. Johnson is afraid to leave the house to tutor because she doesn't know if Janie will be there when she returns home. Janie promises again that she will be there after school, so her grandmother leaves for the day. At school, Reeve and Janie blow each other kisses, leaving everyone to tease them for being in love. At the library, Janie is reading magazines with Sarah-Charlotte when the librarian mentions the New York Times. This gives Janie an idea, and she returns to the library after school to search through old newspapers for information about Jennie Spring's kidnapping. Reeve comes up behind Janie but does not see what she has found. Janie realizes that she will be home late and calls her grandmother so that she doesn't worry.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Janie is relieved to hear her grandparents screaming at her because it feels like something normal, that parents are supposed to yell at their children. She feels guilty for making them worry and does not want to be anything like Hannah. Janie wants her grandparents to think of her as their daughter and not to think of Hannah. Reeve feels good that he has made his parents proud, if only for helping Janie. Janie and Reeve's relationship is defined by Janie's internal conflicts, which foreshadows the trouble they will have. The contrast between adolescence and adulthood, which is the struggle that Janie is experiencing, is reflected in the library scene. Sarah-Charlotte is consumed by magazines and teenage problems like shopping for the prom. Janie, on the other hand, shifts her focus to the New York Times and to her more adult problems like finding and losing a family.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

After her grandfather's team wins the soccer game, Janie wants to go out for pizza with Reeve. Her grandparents agree to let Reeve drive her to school the next day, but they want to take Janie out for pizza by themselves. Janie suddenly remembers a prayer during dinner, which disturbs her because her grandparents are not religious. Later that night, Janie writes a letter to the Springs in her notebook. Janie falls asleep during English class the next day. Finding it difficult to concentrate, Janie keeps putting her own return address on the envelopes that she is addressing for Students Against Drunk Driving. Reeve drives Janie to the Scenic Overlook after school, but she cannot stop thinking about New Jersey. Janie tells Reeve how she blames herself for the kidnapping, and she also tells him that she loves him.

Chapter 14 Analysis

The Johnsons take Janie out for pizza to show her that they love her. Ordinarily, Janie's grandparents do not allow her to eat fast food, so Janie views this as a form of bribery to get her to stay with them. This makes Janie think about how she may have let herself be kidnapped for an ice cream sundae. The idea of the Spring family is so all-consuming for Janie that she must release her thoughts on paper by writing them a letter that she does not intend to mail. Janie's greatest fear is losing the only parents that she has known. Janie is afraid that the Spring family will call the police to have the Johnsons arrested if she contacts them. Meanwhile, Reeve is feeling rejected by Janie. He thinks that she is spending too much time obsessing over Jennie Spring and not enough time paying attention to him. Janie's internal conflicts continue to play out in this chapter as she gets closer to choosing between her present and her past.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Before leaving for a road trip with Reeve, Janie drops her book bag on the floor, exposing the milk carton. No one seems to notice it except for her. Reeve is delighted to have Janie's company during the drive. He talks constantly about his family, and Janie is content to listen. Janie admits that she looked up information about the kidnapping in the newspaper. Reeve tries to distract her by changing the subject. After flirting with each other over lunch, they reach a state park where they lie in the sun together. Reeve confesses that he called his sister, Lizzie, who is a lawyer to ask for her advice about the Springs. Having grown up with the Johnsons, neither Lizzie nor Reeve can believe that the Johnsons would kidnap Janie. He explains that Lizzie thinks it was Hannah that kidnapped Janie from the shopping center and brought her to the Johnsons as her own daughter. Janie and Reeve grow closer with the introduction of this new theory.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Janie continues to be distracted. When Reeve speaks to her in the car, she is pleased to let him be the center of attention but she thinks about how her craving for attention might have led her to be kidnapped. Janie continues to feel responsible for her own kidnapping, believing herself to be a selfish little girl. This furthers the theme of adolescence versus adulthood, a line that is becoming blurred as Janie is forced to grow up. Janie is initially upset that Reeve has betrayed her trust by talking to Lizzie, but she is relieved by the thought that Hannah may be the one who really took her from the shopping mall. This would leave her grandparents as innocent victims as well, which is a comforting revelation for Janie. Reeve and Janie continue to intensify their relationship, but it is clear that Reeve seeks more from Janie, both physically and emotionally, than she is able to give him.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Janie and her friends Reeve, Sarah-Charlotte, and Jason spend the following Saturday watching rented movies and playing games together. During Trivial Pursuit, Sarah-Charlotte asks Janie about the milk carton in her notebook. Reeve tries to protect her, and Janie runs upstairs to get the milk carton. She locks herself in the bathroom and begins to shred it but instead hides it under her mattress. As Reeve becomes frustrated and tired of Janie's talk about New Jersey, Janie turns to her notebook to indulge all of her thoughts and theories. One night, after attending an awards banquet for her grandfather, Janie finally dials the 800 number listed on the milk carton. A recorded message tells her to leave her information and someone will return her call, and she hangs up without saying anything. The phone rings and Janie is alarmed, but it is just Sarah-Charlotte calling to talk about boys. The next day, Reeve drives Janie toward the Scenic Overlook, but Janie gets sick so they end up at a diner instead. Returning home, Reeve cannot put up with Janie anymore, so he threatens to stop seeing her unless she tells her parents about everything. Janie gets angry and tells him to drop dead.

Chapter 16 Analysis

The relationship between Janie and Reeve finally reaches its climax. Janie must decide between the burdens her past and her present, as well as a possible future with Reeve. Janie cannot move on with her present until she confronts the memories of her past, which is why she is ultimately forced to break up with Reeve. The rest of the chapter examines the recurrent theme of adolescence versus adulthood as Sarah-Charlotte playfully questions Janie about the milk carton, having no idea how serious the situation really is. Sarah-Charlotte again functions as a symbol of naive youth when she calls Janie to talk about dating after Janie has just phoned the missing children's hotline.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Janie is hurt when she sees Reeve at school, and then later driving home with another girl. During study hall, Janie rips the pages out of her notebook, stuffs them inside an envelope, and addresses it to the Springs. She plans to place the envelope, the milk carton, and the polka-dot dress inside the trunk in the attic when she gets home. Later, Janie reaches for the letter later in the day, but it is missing. She realizes that she had written her own return address on the envelope and worries that it has been mailed, even though it was missing a stamp. Janie panics and runs to Reeve, asking for Lizzie's phone number. They leave class and go home to call her. Reeve apologizes for everything and says that he wants to make up with her.

Chapter 17 Analysis

Janie realizes that she has put New Jersey ahead of Reeve and comes to regret her decision to end their relationship. The contrast between youth and adulthood is again displayed as Janie's friends treat her breakup more seriously than they treated the kidnapping. The theme of fantasy and reality concludes in this chapter with Janie's letter. Her situation finally resolves itself when she loses the letter. As Reeve points out, Janie may have subconsciously wanted the letter to be mailed, which is why she put her own address on the envelope. Janie was beginning to lose touch with reality, and this was her subconscious way of making the decision.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Lizzie explains the entire situation to the Johnson family. Janie's grandparents sympathize with the Springs, saying that if the situation were reversed, they would not forgive the people who took away their daughter. Everyone is afraid for what might happen next. Janie's appetite has finally returned, so Reeve orders a pizza. The phone rings as he is about to call, and the room turns silent. No one answers the telephone, fearing that it might be the Spring family who is calling. Lizzie urges them to call the Springs, but Janie's grandfather doesn't want to take any action in case the letter has not been mailed. Janie's grandmother, however, feels that it is their duty and their responsibility to call the Springs. Janie is terrified and doesn't want to meet with the Springs. Janie's mother picks up the phone, begins to dial, and hands the phone to Janie. A woman answers on the other end of the line. Janie tells the woman that she is her daughter, Jennie.

Chapter 18 Analysis

With all of the information now out in the open, the Johnsons can finally deal with the situation together. The theme of family concludes with the Johnsons functioning together as a family unit again, as they did in the beginning of the novel. Lizzie serves as the practical figure, balancing their emotions with the facts of what must happen next. Janie is comforted by having her grandparents share in her knowledge and offer her support, but she is still afraid of moving forward by talking to the Springs. The theme of past and presents, fantasy and reality, also converge in this final chapter as Janie finally speaks to Mrs. Spring on the telephone. Although Janie's internal conflict over whether or not to confront her family has been resolved, the novel concludes with an open-ended finale that leaves readers to wonder what will happen next with the Spring family.



Characters

Janie Johnson

The main character in the novel is Janie Johnson. Janie is a fifteen-year-old girl with wild, red curly hair. She is shy, lactose intolerant, less talkative than her parents, and wishes she were named Jayne Johnstone. Janie has never had a boyfriend and feels younger than most of her friends who are the same age. At the beginning of the story, Janie is a typical teenager with parents who love her and are not ready to let her grow up by getting her driver's license. Janie's life is upset when she sees a face on the back of a milk carton that she believes she may be her own. Janie slowly realizes that she may, in fact, be that girl named Jennie Spring - a girl who was kidnapped in New Jersey twelve years ago. Janie starts to feel as she is losing touch with reality when memories of her past continue to surface. She cannot concentrate on anything besides what may have happened to her and begins to question everything around her.

Janie is caught between adolescence and adulthood. She wants to have a relationship with Reeve, but she cannot give him the type of attention and affection that he craves simply because she is haunted by her own thoughts of the girl on the milk carton. Janie tries to maintain her friendships, but it is difficult for her to talk about dating and boys when she is thinking about how to confront her parents and what might happen if she does. Her ultimate fear is losing her family. For Janie, it is not worth the risk of losing her parents for another family that she barely remembers. Although it is clear to readers that Janie is a good person, she finds herself plagued with guilt throughout the novel, guilt for being lured away from the Spring family for a bowl of ice cream and guilt over keeping secrets from her parents and questioning their intentions. Janie cannot resolve her internal conflicts until she comes clean about all of the information that she has discovered.

Reeve Shields

The other main character in the novel is Reeve Shields. Reeve grew up next door to Janie and is close to her and her parents. Reeve is a senior in high school who is barely expected to graduate and not expected to go to college. He always believed that he is not as intelligent as his siblings Lizzie, Megan, and Todd, and that his parents treat him as an underachiever. Reeve shocks everyone by attending the Honors Breakfast, proving that he is smarter than everyone believed him to be. He also displays affection for his parents, although he complains about them, when he watches television with his mother. He ultimately reveals a closeness with his sister Lizzie as well when he contacts her about Janie's situation at the end of the novel. Reeve is developed as a caring character and a typical teenage boy.

Reeve develops strong feelings for Janie early in the novel but keeps her guessing before finally making his intentions clear. Although he is willing to listen about Jennie



Spring and New Jersey, Reeve is also eager pursue a physical relationship with Janie, one that she is not yet ready to have. He tries to check into a motel with her by using his father's credit card, but Janie changes her mind and they return home. Reeve tries to remain patient and serves as a confidant, driving her to and from school and even to New Jersey to see the Spring family home. Reeve is finally pushed to his limit after Janie repeatedly refuses to tell her parents the truth. He threatens to break up with her if she does not tell them, but he comes to regret his decision quickly. Reeve rekindles his relationship with Janie at the end of the novel and is there for her when she makes the call to the Springs.

Miranda Johnson

Miranda Johnson is Janie's mother, who believes herself to be Janie's grandmother. She is married to Frank, Janie's father, who believes herself to be Janie's grandfather. Her daughter is Hannah, whom she believes to be Janie's mother. Her name used to be Miranda Javensen but was changed after Janie came to live with them. She tutors English as a second language, has a degree in medieval literature. Miranda displays her love and affection for Janie by sharing afternoon snacks with her and by taking a cake decorating class with her. She also shows her love for her family by making dinner and insisting that they eat together. Miranda is worried that she will lose Janie like she lost her own daughter, Hannah.

Frank Johnson

Frank Johnson is Janie's father, who believes himself to be Janie's grandfather. He is married to Miranda, Janie's mother, who believes herself to be Janie's grandmother. His daughter is Hannah, whom he believes to be Janie's mother. He used to be named Frank Javensen but changed his name to Johnson after Hannah brought Janie to him from the cult. Frank is a soccer coach, has an accounting degree, and once worked for IBM. He shows his love for Janie through his reluctance for her to obtain her driver's license. Frank does not appear often in the novel, but it is clear that he loves his wife and his daughter.

Hannah Johnson

Though she never appears in the present day scene, Hannah plays an integral role in the novel. She is the daughter of Frank and Miranda Johnson (formerly Javensen) who brought Janie to them to live. Hannah ran away from her parents when she was sixteen years old to join the cult of the Hare Krishnas. She married a man in the cult and later tried to escape. It is presumed that Hannah found Janie in an ice cream parlor in a shopping mall, kidnapped her, and then brought her to the Johnsons as her own daughter. Hannah decided to return to the cult and left Janie to be raised by her parents. The Johnsons were forced to cut off communication with her and it is unknown where Hannah is or even if she is still alive.



Lizzie Shields

Lizzie is the sister of Reeve, Megan, and Todd. She used to baby-sit Janie, but Janie has never liked her because Lizzie is snobbish. Lizzie attended Princeton and is now in law school. Lizzie becomes important at the end of the novel when Reeve calls to ask for her advice. She has grown up next door to the Johnsons and doesn't believe them to be capable of kidnapping. It is Lizzie who deduces that Hannah must have kidnapped Janie from the shopping mall. She appears only in the final chapter, where she remains the practical one who is detached from the situation. Lizzie convinces the Johnsons to contact the Springs.

Sarah-Charlotte Sherwood

Sarah-Charlotte is one of Janie's best friends. She appears frequently throughout the novel as a symbol of adolescence, representing the typical teenager. Sarah-Charlotte is concerned with boys and dating and shows no concern for Janie's feelings about the milk carton. Janie takes a sip from Sarah-Charlotte's milk carton and sees the picture of Jennie Spring on the back. It is also Sarah-Charlotte who finally asks Janie about the milk carton in an immature, teasing fashion.

Mr. and Mrs. Shields

Mr. and Mrs. Shields are the parents of Reeve, Lizzie, Megan, and Todd. They have lived next door to the Johnsons for many years. Mrs. Shields has always taken care of Janie when she was sick. Mrs. Shields appears toward the beginning of the novel when she watches Lassie with Reeve and Janie, telling Janie how her mother was strict when the first moved into town. Mr. Shields only appears toward the end of the novel when he yells at Reeve for disappearing with Janie. It is his credit card that Reeve used to check into the motel with Janie.

The Spring Family

Jennie Spring is the missing girl on the milk carton. When Janie goes to New Jersey, she sees three red-headed boys walk into the Spring house and assumes that they are her brothers. Janie also has a memory of twins that could be other members of the family. There is also a dog named Honey. A voice presumed to be that of Mrs. Spring appears toward the end of the novel, but otherwise the Spring family does not appear in the context of the story. However, Mr. and Mrs. Jonathon Avery Spring still play prominent roles, as Janie continues to remember bits and pieces of her life with them before she was kidnapped.



Adair O' Dell; Pete, Jason, and Katrina

These are all Janie's school friends who appear briefly throughout the novel. Adair is the first one of Janie's friends to get her driver's license. Jason brings up the topic of birth certificates while Pete talks about the picture on the milk carton as being all hype.

Mr. Brylowe

Mr. Brylowe is Janie's English teacher at school. The novel begins during his class, and he questions Janie for writing her name as "Jayne Johnstone" on her essay.

Mr. Yampolski

Mr. Yampolski is Janie's school librarian who mentions that the New York Times covers the entire metropolitan area, giving Janie the idea to look through the newspaper for more information about Jennie Spring.



Objects/Places

Romney Road, Connecticut

This is the street where the Johnsons and the Shields live. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson finally settled there with Janie after moving around for several years.

114 Highview Avenue, New Jersey

This address belongs to the Spring family. Janie and Reeve drive by this location and get a glimpse of some of the Spring children.

Scenic Overlook

The Scenic Overlook is bordered by the ocean to the east and the harbor to the west. Also known as the Sexual Overlook, this is the place where teenagers get physical with one another.

California

Hannah runs away to somewhere in California when she joins the Hare Krishna.

Milk Carton

Janie sees the picture of Jennie Spring on a local Flower Dairy milk carton and begins to believe that it is her own photograph.

Polka-Dot Dress

Jennie Spring is wearing a dress that Janie remembers. Janie later retrieves this same dress from her upstairs attic.

Notebook

Unable to talk to anyone about her situation, Janie begins to write all of her feelings and questions in her notebook. This is also where she keeps the milk carton.



White Shoes

Janie has a memory of wearing white shoes while sitting on a stool in an ice cream parlor. The shoes symbolize childhood innocence.

Apron

Another memory includes the image of a woman wearing a white apron filled with candy in the pockets. The color white again symbolizes innocence.

Trunk

Janie uncovers old school papers and clothes that belonged to Hannah in a locked trunk in the attic that is marked "H."

Setting

The primary function of setting in this novel is to accentuate the comfortable and secure upper middle-class lifestyle that Janie Johnson leads. Her suburban Connecticut neighborhood contains a sense of tradition that can make room for growth.

Their's [the Johnson's] was an architecturally mixed neighborhood. Originally a street of substantial older houses with front porches, big attics, and trees that dumped a million leaves every autumn, each side lot had been built upon. Modern ranches and cute little Cape Cods lay between each brown-shingled old place. Her own house was an old one dramatically modernized with sheets of glass where once there had been dark, hidden rooms.

A typical New England autumn becomes the seasonal backdrop replete with mountains of leaves piled in the street gutters waiting to be collected. A Saturday tailgate picnic before a football game and a drive into the country to witness the fall colors contrast with the tumbled colors in Janie's turbulent mind indicated in italic print.

Inside, her mind spun. It was like having a color wheel for a brain. When it slowed down, things were separate, like primary colors: I have a mother and father . . . I have a childhood . . . I was not kidnapped . . . kidnapping means bad people . . . I don't know any bad people . . . therefore I am making this up.

But when her mind speeded up, the colors blended dizzily. That is me on there. I, Janie Johnson; I was kidnapped.

The author concentrates most of her energies in developing the country of the mind in Janie's psychological setting through a third-person limited omniscient point of view.

Social Sensitivity

Nearly all children have thought at some moment in their childhood that the parents they live with are not their real parents.

Whether it is a secret adoption or abduction, this is a universal childhood fear that Janie confronts.

I don't want to know thought Janie. Because . . . because why? Does something deep inside me know already? But why now? Why something like your real family, and the moment you were taken from them?

Briefly Janie remembers a folk narrative where a fairy change-child or changeling is switched with a human baby from its unsuspecting family. The universality of this fear runs deep in the human psyche which makes the possibility of it occurring an alluring read for all ages.

Keeping Janie's true identity from her compromises the relationship between Janie and the Johnsons. Frequently throughout this ordeal she vows never to trust them again. She becomes the victim of their secrecy much the same way Miranda and Frank Johnson are victimized by their daughter's deceit. Hannah lies to her parents, claiming that Janie is her daughter and their granddaughter. Bringing Janie to them is the first positive act on Hannah's part in her beleaguered life. She was given all the opportunities of an upper middle-class lifestyle but rejects these accouterments because others do not have the same advantages. Wanting to divest herself of worldly trappings seems noble in motive but when she flees her home to join a cult she seems to have gone over the edge by kidnapping a child (Janie), and willfully implicating her parents in this crime without their knowledge. Frank Johnson tries to explain what a cult is to Janie.

A cult is a religious group with exceedingly strict rules for those people who join it.

The Hare Krishna movement swept America like a prairie fire in the sixties and seventies, Janie. It attracted old and young, hippy and conservative, East Coast and West Coast. And it attracted Hannah. She met a group of young people who told her if she became a Hare Krishna, she would be purified. It would no longer be her fault she had so much, because they would not allow her to have anything. She would be saved. When she was sixteen, she fell on her knees and begged to be allowed to be one of them.

Hannah runs away and joins the cult marrying one of its members, causing significant sadness for the Johnsons. They believe they failed as parents, but when given a second chance to nurture their grandchild, they willingly sacrificed their identities not unlike people entering a witness protection program. Hannah makes fugitives of them; their only solace is the child they believe is their grandchild. They suffer two-fold when they learn of Hannah's betrayal and the prospect of losing a child for a second time.



Cooney extends compassion to these parents who have endured so much heartbreak but seem unable to break this spiral especially when Janie's true identity is verified to them as Jennie Spring in the closing pages of this first novel in the trilogy. A child/adolescent such as Hannah who cannot be rescued from her obsessions while parents watch helplessly must be one of the more profound sorrows of the human experience.



Literary Qualities

The most effective writing strategy employed by Cooney in this plot-driven narrative of mystery and suspense is a series of flashbacks into Janie's memory. The milk carton incident triggers a specific memory about the dress the little girl is wearing.

"She remembered that dress . . . how the collar itched . . . remembered the fabric; it was summer fabric; the wind blew through it . . . remembered how those braids swung like red silk against her cheeks."

Frequently these flashbacks, usually signaled by Cooney with italics, are tripped by an event or object in present time. As Janie and Reeve are about to eat ice cream sundaes, she remembered her abduction in the mall when a woman with "long straight cascading hair" tempts her with an ice cream sundae. Janie refers to these flashbacks as daymares, "a nightmare taking place in the day." Interspersed with these daymares are other unsettling discoveries. There are no photos of Janie before age five (not even a baby portrait). Her parents stonewall giving Janie her birth certificate that she will need as proof of identity in order to get her driver's license. When Janie discovers the polka-dot dress worn by her in the milk carton photo hidden in the attic of her home, Frank and Miranda must confess all they know about her background. Other flashbacks come to Janie about two babies in a kitchen and a man with a red mustache holding her close enough for her to tug on the ends of it—to be later confirmed as her younger twin brothers and her red-haired dad (like hers) and her siblings. These events effectively give momentum to the plot resulting in Janie's contact with the Springs.

In addition to serving as a confidante for Janie, Reeve's character also functions as Janie's first romantic interest. Their physical attraction for each, the lingering kiss in the seclusion of the mountainous leaf piles in their front yards provide a pleasurable momentary distraction for them as well for the reader from the serious issue in this narrative. They do not physically consummate their relationship but they are close enough to feel "heartbeats". . . etc. On their way home from New Jersey where Janie confirms her ties to the Springs from a distance, they rent a motel room but mutually withdraw from this temptation. Humor breaks the psychological and physical tension of these preceding scenes when they debate who's going to drive back to Connecticut.

"I don't think I can drive," said Reeve when they were in the Jeep.

"Well, I can't, not in this traffic."

"You want driving experience, take it."

Neither of them wanted driving experience. It was another experience altogether they wanted. "Start the motor," said Janie.

"Believe me, it's running," said Reeve, and they giggled desperately.

Cooney portrays them as lovable kids with healthy libidos. Mystery, suspense and romance spun by this competent author make for a good read. *The Face on the Milk Carton* received IRA-CBC Children's Book Choice recognition.



Themes

Fantasy versus Reality

The theme of fantasy versus reality is explored throughout the novel by Janie's recurring thoughts and images. A distinction is made between daydreams and daymares. Janie refers to daydreams as something over which she has control, such as her fantasies about having kids named Denim and Lace. Her daymares, on the other hand, are uncontrollable images that play out in her mind. She often has no idea as to their meaning and becomes increasingly worried about whether or not these are true. Are they memories from her past or just scenes that her mind has created as a result of seeing the picture on the milk carton? A frequently occurring image in Janie's memories is the color white. There are white shoes, a white apron, and a white dress. Even the frosting on the cake that Janie is decorating when she has another memory is also white. This color symbolizes the innocence of childhood, which was robbed from Janie when she was kidnapped at age three. However, Janie does not believe she was innocent in her own kidnapping. In reality, there is nothing that Janie could have done to prevent being taken away from her real family. However in her own mind, Janie fantasizes a little girl who was selfish and craved attention from the woman offering her an ice cream sundae. Torn between what she hopes is true and what she feels is true, Janie can no longer deny that her memories are real when she sees the red-headed boys walking into the Spring house. Her internal conflicts continue to play out as she gets closer to choosing between her present and her past. The theme of fantasy and reality reaches its climax when Janie's subconscious takes over, causing her to lose the letter. The final chapter concludes this theme, as Janie's fantasy of contacting the Spring family becomes a reality.

Family Relationships

Family and personal relationships are a central theme in the novel. At the beginning of the story, Janie's relationship with her parents is established as loving and functional. Their closeness is increasingly strained with each new discovery that Janie makes about her past. In contrast, the Shields family is strained at the beginning but Reeve becomes increasingly accepted by his parents. Although he has struggled with his siblings, it is ultimately with the help of his sister, Lizzie, that the Johnsons and the Shields come together to help Janie contact the Spring family. Reeve and Janie's personal relationship throughout the story shows Janie's struggle with her daily interactions as she learns more about the kidnapping. Food is a symbol for the state of the family. Mrs. Johnson is concerned if the family does not spend dinner together. Janie's grandparents later try to bribe her with a pizza to stop her from running away like Hannah did. Ice cream is what lured Janie away from her original family, the Springs. Hannah's relationship with her parents directly contrasts Janie's relationship with the Johnsons. Yet their greatest fear remains losing Janie the same way they lost Hannah. Meanwhile, Janie has a familial connection with the Springs but is reluctant to establish



a relationship because she feels that it would be a betrayal to the Johnsons. The theme of families climaxes in the last chapter, when the Johnsons are re-established as a functional unit and the Shields come together to help them.

Adolescence versus Adulthood

Janie's friendships establish the theme of adolescence versus adulthood. In the first chapter, Janie feels younger and more inexperienced than her friends. She is a young teenager. However, when Janie begins to unravel the mystery of her past, she is forced to emerge into adulthood. Sarah-Charlotte symbolizes teenage indiscretion as she repeatedly focuses on superficial interests like boys in her interactions with Janie. Janie grows increasingly frustrated, as she cannot enjoy normal teenage activities because she is focused on the milk carton. Not only is she dealing with grown-up problems, but she is also denied teenage rights-of-passage, such as obtaining her driver's license or her passport, because of it. Janie struggles to hold on to her childhood by not confronting her memories of the Springs. She also tries to preserve her innocence by refusing to take her relationship with Reeve to a more adult (meaning physical) level. Her past, present, and future ultimately converge in the climax of the theme of adolescence versus adulthood in the final chapter. It is here Janie simultaneously returns to her life as a normal teenager with Reeve as her boyfriend and makes an adult decision to contact her real parents.



Themes/Characters

Janie Johnson appears to have a pleasant, pampered, and protected life with her parents, Frank and Miranda. They live in a modernized older home where Janie has the largest bedroom since each of her parents has a separate home office. They opt to take the smaller remaining bedroom which demonstrates how loving and giving they are when it comes to their daughter. Janie is pretty and petite and relatively popular.

Her glorious and abundant red hair makes her stand out, although she prefers to be a viewer of the action rather than a participant. Her parents provide her with abundant cultural opportunities such as playing the flute and taking horseback-riding lessons. Nearly all these opportunities are abandoned, although she does well enough academically and seems to have good friendships with school chums like Sarah-Charlotte and Adair.

Cooney uses foreshadowing and irony to delineate her central protagonist in *The Face on the Milk Carton*. Initially Janie daydreams of having a more distinctive name by adding letters to her present name—Jaynee Johnstone. Ironically within fifteen pages of this daydream she is confronted with her real name, Jennie Spring, on the milk carton. Even the circumstance of this discovery on a milk carton is ironic because Janie is lactose intolerant and usually avoids drinking milk. With the discovery of her abduction as a three-year-old over ten years ago Janie is thrown into a state of emotional vacillation—one moment distrusting her parents then fiercely protecting and loving them, but all the time wondering about and wanting to make contact with her real family, the Springs, who live in New Jersey. As if this isn't enough she feels a tremendous sense of guilt in being lured away from them by a stranger [Hannah] who gave her an ice cream sundae, another example of lactose intolerant irony.

Reeve Shields is Janie's love interest and protector (the use of his last name suggests this role) during her emotional, tumultuous journey to discover the complete truth about her identity. He is literally the boy next door who has spent a great deal of time at the Johnsons over the years seeking refuge from his domineering and academically successful older siblings. Reeve finds it overwhelming to live up to his parents' expectation of doing the same. He seems the obvious person for Janie to seek out and trust; besides, the bold good looks of this senior are attractive to this impressionable sophomore.

He is a good listener as well as kisser.

The dominant theme that emerges from this plot-driven narrative is the universal need for open, honest communication between parent and child. If Miranda and Frank Johnson had been more forthcoming with the information as far as they knew about Janie's background before the milk carton incident, her emotional trauma would not have been so intense. Every child eventually discovers some faults with their parents but this is an especially agonizing discovery and the author clearly wants the reader to respond with empathy to Janie's dilemma.



Style

Point of View

The novel is told in the third person limited point of view. In the third person limited point of the view, the reader follows one particular character and is only privy to his or her internal thoughts. The narrative never contains first person pronouns such as "I" or "we," but the point of view remains consistent with one specific character. In this case, the third person point of view is limited to Janie. The reader moves through the story guided by Janie's thoughts and actions, although Janie speaks directly to the reader. As the novel follows only Janie's perspective, the reader is not told of the other characters' internal thoughts or feelings. The author employs this point of view so readers will sympathize with Janie's situation. When Janie first sees the face on the milk carton, readers can relate to her emotions as she is asking questions about her own identity. Readers are invited to join Janie on her roller coaster of emotions. If other characters' perspectives were introduced, such as Hannah or the Spring family, the overall theme of the novel would change. It would no longer be a story about a young girl's search for her true identity. Instead, the novel would become a much more complex story that asks readers to understand the viewpoint of the kidnapper, the kidnapped, and the victimized family. By using the third person limited point of view, the author keeps the focus on Janie, making her a sympathetic character to whom readers can relate.

Setting

The story begins in October in a small town in Connecticut. The name of the town in which she lives is never specified, but the street where the Johnsons and the Shields live is called Romney Road. Another important location in this town is the Scenic Overlook. Described as bordering the ocean, the reader can infer that Janie's town is on the East Coast of Connecticut. Reeve often drives Janie to the Scenic Overlook so that they can spend private time together to talk. New Jersey also plays a prominent role in the story. The milk carton states that the missing girl was kidnapped from New Jersey. Janie has recurring thoughts of this setting, gradually remembering more from her past there, including the shopping center from which she was kidnapped. Reeve eventually drives Janie to New Jersey so that she can see the Spring family's house on Highview Avenue. California is also an important setting in the novel. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson tell Janie that their daughter Hannah ran away to California when she joined the Hare Krishna. Janie, believing Hannah to be her mother, tries to remember life on the West Coast but has no image of it. This directly highlights Janie's memories of New Jersey, once she sees the milk carton. The locations in this novel are all prominent parts of the story because they correspond with Janie's past as well as her present.



Language and Meaning

The language in the novel is accessible for young adults and does not interfere with the understanding of the story. Names as linked with identity are important to the story. At the beginning of the novel, the author uses a play on names that foreshadows Janie's identity crisis. Having friends with more memorable names, Janie Johnson feels that her name is boring and tries to change it to Jayne Johnstone. After discovering the face on the milk carton, she then believes that her name is Jennie Spring. Later on in the story, Janie learns that the Johnson's last name used to be Javensen, which leads her to believe that her name is really Janie Javensen. Janie's changing names reflects her changing identity. Both her name and identity are inconsistent because she does not know who she truly is, and she is unsure of her own past. The language in the novel also describes Janie's thoughts and memories.

The author uses italics in the text to establish Janie's private thoughts. Italicized text is also used when Janie has a memory or daydream that she is not sure is real. The language employs more imagery during these memories to evoke their dream-like qualities, blurring the line between fantasy and reality. Janie's memories are largely a series of images that do not make sense to her, and the author uses language accordingly to convey this theme to the readers. Aside from these scenes, however, the language throughout the novel remains straightforward and action-oriented.

Structure

The novel features a traditional chronological structure. The course of the story unfolds over just a few weeks. The only time that the novel deviates from this structure is in Chapter 9. The device used in this chapter is called the story-within-a-story technique. As the Johnsons tell Janie the story of what happened to Hannah, the text recalls a past that occurred a long time before the opening scene of the novel. Hannah's story is told entirely through dialogue, as indicated by quotation marks. When the Johnsons conclude their story of Hannah, the novel returns to its present day setting and continues in a linear time structure.



Quotes

"*She remembered that dress...how the collar itched...remembered the fabric; it was summer fabric; the wind blew through it...remembered how those braids swung like red silk against her cheeks.*" Chapter 1, pg. 11

"A woman was next to her...long, straight hair cascading down the woman's back, so pretty Janie had to touch it. The woman kept her hand in the air behind Janie's back so she wouldn't tip off the spinning stool...Jane was little - the woman hugged her - swung her around as the stool had swung...her dress, white with tiny dark dots, blew in the air..." Chapter 2, pg. 22

"Apron. It was white; heavy; almost as heavy as canvas; it had a bib; her mother kept little hard candies in one pocket and Janie could stretch up and reach her baby hand into the pocket to take out one candy. With a cellophane wrapper that crinkled. But my mother doesn't wear aprons, thought Janie." Chapter 3, pg. 31

"Very slowly her hands crept around his face, finding the back of his neck where his hair lay thick over the pulse. His hand, rough-surfaced, gently touched her face. Moved her hair away. With the pad of his thumb her traced her profile." Chapter 5, pg. 47

"But she thought of Jennie Spring. Of parents somewhere in New Jersey who missed their little girl so much that all these years later they were still hoping, hoping by the thinnest thread they would somehow find their Jennie again, and Jennie would be safe, not murdered or raped or abused - *or happy and ignorant with another family.*" Chapter 5, pg. 52

"She lifted the heavy lid carefully, tilting it back against the wall. The trunk was filled with papers and photographs. She was immediately bored. Old school reports, old term papers, old fill-in-the-blank maps and quizzes. Somebody named Hannah. She had never heard of anybody named Hannah." Chapter 7, pg. 67

"I want to know why there aren't any photographs of me until I'm five. Even if you didn't buy a camera until then, you would have had a baby portrait done. I want to know who Hannah is upstairs in the trunk. I want to know why you won't let me see my birth certificate." Chapter 8, pg. 79

"It was a nice story they had told last night. But what about the Springs? What about the milk carton? Hannah was real. The trunk in the attic full of her geography papers proved it. But the milk carton was real. Jennie Spring was real and so was that 800 number. New Jersey was real. And that shopping center." Chapter 10, pgs. 93-94

"The boys had red hair. The color of Janie's. She subtracted the years she had been gone...The front door on the number 114 began to open for the redheaded boys. They were not latchkey kids. Somebody was home to welcome them. The inner wood door was bright red. A hand reached to push open the storm door. Janie covered her eyes



and sank down in the seat. 'Drive past, hurry up, Reeve, drive past.'" Chapter 11, pgs. 110-111

"It was wonderful to be yelled at. It was so parental. Her mother's face, taut with worry and rage, was a mother's face. Her father's hands, rigid with wanting to shake her by the shoulders till her teeth rattled, were a parent's hands. They loved her. Parents who loved you bothered to get mad." Chapter 13, pg. 120

"Lizzie thinks it's Hannah who kidnapped you...She ran inside and there was this sweet little girl who would hold her hand. Lizzie thinks maybe Hannah took you along for company. And Hannah was such a lost soul maybe she didn't even know she was kidnapping you. But if she did know, she sure wouldn't tell her mother and father when she got to their house." Chapter 15, pgs. 153-154

"With numb fingers Janie took the phone from her mother. I should have had something to eat, she thought. I'm so hungry I'm dizzy. It rang once more. In New Jersey somebody picked up the phone. 'Hello?' said a woman's voice. Janie clung to her mother. She said, 'Hi. It's...your daughter. Me. Jennie.'" Chapter 18, pg. 184



Topics for Discussion

1. Should Janie's parents have told her about what they know concerning her identity? Why or why not?
2. Make a list in order of their importance, not necessarily their order of appearance in the novel, of the crucial discoveries that inform Janie about her identity. Defend your ordering of these events.
3. Should Janie and Reeve have taken advantage of the motel room? How would you react in a similar situation? What would be your parents' reaction?
4. What do you make of Hannah's character? Is she aware of the magnitude of her actions? Is she a sinister character or a "rag doll"? Explain the significance of this last term as it appears in the novel.



Essay Topics

Discuss the theme of fantasy versus reality throughout the novel. What symbols and imagery does the author include to blur the line between fact and fiction?

Explore the theme of families. How does the Johnson family contrast the Shields family? Why is Janie so reluctant to contact the Spring family?

Discuss Janie's conflict with her past and her present. How does Janie try to deny her past, and how does she view her present? How might Janie's past influence her future?

Explain the significance of the color white as it appears throughout the novel. Include examples from the text and relate them to Janie's experiences.

Discuss the theme of adolescence versus adulthood. How does Janie differ from her other friends? What role does Janie's relationship with Reeve play in this theme?

Explore the literary devices used in the novel. How would the novel change if it were told from the perspective of Hannah, Mr. Johnson, or Mrs. Spring?

Discuss the significance of names. How do these changing names reflect the characters? What does this say about their identities?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Janie makes use of the New York Times on microfilm to learn more about her abduction at the time it took place ten years earlier. Select a trial or topic currently running on Court TV and locate printed coverage of the crime or event when it originally happened. What information is developed in the original coverage in contrast to what is developed in the court proceedings or television presentation?
2. Read the sequel *Whatever Happened to Janie* and compare/contrast Janie Johnson in the first novel with Jennie Spring in the second novel. Which character is more likable and why?
3. Frank Johnson says in the closing pages of *The Face on the Milk Carton* that "not everything ends happily." How is this prediction accurate for both families in *Whatever Happened to Janie*? Apply this to specific individuals from each family.
4. Read the final novel in the trilogy, *The Voice on the Radio*, and demonstrate how Reeve has changed. Does he take responsibility for his actions? Explain in detail.
5. Read Cooney's historical time-travel fantasy *Both Sides of Time* and compare Annie Lockwood's adventures living in the late 1890s with Janie's.
6. Read either Zilpha Snyder's *The Changeling* or Eloise McGraw's *The Moorchild* and comment upon how Ivy or Moqi cope and compensate for being different in their respective communities.

How do their personality and sense of self compare to Janie's?

Further Study

"Caroline B. Cooney." June 1999. Online Internet <http://www.dellbooks.com/teachersbdd/caro.html>. A brief look into Cooney's childhood with her memories of reading such series books as The Hardy Boys and Cherry Ames, Student Nurse.

"Caroline B. Cooney." Something about the Author, Volume 80. Edited by Kevin S. Hile. Detroit: Gale, 1995, pp. 55-57. Briefly assesses representative titles up to the publication date of this reference text.

Related Titles

It is challenging for an author to create a successful sequel especially when the first novel, *The Face on the Milk Carton*, is developed through mystery, suspense, and romance. The sequel, *Whatever Happened to Janie?*, chronicles Janie (now known as Jennie) adjusting to her real family. The legal rights of the Springs are upheld in court and respected by everyone so their long lost daughter comes to live with them. Sharing a cramped room with her sister Jodie, enduring the anger and embitterment of her older brother Stephen, and witnessing the heartbreak of her real parents as she hesitates to accept them, gives this novel a tense, painful atmosphere. The FBI and their continuing search for Hannah brings about a truce among Jodie, Stephen and Jennie as they search the underside of New York City for this shadowy personage. This sequel was named an ALA Best Book for Young Adults.

The Face on the Milk Carton The possibility of Hannah resurfacing in the final novel of the series, *The Voice on the Radio*, adds an element of mystery. Readers may be disappointed with college freshman Reeve as he gains a reputation for himself as a radio personality on the student broadcasting facility at Janie's expense.

Inadvertently Reeve is drawn into a weekly program of narrating Janie's harrowing experiences of the last few years. These programs, known as "janies," gain a wide audience, becoming popular beyond the campus which is located near New York City. Janie moves beyond her preoccupation with selfpity prevalent in the second novel as she responds to Reeve's betrayal after hearing a "janie" for herself. Another shadowy personage may have heard the "janies" too, since a mysterious caller contacts Reeve during his radio program. The specter of Hannah lurking in the background gives this novel a sense of chilling suspense.



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