

# **Feathers Study Guide**

## **Feathers by Jacqueline Woodson**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Feathers Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 1.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 2.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 3 and 4.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 5 and 6.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 7 and 8.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 9 and 10.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 11 and 12.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 13 and 14.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 15 and 16.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 17 and 18.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 19 and 20.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 21 and 22.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">34</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">37</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>



## Plot Summary

A new kid is enrolled in Frannie's sixth grade class. The children at Price School are all African Americans. Although there is some question about his true identity, the new boy looks white; in fact, he is extremely pale. The kids in the class cannot understand why a white boy would choose to come to their school—all the white kids live and go to school across the highway. The children all have different reactions to the new kid. Frannie, who is the narrator of the story, is intrigued by the new kid and has empathy for him. Frannie's older brother, Sean, is deaf. She associates the new kid with her brother because they are both different and kids have strong reactions to both of them—some not so nice. Some of the children think the new kid looks like Jesus. He seems to be white and he has long hair just like Jesus. The kids dub him Jesus Boy. The kid likes his new name.

Trevor, who is bi-racial and the class bully, immediately resents the new kid. He feels threatened by him, fearing that the presence of the white boy will bring the subject of race to the surface—a subject that he vigorously avoids. Trevor tells the new kid that he doesn't belong at Price School because he's white. Jesus Boy holds his ground and declares that he is not white, a statement which serves to confuse everyone.

Frannie's best friend, Samantha, who is very religious and the daughter of a Baptist preacher, begins to hope that Jesus Boy is in fact the real Jesus. She is elated with the thought that Jesus would choose Price School for his return to earth. She thinks all the signs are pointing to the boy being Jesus. Jesus is really needed because there is a war going on and people are starving. The practical Frannie points out to her friend that there are always wars and always starvation. Samantha is convinced more than ever that the boy is Jesus because another classmate, RayRay, has become a much better person since Jesus Boy arrived.

Frannie has problems at home. Her mother, who has lost an infant daughter and two more babies in miscarriages, is pregnant again. Frannie and her brother Sean are concerned that their mother may lose this baby and be depressed again like she was in the past. Frannie is protective of Sean and wants him to stay in the deaf world where he is accepted. But Sean wants to reach out and be part of all worlds. Frannie transfers her protectiveness to Jesus Boy. She feels empathy for him because she remembers how she felt when she was the new kid. Frannie is the first to befriend Jesus Boy. When Jesus Boy's behavior plainly shows that he is human and not Jesus, Samantha is disappointed. Frannie's big heart understands Samantha's disappointment and comforts her.

Frannie's mother's condition improves and the baby seems to be thriving. The teacher, recognizing that Jesus Boy is not being accepted by some of the kids, illustrates how one can have many similarities with people who seem to be different. Frannie learns to hold on to the good memories in life and feel comforted by hope - because hope is all around.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

A new boy joins the sixth grade class. He is tall and skinny, has long curly hair way down his back and his skin is very pale, matching the snow outside. Trevor greets the boy with a nasty remark, his attempt to cover it with a cough not successful. Ms. Johnson warns Trevor to behave. The new boy just seems to ignore Trevor as he taps out a silent tune with a pencil on his desk. The narrator, Frannie, looks at her notebook, recalling the day before when Ms. Johnson read a poem. Her favorite line, "Hope is the thing with feathers," is written down in her notebook. Mama had told Frannie that Ms. Johnson was trying to teach the children to look toward the future. Her brother Sean signed that it was a metaphor.

The new boy is assigned a seat in the front. There is something sad about him. For some reason, he makes Frannie think of Christmas when Sean had been thrilled with the basketball jersey he had gotten. The kids line up for lunch in two straight lines and are led into the cafeteria by Ms. Johnson. As usual, RayRay is acting like a fool, dancing around and even doing a split, of course, outside the view of Ms. Johnson. Trevor breaks the "no-talking in line" rule. He tells the new boy he's too much of a pale-face for this school. The new boy tells Trevor that he's just as pale. Ms. Johnson reminds the class that there's no talking in line. She reminds Frannie to look straight ahead and not keep looking back at the two boys.

Trevor has light skin and blue eyes. Frannie recalls how he punched RayRay for asking him if he was part white. Frannie knows that it is a just a matter of time before the new kid would get punched.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

A new student joins Frannie's sixth grade class which, it appears, is made up of mainly African-American students. The description of the new boy leads the reader to believe that he is white or extremely light-skinned. Trevor, who is part white, bitterly resents the presence of the new boy. His appearance confuses and angers Trevor who does not like his bi-racial heritage discussed. Trevor is an angry child who has confusion about his identity and the new boy, by his mere presence, is a threat to Trevor's identity in that the boy will bring a focus on skin color. Frannie draws a parallel between her disabled brother Sean, who is deaf, and the new student who in some sense is disabled, or at least different, because of his skin color.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

At the cafeteria, Frannie winds up in line behind the new boy. She tries to take two hamburgers but is stopped by Mrs. Costa, the lunchroom helper, who reminds her she has to come back if she wants another. The new boy turns around and smiles at Frannie. Surprisingly, he takes fish instead of a hamburger. Frannie sits down next to Maribel Tanks but only because Samantha is sitting with her. When Frannie had started school, Samantha was the first girl to befriend her. Frannie can't stand Maribel and doesn't understand why Samantha is friendly with her. Maribel had gone to a private school before she came to Price. Maribel comments on how horrible the food is and that at her private school she could bring lunch. Her family owns the Tanks Grocery store which, according to Frannie's mother, charges too much for everything and it is just another example of the Tanks putting on airs.

Frannie loves to hear her mother talk about people. Her grandmother says her mother has the gift of gab and that she, Frannie, has inherited it. Frannie isn't sure if that's true. She thinks of herself as more of a listener except when it comes to the subjects of math, science and geography; she always has a lot of questions about those subjects. Watching the new boy eat by himself, makes Frannie feel sad again. She tells the other girls that someone should have been assigned to be his partner. Maribel sarcastically suggests that Frannie take on that responsibility. Maribel comments that she has done her charity work through the family store by collecting clothes for the under-privileged. In fact, she adds, the coat the boy is wearing looks like one they gave away.

Maribel tells the girls that the boy had come into their store the day before and bought a few items, paying for them with all pennies, which had made her mother very angry. Frannie defends the boy and tells Maribel to hush up about the boy. She thinks that the boy is too white and should not be at Price. Frannie silently agrees that it is strange that the white-skinned boy is at their school. She reminds Maribel that it's the seventies and that segregation no longer exists. Samantha adds that it's okay for anyone to be anywhere.

Frannie looks closely at Maribel, who is RayRay's cousin; they both have smooth brown skin. Maribel's hair is straightened and she wears it long and turned under. Frannie's skin is dark chocolate brown and her hair is kinky and she usually wears it in braids. Samantha is delicate and lady-like. Frannie wishes she could be more like Samantha.

Out on the playground, Maribel is off playing with some other kids. Samantha is reading her Bible. Trevor, RayRay and some of the other boys approach the new boy who is sitting in the wet snow, hugging his knees. They ask him what his name is. He doesn't answer and the boys continue to harass him. They mock him, calling him deaf and pretending to communicate in sign language. RayRay glances at Frannie and ceases



his fake sign language. The boy signs back to the boys that he's not deaf. He smiles at Frannie.

Trevor tells the kid he looks like Jesus. Samantha looks closely at the boy and agrees that he does look like Jesus. But Trevor is not impressed and kicks at the boy's boot, telling him he's going to have to learn to answer a soul brother when he speaks to him. The boy seems to ignore everyone and looks off in the distance seeing things no one else does.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

Frannie has a sympathetic heart. She shows her empathy for the boy when she is disturbed that no one is sitting with him and that the teacher didn't see to it that he had a partner on his first day. She recalls how alone she felt on her first day when Samantha had been the only person who befriended her.

Samantha is a religious child who seems to be almost perfect. Maribel is a snooty child who believes she's better than everyone. Frannie resents Maribel but admires Samantha who is quiet and unassuming in her perfection. Frannie continues to connect the new boy to her brother; his mere physicality brings waves of sadness over her.

The boy seems to have no reaction to the ridicule of the other boys. Samantha thinks he looks like Jesus, who was persecuted much like the treatment to which the boy is being subjected. The boy seems to look beyond the present and sees things that the other children do not. Perhaps because of the ridicule he has received, he has a different world view than the others or he has learned to remove himself from the present so that it does not touch him.



# Chapters 3 and 4

## Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

### Chapter 3

Watching the snow out the window, Sean signs to Frannie that it would be cool if someone built a bridge across the highway and they could go to the other side. The "other side" is where the white kids are and Mama has told them that the white people don't want to be with them. This makes Frannie think of the Jesus Boy again. Frannie asks Sean why he would want to go to the other side. His response is a kind of "why not." Frannie scans the neighborhood. Maybe it isn't very appealing, she thinks. People write on the walls on their side, some of the houses don't look so great, some broken windows have been replaced with cardboard and some people let their laundry freeze on the wash lines.

But their side has everything the people need including supermarkets and schools, even a special school for kids like Sean. Their side also has a library which her mother calls a day-care center, because most of the kids are waiting to be picked up by their working parents. Frannie asks her brother if there were to be a bridge, who would cross first, someone from their side or someone from the other side? Sean says he would volunteer to go first. But Sean doesn't have any idea what would happen after he would cross over.

### Chapter 4

Trevor isn't at school the next day. RayRay tells Frannie that Trevor broke his arm jumping out of a swing. She recalls that in the summer how Trevor's arms turn the most beautiful shade of copper. Jesus Boy is staring at Frannie. Maribel notices that he's always looking at Frannie. Trevor's attempt to reach the fence by jumping out of a swing reminds her of Sean talking about a bridge to the other side. Maribel is wearing a sweatshirt with the words "Casey School," which is the private school she had attended.

Mrs. Johnson asks if everyone has introduced themselves to the new boy. He tells the class that everyone calls him Jesus and he likes the name. Mrs. Johnson doesn't question him and proceeds to call him Jesus. Just like RayRay, whose real name is Raymond, Mrs. Johnson doesn't question his nickname either. Frannie's real name is Abigail but no one calls her that. She had picked Frannie because Sean can say something that sounds something like "Frannie."

RayRay objects to the new kid being called Jesus because Jesus was a spirit and not a boy and Jesus wasn't white. He was "spirit colored." RayRay defines "spirit colored" as "no color." Jesus Boy agrees. Frannie glances down at the pock marks on each of her hands; maybe someone might think they look like nail holes. RayRay adds that the boy doesn't think he's Jesus; it's just a name. Spanish people use Jesus as a first name but



it's pronounced differently. Plus, if the boy is really Jesus, he wouldn't be at Price School, he'd be in a private school. Maribel points out that the only private school on their side of the highway is closed.

Mrs. Johnson asks Jesus Boy if he thinks he's the Son of God. Samantha points out that everyone is a child of God. Frannie looks at Jesus Boy and sees several tears falling down on his folded hands and tells Mrs. Johnson. RayRay feels badly. He didn't mean to make Jesus Boy cry. Jesus Boy denies that he is crying and shoots Frannie an annoyed look. Jesus Boy assures Mrs. Johnson that he is fine. He tells the class that he used to live on the other side of the highway but his parents thought the people would be nicer to him on this side. The boy rests his head on his desk. It's obvious he's upset and Mrs. Johnson walks him out in the hall. Somebody calls him a crybaby but RayRay, showing a glimpse of sensitivity, defends him. He says the boy isn't a crybaby; he just feels lost. RayRay admits to feeling like that himself sometimes. Usually when Mrs. Johnson leaves the room, the kids take advantage and talk and act up. But strangely, on this day, the class remains silent.

## Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

### Chapter 3

Sean dreams about both sides of the highway being one, a place where whites and blacks could live harmoniously. He doesn't understand why they can't all live together. His innocence is contrasted with Frannie's mother who has told her kids that the white people don't want to be with them. Frannie is tainted by her mother's words. She looks at her side of the highway as lacking in beauty and attractiveness. She only makes a superficial assessment of her side, not delving into the character of the community or the people. She is buying into the message that she lives in a ghetto and that she belongs there. Sean wants to reach out to the other side even though he doesn't know what will happen. Sean is a risk taker and a dreamer.

### Chapter 4

Sean isn't the only one who wants to see what the other side is like. Trevor breaks his arm trying to fly there. Trevor is an angry, troubled child and it is fitting that his attempt to break away from his side of the highway would involve violence. Maribel is wearing the name of her former private school, "Casey School," on her sweatshirt. That Maribel would rather be somewhere else is obvious by her behavior and words. The new boy wants to be called Jesus, but when RayRay points out that Jesus is just a name, it upsets the boy who is troubled with his own, true identity. Samantha tries to comfort the Jesus Boy by pointing out that everyone is a child of God. The new boy, who seems so confident, actually is in a fragile state of mind. The boy shows his first flash of anger when Frannie tells the teacher he is crying. He is threatened that his facade is being exposed.





# Chapters 5 and 6

## Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

### Chapter 5

A baby sister had died before Frannie had been born. Her mother has always told her that the baby would be with them all the time somehow, when the family needed her. Her mother first feels this way when the family attends church together. The light that filters through the stained glass warms and comforts her. The baby had been named Lila. Frannie swears she sometimes sees a little baby with black curly hair smiling at her in the corner of her eye.

### Chapter 6

As Frannie and Samantha walk home together from school, it occurs to Samantha that the new boy might be the real Jesus. After all, Jesus just showed up and miracles started happening. People even started rising up from the dead! Samantha thinks that if Jesus were to show up, this would be a perfect time because a war is raging. Frannie reminds Samantha that there's always a war. Anyway, why would Jesus chose this time to return? Samantha responds that there are also starving people. Frannie reminds Samantha about the suffering caused by the Dust Bowl, the Depression and natural disasters. Samantha's father is a preacher at OnePeople Baptist Church. Frannie's mother calls it a fire-and-brimstone church because it teaches that the people are either going to heaven or will have eternal fire.

Samantha goes to her father's church every Sunday. Frannie usually thinks of excuses not to go to church. Sean goes most Sundays with their parents. Frannie's grandmother always goes to two churches every Sunday, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Frannie's grandmother always has her Bible tucked in her purse. Sometimes she takes it out to remind Frannie that she needs to read it. Her grandmother even uses the Bible to bop Frannie on the head if she needs it, especially if she takes the Lord's name in vain. It doesn't bother Frannie that people believe in Jesus Christ even though Frannie herself isn't so sure about his existence.

Samantha thinks it's strange that the boy just showed up from nowhere. Frannie reminds her that he came from across the highway. But Samantha still finds it surreal, since no one comes from that side of the highway to live on their side. But just like the boy, Jesus wandered the earth looking for a place he would be accepted. Further proof to Samantha is the shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept," just like the new kid weeps. But Frannie insists that the boy isn't Jesus because he's white. Her father has told her that all the drawings of Jesus showing him as white had been done by white people. But the boy has insisted that he isn't white, Samantha responds, and maybe Jesus is whatever color he needs to be when he appears.



After Samantha and Frannie part, Frannie keeps thinking of the word "surreal." She doesn't know what it means and it's nagging at her. She envies Samantha's wealth of knowledge and her open mind. The difference between the two of them is that Frannie could never believe that the boy is Jesus and that Samantha could believe it.

## Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

### Chapter 5

Frannie's family has faced the tragedy of losing a baby. The mother copes with the loss by believing that the baby is in heaven, watching over her family. She instills that feeling in her family.

### Chapter 6

Samantha, a very religious girl, has hopes that the new kid might really be Jesus. She thinks of all the good things he could do. He could stop wars and starvation. He could raise the dead. Frannie is certain that the boy is not Jesus. She admits that she doesn't really even believe in Jesus but, for some reason, she does not want Samantha to think that the boy is Jesus or even that he could be Jesus. Even though she is not a churchgoer or a follower of Christ, she envies Samantha's faith and ability to believe in miracles. She believes she doesn't have the capacity to dream of the impossible. She may have the capacity but is afraid to dream so she isn't disappointed. Frannie is practical and a realist. The word surreal bothers her because it threatens her belief in only those things that she can see and touch.



# Chapters 7 and 8

## Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

### Chapter 7

When Frannie gets home, Sean signs to her that their mother is sleeping. Immediately, Frannie is worried but Sean tells her their mother is just tired. Three years ago, their mother had had a persistent pain in her stomach. She always hates to go to the doctor after losing Lila and then the miscarriage that followed a short time after her death. After her mother had finally gone to the hospital, they had learned that their mother had a baby inside her that wasn't "thriving." Their mother stayed in the hospital a few days and when she returned home she was very sad for a time. Now, Frannie is afraid that something could be wrong with her again. Sean assures her and makes her feel better. Sean is so handsome. If he wasn't deaf, the girls would be after him. Girls are attracted to him but as soon as they see him signing, they lose interest. To Frannie, signing is just another language and people should not be afraid of it.

On her way to check on her mother, Frannie stops and looks at a picture of baby Lila. If there was a Jesus, Frannie would ask him how a person can have any hope when there are bullies like Trevor and when your mother can get sick. Frannie quietly enters her mother's room. She kneels by the bed and strokes her mother's face. Her mother wakes up and immediately recognizes the worry on Frannie's face. She assures Frannie that she is just tired and that nothing is wrong with her. She's tired from taking care of all the kids. Frannie responds that there are only two kids, her and Sean. She tells Frannie to go help Sean make dinner but Frannie refuses to leave. Her mother has her get up in the bed with her.

Frannie asks her mother what the word "surreal" means. She tells Frannie that something is surreal when it is really happening but seems like a dream. Frannie tells her mother about the Jesus Boy. Her mother reminds her that she had once been the new kid and everyone thought she came from the moon. Frannie had missed the first month of school when she had chicken pox. Her mother reminds her that she would have gotten better faster if she had listened to her and not scratched her rash. Her mother falls back to sleep.

### Chapter 8

Frannie and Sean make dinner. They bicker about who cooks the best. For one thing, Frannie puts too much salt in everything. The kids play a game that they've been playing for years. Sean gives Frannie a difficult word to sign; then she gives him one to sign. Their father comes home and both kids greet him with hugs and kisses. He seems upset when he hears that his wife is lying down. Although the kids set four places for dinner, their mother does not come to dinner. After their father comes out, they have dinner. Sean tells his father he should get a different job, one where he could be home



more often. He's a long-distance truck driver. Sean asks his father what's the most beautiful place he's ever been. His father tells him that the most beautiful places he's ever seen are California and right there at home.

Their father tells them that their mother is expecting another baby. Sean says she's too old to have a baby and that they're too old to have another brother or sister. Sean says she needs rest so she can grow a brother or sister. If the baby is a girl, Frannie tells her father, she won't share her room with her. Although Frannie didn't say anything aloud, she was thinking that it was just wrong. She is supposed to be the baby of the family. That's why the last one had not made it. What if that happens again? She is the only baby who made it through alive and healthy. Sean had been born deaf. The doctors have said they could operate on him and fix his hearing but his mother thinks it sounds experimental and she isn't going to let the doctors experiment on her son. Besides, there's nothing wrong with being deaf. The kids argue over who will wash the dishes; finally Sean says he will because Frannie won't do a good job. At the sink, the two bump into each other. Frannie is happy to be standing next to her brother.

## Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

### Chapter 7

Frannie's fears center around illness and death. She had been traumatized when her mother lost a baby three years before. Just before she goes to check on her mother, she stops and looks at a picture of her dead sister. If there was a Jesus she would ask him how to have hope. It must have been on her mind at that moment, especially since Samantha said Jesus could raise the dead and that she could ask Jesus to bring her sister back to life. It seems natural that, given the opportunity, Frannie would have asked Jesus to give life to her sister. But Frannie is afraid to dream, to open her mind to miracles and the "surreal," because she doesn't want to be let down in case it's all a lie. It is safer for her to believe in only what is tangible. She is afraid to have faith in something that may disappear. Frannie's mother hints that she may be pregnant.

### Chapter 8

As foreshadowed in the last chapter, Frannie's mother is expecting another child. Both Frannie and Sean hide their fears by reacting to the news negatively. They fear their mother may die in childbirth or that the baby will not survive and their mother will be sad and depressed again. In this chapter, the close relationship between brother and sister is firmly established. They are dependent upon each other and even though they bicker they feel safer in each other's company. Their father is a very positive man; he laughs and smiles and hugs his children. However, he is worried about his wife's pregnancy. There is a look of concern when he learns that his wife is lying down. He too has fears that his wife might die or that they may lose another baby. He tries to hide those fears from his children so they don't become alarmed.



# Chapters 9 and 10

## Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

### Chapter 9

On Saturday, Frannie's mother stays in bed all morning. Sean seems to want to pick a fight with Frannie. To get back at him, she turns her back on him when she talks. It makes him angry when he can't see what she's saying. When their mother emerges from her bedroom, she looks very fatigued and has bags under her eyes. She tells the children not to fight and to figure out their problems for themselves; she's too tired. Sean goes to his room and slams the door. Frannie has to clean the bathroom. She thinks about the Jesus Boy and where he lives and what he's doing.

Frannie and her father go grocery shopping. When they take the elevator down, her father holds her hand. She knows she's too old for that but she lets him anyway. Her father asks her if she's worried. She is and tells him that she thinks he is too. This baby might die, she tells him, like the other ones. Her father tells her to be happy about the baby, even if it's just for a short time. He tells Frannie that her mother's just tired from working too hard and keeping up with her and Sean. Frannie silently wishes she could take the tiredness out of her mother. In fact, she wishes she could go around the entire world and take everyone's pains away. The pock marks in her palms start itching.

### Chapter 10

After grocery shopping, Frannie asks her father to drop her off at the rec center so she can watch her brother play basketball. One of Sean's friends who is also deaf signs and asks Sean if it is babysitting time. While Frannie watches her brother and his friends play against some hearing guys, the girls behind her are talking about how cute Sean is and how it's too bad he can't hear. Frannie is becoming increasingly annoyed by their comments and doesn't want to be around in case her brother's team doesn't beat the hearing guys. She decides to wait for Sean in the hallway.

After standing in the hallway a few moments, Jesus Boy emerges from the locker room, his long, curly hair wet from showering. He says hello and calls her by name which surprises her. When he signs a comment to her, she asks how he knows sign language. He is vague about how he knows sign language and hints that perhaps someone in his family also knows it. Jesus Boy tells Frannie that she looks just like her brother. She thinks to herself that she doesn't look a thing like her brother. Sean's beautiful and she's just regular. She asks Jesus Boy what living across the highway had been like. He says it was all right for him but difficult for his parents. One day when he and his father had been wrestling around outside, a cop stopped them and asked Jesus Boy if he knew his father. He doesn't look like his father. He tells Frannie that he has always wished he'd wake up and look like his father.



Trevor, his arm in a cast, enters the rec center with some other boys. He stops when he sees Frannie and Jesus Boy. Trevor makes a point to tell Jesus Boy that he doesn't like him because he's white. Jesus Boy responds that he's not white. The two get into a scrap and are ready to "take it outside" when a tall, slender, light-skinned black man enters the rec center. It's Jesus Boy's father. He introduces his father to Frannie and Trevor who both are unable to hide their surprise. Trevor takes off down the hall while Frannie watches Jesus Boy and his father leave. Some little girls run up and ask Frannie if Jesus Boy is her boyfriend. She shoos them away. Sean finishes his game and tells Frannie she should have stayed and watched the game. He had the winning jump shot.

## Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

### Chapter 9

Sean is picking fights with Frannie because he's really worried about his mother. She is not doing well, staying in bed most of the time. Her father tells Frannie that she should be happy with her mother's pregnancy, even if it's just for a few months. This comment indicates that he doesn't have much faith that the pregnancy will be full term. Frannie wishes she could take her mother's pain away and, in fact, everyone's pain. She has mentioned before that the pock marks in her palms could be mistaken for nail holes. The imagery is an allusion to Jesus Christ who had real nail holes in his hands and had the power to heal. Frannie is searching for help beyond herself.

### Chapter 10

Again Frannie seeks the comfort of being with her brother. She feels safe with him and she is very protective of him. She is hurt by the careless remarks of the girls who think he's cute but "too bad" he's deaf. Frannie, afraid that Sean's team of deaf kids will lose to the hearing boys, leaves the gym because she can't bear seeing her brother lose in front of the girls. Frannie is feeling a deep-rooted sense of unfairness. Sean has no hearing; can't he at least win a basketball game?! Jesus Boy knows sign language but it is unclear as to exactly how he learned it. He hints that maybe someone in his family knows it. Frannie is intrigued by the boy; yet, he annoys her because, even though he is friendly, he seems to be hiding some aspects of his life including his race. His comment that the police had asked if he knew his father indicates that they thought that he, a white boy, was being accosted by a black man.

Frannie is not comfortable with her appearance. She rejects Jesus Boy's compliment that she looks like Sean who she considers beautiful. Trevor is open about his dislike of Jesus Boy because he's white. Trevor and Frannie are at a loss when Jesus Boy's black father picks him up. It frightens Trevor and intrigues Frannie.



# Chapters 11 and 12

## Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

### Chapter 11

Frannie is dancing to a Michael Jackson song on the radio. Sean is sitting on the couch, stuffing pretzels in his mouth, making fun of her lack of rhythm. The music is so loud that they don't realize their grandmother has entered the room until she is standing right next to Frannie, telling her to turn the music down. They both hug and kiss their grandmother. Frannie tells her grandmother that there's a "white cat" in her class who everyone calls Jesus. Grandma tells Frannie not to "mess" with him just because he's white. There's a time when everyone is "different," she tells Frannie, and that she should be the one that people remember.

### Chapter 12

On Sunday, Samantha calls and invites Frannie to church. But it's snowing very hard and Frannie doesn't want to go outside. Casper the Friendly Ghost cartoons are on TV. It reminds her of Jesus Boy. As much as Casper tries to convince people he's harmless, they run away when they realize he's a ghost. Samantha asks Frannie if she's afraid of dying without being saved. Saved from what, Frannie asks her. Frannie thinks to herself that the reason Samantha's afraid of dying is that she doesn't know death. But in her family, with all the babies dying, she knows what death is. And even though it's sad for a while, you make it through.

Frannie tells Samantha that when she had been sitting with her grandmother the day before watching the snow, she had thought of her. The quiet and peacefulness of the moment felt holy, how she must feel when she reads her Bible. Finally, Frannie agrees to go to church with Samantha. Frannie's mother is happy she is going to church, although she doesn't like Samantha's church. Frannie's mother feels good when she goes to church. It gives her hope that tomorrow will be a little better than today. She reminds her mother about the poem about feathers. She thinks the feathers that are light and float everywhere are just like hope. There is hope in their house, she tells her mother. Her mother hugs her tight. Frannie sees a tear streak down her cheek. When Samantha and her father pick Frannie up, she squeezes Samantha's hand and she squeezes Frannie's back.

## Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

### Chapter 11

Jesus Boy is on Frannie's mind. She seeks advice from her grandmother who tells her that everyone feels different at times. She tells Frannie not to follow the other kids who are ridiculing the boy. If she refuses to go along with the crowd, it will show that she is



staying true to her values and will be remembered for staying above the fray. When she seeks her grandmother's advice, she knows how her grandmother will respond, indicating that she is feeling sympathy for Jesus Boy and does not want to go along with the kids who are harassing him.

## Chapter 12

Frannie at first doesn't want to go to church with Samantha. Frannie doesn't understand the Christian concept of being "saved." She connects fear of death and religion. Since there has been so much death in her family, she concludes that she doesn't need religion because she has experienced so many deaths in her family but has made it through. Frannie compares Jesus Boy to Casper the Friendly Ghost, a harmless spirit who tries to love but is rejected because he is different. Her mother is touched by Frannie's sensitivity and intelligence when she tells her that hope is everywhere.





# Chapters 13 and 14

## Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

### Chapter 13

Sean and Frannie are walking to school when two hearing girls approach Sean and flirt with him. Sean likes one of them who is a very cute girl. She asks him his name and is confused when he doesn't answer. He signs and Frannie tells the girls that he just did answer them. They figure out that he's deaf. Frannie is annoyed and smarts off to them. The girls leave. Sean seems to be upset. Frannie reminds him there are cute girls at deaf school. Sean tells Frannie that the hearing girls are like the bridge to the other side of the highway. He tells her she doesn't understand because she can easily walk in any world. He likes his world but wants to be able to be part of other ones.

### Chapter 14

At school on Monday, Trevor is his usual bully self. Jesus Boy is across the way from Frannie, Samantha and Maribel. Maribel tells the other girls that Jesus Boy had come to their store and bought a few items with all pennies again. She yells over to Jesus Boy, "A penny for your thoughts." Frannie is embarrassed. She fears that Maribel is hurting his feelings. Trevor approaches Jesus Boy and starts harassing him again. RayRay gets up enough nerve to tell Trevor to lay off. Samantha thinks it's a miracle, just like when Jesus came to earth. Frannie thinks RayRay has lost his mind.

Trevor confronts Jesus Boy and challenges him to a fight. Frannie is really frightened when Jesus Boy asks Trevor if he's angry because he has a father and Trevor doesn't. All the kids know never to mention Trevor's father. The two boys get into a debate about the color of Jesus Boy's skin. Trevor claims that Jesus Boy is white. Jesus Boy insists that he isn't. Trevor tries to punch Jesus Boy with his one good arm but misses him and stumbles over. While the other kids laugh at Trevor, Frannie and Jesus Boy help him up out of the snow. Trevor seems scared and sad and seems to be crying.

## Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

### Chapter 13

Frannie is showing her protectiveness of Sean. She is so afraid that he will be hurt by the hearing world that she tries to shield him and keep him in the deaf world. He indicates his need to be free to walk in all worlds like she does. Sean does not want his disability to restrict his potential.

### Chapter 14



Frannie shows her protective side to Jesus Boy, taking up for him when Maribel ridicules him. She is protective with Sean and Jesus Boy because she considers them both disabled, although in different ways. RayRay is becoming stronger and more independent of Trevor and feels empathy for Jesus Boy. He gets up enough nerve to tell Trevor to leave Jesus Boy alone. Frannie shows her empathy for Trevor by helping him up out of the snow. Jesus Boy shows his strength and forgiving spirit by first standing up to Trevor and then helping him up from the snow after he just tried to hit him.



# Chapters 15 and 16

## Chapters 15 and 16 Summary

### Chapter 15

When they had discuss the poem about feathers, Mrs. Johnson asks Trevor what the poet meant when she wrote the line, "Hope is the thing with feathers." He responded that maybe the poet wanted to fly.

After they help Trevor up, RayRay runs over to see how everyone is. He tells the girls and Jesus Boy that he's no longer afraid of Trevor; he's just a kid like everyone else. RayRay asks Jesus Boy if he'll stay at Price. He has no where else to go, he tells him. Trevor is standing by himself, looking weak and vulnerable. Jesus Boy tells the others that he feels like punching Trevor and if he does, everyone would cheer. But he'd become just like Trevor and he doesn't want that to happen.

### Chapter 16

Frannie and Samantha walk home together. Samantha comments that Jesus Boy is just a regular kid because he had been ready to punch Trevor, something Jesus would never do. She thinks it's strange that one day a person can believe in one thing and the next day those beliefs change. Frannie feels sorry for Samantha but doesn't know what to say.

## Chapters 15 and 16 Analysis

### Chapter 15

Trevor is a sad person inside. He wants to have hope and wants to escape to a better world. RayRay is becoming stronger because Trevor is weakened by his broken arm and because he is being exposed as weak and vulnerable. Jesus Boy controls his anger so that he is not tempted to temporarily win the adoration of others and become something that he doesn't want to be.

### Chapter 16

Samantha realizes that Jesus Christ has not come to her school. The image she had had of Jesus Boy has been destroyed because he is human like the rest of the kids. Samantha's strong beliefs are a little shattered. Frannie feels badly for her friend but doesn't know how to comfort her.



# Chapters 17 and 18

## Chapters 17 and 18 Summary

### Chapter 17

Frannie's mother is cooking chicken when she gets home from school. Frannie is elated because her mother is up and around and looking better. They discuss memories, how some are remembered vividly and others just disappear. Her mother says that it's the feelings about an incident that are most important, both the good and bad feelings. Sean comes home. He has a big smile on his face and wants to know what the doctor had to say about their mother's condition. She tells him that the baby looks fine. Frannie wishes he hadn't spoiled the moment by bringing up the doctor's appointment. The most important thing is that her mother is feeling better.

### Chapter 18

At school, Jesus Boy tells Frannie that he probably shouldn't have mentioned Trevor's father. Trevor acts like a bully because it liberates him. Trevor approaches them and sarcastically calls them Mr. and Mrs. Jesus. RayRay tells Trevor to "knock it off." Jesus Boy and Frannie aren't doing anything to hurt him. As Frannie and Jesus Boy pass Mrs. Johnson in the hall, Mrs. Johnson seems to focus on Jesus Boy.

In class, Mrs. Johnson tells the kids to write a list of things that they have in common with each other. All Frannie can think is that they all go to Price School; all wear clothes; all live on this side of the highway; all walked in the snow this winter; and, all were once little babies. She looks around the room. The boys all seem to be stumped with their lists.

## Chapters 17 and 18 Analysis

### Chapter 17

When Frannie and her mother are talking about fading memories, they are each talking about different things. Frannie is thinking about how sad her brother looked when the hearing girls walked away from him that morning. Her mother is thinking about losing her babies. Frannie is upset that Sean brings up her mother's doctor's appointment because she doesn't want to think about the pregnancy, something that she fears and somewhat resents.

### Chapter 18

Jesus Boy is showing his forgiving and understanding nature toward Trevor. Mrs. Johnson realizes that some of the children are ostracizing Jesus Boy because he is different. Through an exercise in class, she is trying to illustrate that even when

someone seems to be different, they actually have more in common with others than it first appears.



# Chapters 19 and 20

## Chapters 19 and 20 Summary

### Chapter 19

Samantha and Frannie are eating lunch. Samantha is having a difficult time understanding why Frannie and Jesus Boy helped Trevor up out of the snow. Frannie says it had just been the right thing to do; he needed help. Samantha points out that Frannie hardly ever goes to church. Samantha is still disappointed that Jesus Boy is not the real Jesus. Frannie says maybe he is the real Jesus but Samantha insists that the real Jesus wouldn't have been mean to Trevor. Frannie reminds her that, "Jesus wept." She tells her friend that maybe there's a little bit of Jesus inside of everyone. Maybe Jesus had been the hope that Samantha had about the real Jesus coming to school.

### Chapter 20

Mrs. Johnson wants the class to write a story. Everyone seems to be stumped. She tells them to write down every detail of a day or time they remember. It could be an exciting day when something wonderful happened or just a regular day when nothing extraordinary happened. But the main thing is to write from the heart. Jesus Boy says that when he was three years old, his mother and father brought him home and told him they'd be his parents. Someone whispers that he must be adopted. But Jesus Boy says he doesn't remember anything about that day. Mrs. Johnson tells him to imagine how he must have felt. Frannie is having a difficult time thinking of what to write. Mrs. Johnson tells her to write about the very first thing she remembers. Frannie writes about her brother teaching her sign language when she was two.

## Chapters 19 and 20 Analysis

### Chapter 19

Samantha is puzzled by Frannie's kind since she hardly ever goes to church. Samantha has a bias against people who do not attend church which could be attributed to her father being a preacher. She is disappointed that Jesus Boy is not the real Jesus, because Jesus Boy, unlike Jesus, has flaws. But, Frannie reminds her, "Jesus wept," meaning that He had a human and therefore imperfect side, too. Jesus is the hope - the feathers - that Samantha had been feeling about the possibility that Jesus had come to Price School.

### Chapter 20

The mystery of Jesus Boy is somewhat resolved. He is adopted. Mrs. Johnson tells the class to write from their heart and to use their imaginations in writing about their

feelings. Frannie's first memory is of her brother, once again showing the closeness of her relationship with Sean and how important he is to her.



# Chapters 21 and 22

## Chapters 21 and 22 Summary

### Chapter 21

Jesus Boy walks alongside Frannie and Samantha after school. He tells Frannie that he'll be at the rec center later and it would be nice to see her there. She signs to him that maybe he had learned sign language from the people he had been with before he had come to his parents. He signs back that he doesn't remember. She signs back that he should grab one of the pinball machines at the rec center before she gets there. Jesus Boy tells the girls he'll see them tomorrow and runs off toward his home. Samantha wants to know if Jesus Boy is taking her out on a date. Frannie denies it. She's just being nice to him because he's the new boy. You never forget how that feels. Samantha laments that it would have been nice if Jesus Boy had been the real Jesus. Frannie agrees. She would have asked Jesus if Lila is okay and if the new baby is okay. In fact, she would have asked Him if everyone was going to be okay. Samantha holds on tight to Frannie's hand as they continue to walk home.

### Chapter 22

Frannie's mother is feeling good. The baby is craving muffins just like Frannie did. Frannie looks at her mother on this sunny morning. She looks beautiful with the sunlight streaming through the window and with Sean sitting on the floor beside her in her rocker. It's moments like this that Mrs. Johnson says should be remembered forever. Frannie hopes that Samantha, Jesus Boy and she can all hang together. Frannie climbs on her mother's lap and tells her that, at least for a while, she is still the baby in the family. She feels a tiny foot kick from her mother's stomach. Each moment, she thinks, is a thing with feathers.

## Chapters 21 and 22 Analysis

### Chapter 21

It is Frannie who has the biggest heart, despite the fact that she never considers herself religious and doesn't think about Jesus that much. She has reached out to Jesus Boy because he needs a friend and she remembers how difficult it is to be the new kid in class. Jesus Boy is happy that he has made a friend in Frannie. He also understands that Samantha is having difficulty accepting him. He tells the girls that he'll see them tomorrow, understanding that it is best to not reveal to Samantha that he and Frannie are meeting later at the rec center. Samantha, although professing to be religious because she goes to church, has a much narrower view of people than does Frannie. Frannie shields Samantha from her growing friendship with Jesus Boy and their plans to meet later at the rec center by speaking in sign language. She understands that





Samantha's beliefs have been shaken and that Samantha is too fragile to understand her friendship with Jesus Boy. Frannie is there for both Jesus Boy and Samantha.

## Chapter 22

Frannie has learned to appreciate what she has and no longer resents the new baby that's coming. In fact, she has her first bonding moment with the baby. Frannie has learned to appreciate the happy moments and hold them close to her heart. She now understands that no matter what is happening, hope is always floating around them.



# Characters

## Frannie

Frannie is the narrator of *Feathers*. She is eleven years old and in the sixth grade at Price School. She lives with her mother, father and brother, Sean. She is very close to Sean, who is deaf, and very protective of him because of his disability. Frannie is an average student who struggles with some subjects like math and geography. When a new kid, Jesus Boy, is enrolled in the class, she is immediately intrigued by him. He is the only white boy in the school. Frannie is mystified as to why a white boy would move to the other side of the highway where all the blacks live and come to Price. Even though some of the other kids resent Jesus Boy's presence in their school, Frannie has a big heart and feels empathetic towards him. She remembers how it feels to be the new kid who no one knows.

Frannie's mother lost an infant before Frannie was born. She also lost two babies through miscarriages. When Frannie and Sean find out that their mother is pregnant they are very worried about her welfare and state of mind. If she loses another baby, she will be sad and depressed like she was before. Frannie resents the thought of another baby because she is used to being the baby of the family and doesn't want to give up that status.

In the end, Frannie learns that good memories should be savored and that having faith helps one through the most difficult situations. And one can have faith because hope surrounds us.

## Sean

Sean is Frannie's older brother. He is born deaf and although the doctors at the time feel they can correct the birth defect and allow him to hear, his mother does not want her son to be subjected to experimental surgery. Sean's mother teaches him and his sister, Frannie, that signing is just another language and nothing of which to be ashamed. Sean and Frannie are very close and communicate by signing throughout the story. Sean is described by his sister as beautiful; he has a smooth, even-toned lovely skin coloring and has soft expressive eyes. Frannie's real name is Abigail but she prefers to be called Frannie, because Sean can vocalize something that sounds close to it.

Sean is a happy child but he has dreams about other worlds from which he has been excluded because of his deafness. He looks out his window and fantasizes about a bridge from his window that would lead across the highway to the other side where the white people live. Frannie is protective of her older brother and tries to shield him from hurt inflicted by other kids who make cruel comments, ridiculing his disability or who recoil from him because they don't understand that he's really just a regular guy. When



some young hearing girls flirt with the good-looking teen, Frannie whisks him away from them reminding him that there are cute girls at his school. He tells her that he doesn't want his disability to restrain him from walking in all worlds. Just as Frannie feels protective of Sean, she feels the safest and most comfortable in the company of her brother.

## **Jesus Boy**

Jesus Boy is the new kid in Frannie's sixth grade class. The kids in the class, who are all African-Americans, are mystified as to why Jesus Boy, a white boy, would choose to come to their school. The boy has a mysterious aura about him, making the kids wonder about his true identity.

## **Samantha**

Samantha is Frannie's best friend. She is very religious and has hopes that the new boy, Jesus Boy, might actually be the real Jesus. Samantha is always encouraging Frannie to attend church with her.

## **Trevor**

Trevor is a bi-racial boy who attends Price School. He is the class bully and is threatened by the presence of Jesus Boy whose true racial identity is in question.

## **Maribel**

Maribel is a snooty girl in Frannie's class. She formerly attended a private school and makes sure everyone knows it. She puts down the food and the other kids at Price.

## **RayRay**

RayRay is a friend of Trevor. He has always been intimidated by Trevor, but he digs deep within himself and finds the strength to stand up against him when he treats Jesus Boy in a derisive and cruel manner.

## **Frannie's Mother**

Frannie's mother has lost an infant baby and two more babies to miscarriage. When she becomes pregnant again, Frannie is fearful that her mother will die or lose another baby and become sad and depressed again.



## Frannie's Father

Frannie's father is a long-distance truck driver and away from home quite often. He is worried about his wife's pregnancy but tries to hide his fears so that his children don't become overly alarmed.

## Lila

Lila is the seven-month-old infant sister who died before Frannie was born. Frannie's mother tells Frannie that Lila is in heaven, watching over them. Frannie often looks at a photo of Lila for strength.



## Objects/Places

### The Highway

The highway that runs alongside Frannie's apartment building separates the black neighborhood where she and her family live from the white community located across the highway.

### Frannie's Apartment

Frannie lives in an apartment with her parents and brother, Sean. They are on an upper floor of the apartment building and use an elevator to travel up and down.

### Price School

Frannie is a sixth-grader at Price School. The school is located in an African-American neighborhood and all the children are black, except the new boy who has just recently enrolled.

### Mrs. Johnson's Classroom

Mrs. Johnson is the sixth-grade teacher at Price School. In this class, Frannie and the other kids study the Emily Dickinson poem, "Hope."

### The Rec Center

Frannie is at the Rec Center when she sees the new white kid, Jesus Boy, being picked up by his father who is African-American. Later, the two friends plan to meet there to play pinball.

### Basketball Court

Frannie likes to watch her brother, Sean, play basketball at the Rec Center. She resents that some of the other girls think he is cute but aren't interested in him because he is deaf.

### Casey Private School

The snooty girl in Frannie's class, Maribel, brags about having gone to Casey Private School. Her parents own a small grocery store and she thinks she is a cut above everyone else at Price School.



## **OnePeople Baptist Church**

Samantha's father is the preacher at OnePeople Baptist Church. Samantha lectures Frannie about not going to church and encourages her to go with her to her father's church.

## **Tanks Grocery**

Maribel's family owns a small grocery store. Frannie's mother doesn't like shopping there because everything is marked too high. Maribel ridicules Jesus Boy for paying for some items with all pennies.

## **Sean's School**

Sean attends a special school for the deaf. When the hearing girls seem to reject him, Frannie reminds him that there are cute girls at his school. Sean likes the girls at his school but wants to feel like his world isn't limited to just the deaf community.



# Themes

## Being Different

Feathers focuses on the peoples' differences and the reactions of others to these differences. Everyone feels different at some time in their lives. However, some people are subjected to the scrutiny of being different long-term. Frannie, who narrates the story, has learned to be protective of her older brother, Sean, who is deaf from birth. She is tuned in to the cruel and thoughtless remarks others make about his condition and tries to shield him from their sting. Although Sean is different in that he cannot hear, he is an attractive looking boy who is great at basketball and, bottom line, is just a regular guy. When some hearing girls seem to lose interest in Sean because he is deaf, Frannie reminds him that there are cute girls at his school. He tells her that he wants to feel he's a part of the entire world and not be restricted to live and function strictly within the deaf community.

When the new kid joins Frannie's sixth-grade class, his difference is an immediate focus of the rest of the class. Price School is an all black school and the new kid, dubbed Jesus Boy, is white. He confuses the other kids when he tells Trevor, the bully who tells him that whites are not welcome at Price, that he is not white. The kids all have different reactions to him. Frannie can't imagine why a white kid would choose to come to her school. Her mother has always told her that the kids across the highway in the white community don't want to be with the black kids.

Trevor, who is bi-racial, feels threatened by Jesus Boy because his mere presence raises the subject of race, a subject of which Trevor wants no part. Samantha, a very religious little girl, is hoping that Jesus Boy is, in fact, the real Jesus. Jesus Boy is confused about his own identity because he has been adopted by black parents. Inappropriate reactions to differences are not limited to kids. When Jesus Boy's family lived on the "other side," a cop stopped him one day when he had been with his father to make sure the little white boy wasn't being accosted by a black man.

## Fear

Fear comes in many different varieties, strikes for many different reasons and generally makes everyone its victim at one time or another. In Feathers, most of the sixth grade class is afraid of Trevor, the class bully. His own fear and vulnerability emerges when a new kid comes into his class. Trevor is a bi-racial boy who doesn't know his white father. The kids all know not to bring up the subject of race around Trevor. But the mere presence of the new kid, a white boy, brings the subject to the forefront. Trevor is confused about his own identity and fears his fragile state will be exposed and his reputation compromised by the addition of the new boy.



Trevor's friend, RayRay, has always been intimidated by Trevor and has always deferred to him. But RayRay is finally able to overcome his fears when he sees that Trevor is mistreating the new boy for no reason, and because he is beginning to understand that Trevor is just a frightened confused kid under all his bluster. Samantha, a very religious girl, is hoping that the new kid dubbed Jesus Boy is, in fact, the real Jesus. Her faith is shaken when she sees that the boy is just human. She had been looking for evidence to support her faith and had been afraid to share her doubts because her father is a preacher.

Frannie is fearful about her mother's pregnancy. Her mother had lost a young baby to illness and two others in miscarriages. After the miscarriages, her mother had been understandably sad and depressed. The latest pregnancy has Frannie reliving the pain and sadness that to which her mother had been subjected in the past and she fears that her mother will be suffering again.

Frannie is protective of her brother, Sean, who is deaf since birth. She tries to shield him from cruel and ignorant remarks from others over his disability. It is Sean, however, who wants to be part of the entire world, not just that of the deaf community. He has overcome his fears and is willing to take the risk to venture into the unknown.

## Empathy

Frannie doesn't like going to church and isn't sure how she feels about Jesus Christ. She doesn't measure up in her friend Samantha's view, Samantha being the daughter of a Baptist preacher and very religious. However, Frannie practices the values that could be described as Christian. She has a sympathetic heart and an easy understanding of and empathy for other people's problems and strife. Perhaps Frannie has the wisdom usually associated with a more mature person due to the family problems she has experienced and from a life-time of protecting her older brother, Sean, who is born deaf. Each time a kid makes a thoughtless remark about Sean's disability or is fearful of him when he is signing, Frannie takes the situation on as her own. In fact, she defends him so often that her over-protectiveness serves to keep him in the deaf world while he wants to be accepted beyond those borders.

Frannie associates the new boy in school with her brother. She looks at his difference with the other kids—he is white in an all black school—as a "disability" for which he is ridiculed and ostracized. She also feels for him because she remembers how it is to be the "new kid" who has no friends. Despite the boy's mystique and the ridicule to which he is subjected from other kids, Frannie is not afraid to stand alone and befriend the new boy, because her heart tells her it is the right thing to do. Just like when Trevor, the class bully, is knocked down in the snow, it is Frannie who is the first to help him up. Samantha is surprised Frannie, the girl of no faith, turns the other cheek like Jesus and helps her enemy up off the ground.

Even when Samantha scolds Frannie for her lack of faith, Frannie knows instinctively that Samantha's belief system is more fragile than her own. She takes the lectures



without much complaint and when Samantha's faith is rocked, Frannie understands and offers her unyielding support.

# Style

## Point of View

Feathers is written in first person narrative. Frannie, an eleven-year-old African American girl is the narrator. She tells the story of fear, bias and faith from the point of view of a young girl who has known tragedy and prejudice. Her older brother, Sean, is deaf. She describes how other kids are cruel or even afraid of him because he can't hear and communicates using sign language. She is protective of him and tries to shield him from hurt but he is willing to take the risk and try to be welcome in the hearing world.

Frannie is a practical girl. Her faith is not strong because she has known tragedy. Her mother lost an older sister as an infant before Frannie was born. Her mother also lost two more babies in miscarriage. When she becomes pregnant again, Frannie fears that her mother could die or lose another baby and become depressed and sad again. Frannie's best friend, Samantha, is very religious and is open to all possibilities, even that the new white student, nicknamed "Jesus Boy," could be the real Jesus. Frannie is disturbed by Samantha's characterization of Jesus Boy's appearance at their school as "surreal." She can only understand the tangibles in life, things that she can feel, see and touch.

Frannie's growth is realized when she learns that faith will sometimes get one through even the most challenging of situations. She learns that faith is possible because "hope is the thing with feathers" and it surrounds us.

Jacqueline Woodson, author of Feathers, is an award winning writer who has won lifetime achievement awards for her writing for young adults.

## Setting

Feathers takes place in an African-American neighborhood that is located across the highway from what is described as an all-white neighborhood. The highway is a metaphor for the schism between the two communities. There are many references to the two sides of the highway. When a white boy enrolls in their school, the black students are astonished. Frannie, the narrator and main character, has always been told by her mother that the people across the highway don't want to be with the people on their side. Sean, Frannie's older brother who is deaf, fantasizes about a bridge that would reach across the highway to the other side. He'd be willing to volunteer to be the first one to cross the bridge but doesn't know what would happen once he reached the other side.

Much of the story takes place in Frannie's apartment that she shares with her mother, father and brother Sean. Frannie describes the walks in the winter snow from her



apartment to Price School where she is in the sixth grade. Mrs. Johnson is her teacher at Price and there are important episodes that take place in her class.

Frannie visits the rec center where she watches her brother, Sean, play basketball. She also meets up with the new kid in class who is dubbed Jesus Boy. As the book ends, she has plans to meet Jesus Boy back at the rec center where they will play pinball.

## Language and Meaning

The title of Jacqueline Woodson's *Feathers*, is taken from the Emily Dickinson poem, "Hope." The first stanza starts with the line, "Hope is the thing with feathers." The narrator of the story is Frannie who is a sixth-grader at Price School. Frannie and her class study the Dickinson poem. Frannie's brother, Sean, tells her the line is a metaphor for hope. Another boy in the class, Trevor, thinks that Dickinson wanted to fly away when she wrote that line. Trevor is a troubled boy who would like to fly away from his life.

The language of "signing" is dominant throughout this work. Sean is born deaf and he and Frannie communicate by signing. Their mother has always taught them that signing is just another language and nothing about which to be ashamed. Frannie is bothered when other kids ridicule Sean for signing or are scared off by his disability. The brother and sister have played a game all their lives in which they challenge each other with words that are difficult to sign. When asked to write a story about her first memory, it is when her brother teaches her how to sign "now" when she is two years old.

The story contains a good deal of symbolism. Sean fantasizes about bridges coming out of everyone's windows that lead to new worlds. Perhaps it is his way of trying to bridge the gap between himself and the hearing world. Jesus Boy, who is the new kid in an all black school, is white. He is an object of curiosity because he says he is black. Frannie feels sorry for him and associates him with her deaf brother, because they are both ostracized by other kids.

Frannie's religious friend, Samantha, refers to the white boy enrolling in their school as "surreal." When Frannie learns the definition of the world, it disturbs her. Since she is skeptical and has little faith, she only feels comfortable with tangibles that she can see and touch.

## Structure

*Feathers*, by Jacqueline Woodson, is separated into four main parts. Part One contains four chapters and covers the new kid who enters the sixth grade class of the narrator of the story, Frannie. The new kid is dubbed Jesus Boy. His true identity is mysterious and he evokes a variety of reactions from the kids. Part Two contains Chapter Five, which tells the reader about Frannie's sister who died as a baby before Frannie was born; and, Chapter Six, which features Frannie's friend, Samantha, who begins to think that Jesus Boy could be the real Jesus.

Part Three contains Chapters Seven through Sixteen. In this section, the family's worry over the newest pregnancy of Frannie's mother is showcased as well as Frannie's budding friendship with the mysterious new kid, Jesus Boy, and the struggles of her classmates to understand him. The fourth section contains Chapters Seventeen through Twenty-two. In these chapters, Frannie's mother's health is greatly improved and allowing the family to be less worried. This section describes how Frannie and her classmates begin to understand what memories are important, how differences in people should be embraced and that hope is always around.

Before the first section, the first stanza of the Emily Dickinson poem, "Hope," from which the title of Woodson's book is taken, is quoted.



## Quotes

"Mamma said one day the Tanks were gonna go put on so many airs they'd just up and float away." (Chapter 2, page 9)

"When I was a baby, Mama said old people would look at me and say, 'Oh Lord, this child's got an old spirit. She's been here before.'" (Chapter 2, page 13)

"... Imagine if there was a bridge from every single window in the world to some whole new place. That would be crazy, wouldn't it? It would mean we could all just step out of our worlds into these whole new ones." (Chapter 3, page 17)

"Sean smiled and shook his head. It wasn't a big smile. Just more like a big-brother smile. He's so beautiful—all tall and dark with pretty eyes and a nice big-brother smile. If he wasn't deaf, he'd have a million girlfriends. Hearing girls were always looking at him—but most times, when they saw his hands flying through the air, they stopped looking, which was stupid." (Chapter 8, page 42)

"My grandmother always says that good things come in ones and two and threes and bad things come however they can get there." (Chapter 9, page 60)

"The feeling. It felt holy. All peaceful and quiet. All promising. It made me think that must be what you feel when you stand in the school yard reading your Bible or sit in your daddy's church listening to him promise the whole congregation... something... something better coming along." (Chapter 12, page 77)

"I guess the writer was thinking about how light feathers are and they can just float everywhere. And I guess that's how hope is too—all light and everywhere like that." (Chapter 12, page 80)

"The hearing girls are bridges—they're the other worlds. They're the worlds I can't just walk across and into, you know. I mean, the deaf girls, they're my world—we don't even have to talk and we know each other. But I don't just want my world—I want everybody else's world too." (Chapter 13, page 83)

"It frees him. All that stuff that makes him mad and mean and ugly leaves him when he does stuff to other people." (Chapter 18, page 103)

"And I would have asked [Jesus] about the one [baby] that's coming—about all the ones



that are coming all over the world... I would have asked Him if we were all gonna be all right." (Chapter 21, page 115)

"Mrs. Johnson says each day holds its own memory—its own moments that we can write about later. She says we should always look for the moments and some of them might be perfect, filled with light and hope and laughter. Moments that stay with us forever and ever. Amen." (Chapter 22, page 116)

"Each moment, I am thinking, is a thing with feathers." (Chapter 22, page 118)



## Topics for Discussion

Why was Trevor a bully? Why did he resent the new kid, Jesus Boy? About what was Trevor troubled?

What race was Jesus Boy? Why were the kids surprised that Jesus Boy was at their school? What was the true identity of Jesus Boy and who were his parents?

Why was Frannie protective of Sean? What connection did Frannie make between her brother, Sean, and Jesus Boy? In what ways did Frannie show she had a sympathetic heart?

Why did the word "surreal" bother Frannie? What were Frannie's feelings about church? How did she display her Christian beliefs and values even though she didn't attend church regularly?

Who did Samantha think Jesus Boy was? What about Jesus Boy disappointed her? What bias and judgmental attitude did Samantha display toward Frannie? What did Frannie understand about Samantha and how did she reach out to her?

Why were Sean and Frannie upset about their mother's pregnancy? How did their father react to the pregnancy? Why did Frannie have some resentment about her mother having another baby?

How was Mrs. Johnson a good teacher? How did she show her fairness to the children? How did Mrs. Johnson try to help the kids accept Jesus Boy? What meaning did the "feathers" have in the poem the children studied?