

Francie Study Guide

Francie by Karen English

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Plot Summary

Karen English's *Francie* is a delightful story of a young black girl living in the deep south region of Noble, Alabama with her mother, Lil, and her brother Prez. Francie's father works in Chicago and has promised to send for them, but waiting for the move out of Noble seems to be endless, and there is some doubt that he will ever come through with his promises of a better life. Francie's Auntie Lydia lives nearby in their wooded neighborhood of Three Notch, with her son Perry and her new baby, Janie. Lydia's husband, Uncle June, also works away from home, but is close by in Benson, Alabama. The two sisters help one another get by. Their two little boys are fast friends, cousins and playmates whose mischief saves the day later in the story.

Francie incurs the wrath of a pair of sisters at school, who resent her intelligence and her refusal to cheat for them on a test. A new student, Jesse Pruitt, saves her from their assault after school, sealing a new friendship. Francie tries to teach the less-fortunate Jesse to read, but Jesse is forced to leave school and eventually, must fend for himself.

Francie graduates from grammar school early in the story. She works most days with her mother at Miss Beach's boarding house and in the homes of wealthy white women. The two do heavy cleaning, laundry, cooking and serving at social functions. On her occasional day off, Francie likes to sit up on her favorite hill under a chestnut tree, reading, eating a Scooter Pie and watching the local train go by. Here she dreams of her new life in Chicago.

Francie has several unfortunate encounters with those who consider themselves superior to her. She is unfairly accused of stealing. When she tries to defend herself, she is slapped in the face and humiliated by a local white girl who is, herself, a thief. Francie experiences many instances of disrespect and condescension from local white people, which is the norm in her culture. But with her feisty spirit and strong sense of fairness, Francie finds ways to right some of the injustices in her life.

When her friend, Jesse Pruitt, is unfairly accused of attempted murder, Francie's determination to help him puts her family and her entire neighborhood in jeopardy. Jesse manages to escape to California and, eventually, Francie's mother finds a way to take herself and her children out of Noble to rejoin her husband in Chicago. This is a hopeful story of hard work, determination and success for a family fighting the odds of poverty and racism.



Treasure and Our Side of Town, Their Side of Town

Treasure and Our Side of Town, Their Side of Town Summary

Young Francie, who washes clothing with her mother at Miss Beach's Boarding House for Colored, has been scratched four times by Miss Beach's cat named Treasure. Gathering linens from the guests' rooms, she plays with their belongings, but becomes startled by Treasure's appearance from under the bed. Treasure scratches her again, and she shoves him into a wardrobe, closes the door and goes on about her work. Francie's father is working in Chicago as a train porter, and will send for her and the family soon. Miss Beach expresses her doubts that it will ever happen. Francie sticks her tongue out at her.

When Francie's mother learns what Francie did to the cat, she whips Francie for putting her job in jeopardy. In pain, Francie withholds a letter from her father and wonders why she sometimes does hateful things.

Francie's mother has left without her and Prez, her brother, tells her she is expected to help at Mrs. Montgomery's by noon. Francie's Aunt Lydia is expecting a baby, with whom Francie hopes to play some day, since her brother Prez has their cousin Perry to play with. As she walks to work, Miss Mabel asks a favor of her, but Francie knows she might not get paid back if she buys her some snuff. She reads the letter from her father, which holds promises of piano lessons, baseball and school.

Mrs. Montgomery is a white woman whose niece is a girl named Clarissa. Francie begins washing dishes and ironing linens. Clarissa comes into the kitchen and notices Francie's injured legs, but says nothing.

Treasure and Our Side of Town, Their Side of Town Analysis

In these two chapters, we are already seeing the symptoms of cultural differences in Francie's world. Her father is forced to work away from home, and her mother has more than one job on which she depends for survival. Even Miss Beach is light-skinned and well-to-do, and Mrs. Montgomery is white.

There is a definite sense of poverty; as Francie examines the guests' belongings, she is fascinated, smelling and touching them. Francie is severely punished for locking up the cat, even though the cat had been scratching her, because her mother's job is more important than anything. Miss Beach suggests that Francie's mother may be waiting in



vain for a husband who may not return. All of these things add to a sense of angst in Francie's life. She looks like her father; she is depending upon him.

Francie's vague unhappiness over her situation manifests in her passive aggressive behaviors - locking up the cat and withholding the letter that her father has written — and she, herself, wonders why she does these things.

For a child, Francie has lots of chores, including feeding chickens, sweeping the yard and helping her mother as a servant for Mrs. Montgomery. Miss Mabel's request for a favor from Francie illustrates that there is poverty in other homes, as well, and Miss Mabel is a "moocher." In this chapter, Francie admits how tired she is of work and longs for the time when all she has to do is go to school, as her father promises in his letter. We know that conveniences like indoor plumbing and an ironing board are not things that are in Francie's home, so she clearly sees what it is like to live a better life, but it is not an option for her.



School and Miss Lafayette

School and Miss Lafayette Summary

School:

Francie only puts her shoes on when she gets to school in order to keep them clean. Augustine and Mae Butler come from a large family of sharecroppers and are not nice to Francie. Francie knows her math; Augustine is slow and resents Francie's skills since Francie is a year younger. The Butler children, who do not have lunch to bring to school, are angry because Francie will not let them cheat on a math test. In an effort to avoid being ambushed by the Butlers, Francie takes a roundabout way home and ends up in town, where she sees Clarissa and her friend, Holly Grace. Francie observes Holly Grace, whose mother constantly brags about her, stealing a tube of lipstick. Francie unexpectedly encounters her mother helping Mrs. Montgomery with groceries, and knows that she is, again, in trouble. She has kept Augustine's written threat in her pocket, and with this evidence, her mother decides not to punish her for being in town.

Francie hurries to school to avoid the Butler girls. A new boy named Jesse Pruitt has come to the school. He has never learned to read, and Francie is asked by Miss Lattimore to help him. Francie is elated that she is actually going to teach someone to read. On the way home, Augustine and Helen Butler step out in front of Francie and push her down. Jesse Pruitt appears and tells the two big girls to go home.

Francie continues to teach Jesse, who knows very little but is a bright boy. Francie learns that he has been walking six or seven miles to school every day and is going to school because he promised his late mother. Francie invites him home for dinner, but he has a lot of work at home and does not want his father to stop him from going to school.

Miss Lafayette:

Miss Lattimore, the school principal, has been substituting for Francie's real teacher, Miss Lafayette, who has now returned to her home at Miss Beach's where Francie and her mother do laundry. Miss Lafayette is in bed and frail, but has brought Francie a book, *The Dream Keeper* by Langston Hughes. Miss Lafayette returns to school on Monday and meets Jesse for the first time and realizes he has no lunch. Francie tries again to invite him to dinner, but he gets upset and goes home. In April, Jesse's father arrives at school and roughly takes him away. Jesse does not return to school, which is distressing for Francie. Augustine taunts her about Jesse's absence.

School and Miss Lafayette Analysis

School:



Young Francie is an intelligent young girl. Although she accepts her station in life, she continues to hope for something better. Keeping her shoes clean tells the reader that she is not a careless person; her refusal to cheat reveals that she has been taught the values of honesty and integrity. Francie knows that she holds a different place in society than white girls, and is astonished to see that white girls, who are supposedly better than she, would lower themselves to steal from a store.

In today's society, the Butler girls' bullying behavior would be addressed as such. Francie's respect for learning is illustrated in her enthusiasm for teaching Jesse to read. The Butler girls, who may not be as bright as Francie, resent her for her values and her intelligence and the fact that she is younger, but ahead in school. They taunt her with the idea that her father might never return and that her dreams of moving to Chicago won't come true.

Miss Layfayette:

Francie and Miss Lafayette share a mutual special affection. Miss Lafayette likes Francie's integrity and her eagerness to learn. Jesse's failure to return to school reflects a level of poverty in his family, which cannot sustain itself without him.



Diller's Drugs and Commencement

Diller's Drugs and Commencement Summary

Diller's Drugs:

A new letter arrives from Francie's father, promising a better life in the future, including piano lessons for Francie. Her daddy has been gone one year. Francie likes to sit under a pecan tree to watch the train go by.

After doing laundry at Miss Beach's, Francie takes her Nancy Drew book and goes to Green's to buy a Scooter Pie. She likes to read, eat her Scooter Pie and watch the local train go by, which will someday take her to Chicago. White children throw spitwads of paper at her back. Since Green's is out of Scooter Pies, Francie goes to Diller's Drugs. When she tries to pay the nickel for her treat, Mr. Diller accuses her of stealing the Nancy Drew book under her arm. Other children in the store try to incriminate her, saying she came in empty handed; Mr. Diller counts only nine of the new ten books he ordered, since Holly has taken one away. Francie suggests that Holly has taken the missing book and says that she saw Holly stealing lipstick; Holly lunges at her and slaps her, calling her a pickaninny. Francie is asked to leave, and she is forced to go without her book. "I was innocent, but the world had decided to make me guilty." She sees the train and waves to it, resolved to get out of Alabama some day.

Commencement:

Miss Lafayette speaks to the students about the possibilities in life. Augustine Butler learns she will not "graduate" from grammar school. Francie feels real sympathy for her. Prez tells Francie he saw Jesse working at the early Farm. Francie takes buckets of lunch to Prez and Perry, who are also working on the Early farm, but Jesse cannot take time to talk to her because the boss is "pretending" Jesse could be doing more, given his size.

Commencement day arrives, and Francie is in her new dress and her mother's earrings, her family in the audience. Perry, whose mother is pregnant, and Prez will go to their Uncle June's for a visit. Francie gets an award for academic achievement, and her mother's smile makes Francie very happy.

Diller's Drugs and Commencement Analysis

Diller's Drugs:

Another instance of totally unfair treatment is explored in the Diller's Drugs chapter. Since the author writes in first person, the reader is able to see this scene from Francie's point of view, and it is not pleasant. The white children all seem to be bigoted and dishonest, as do the white adults. There is no question that Francie would be the



one lying, and not Holly. Her revelation of seeing Holly steal lipstick goes unaddressed entirely and Francie is found guilty, simply because she is black. She is forced to step aside or go around white people, and is not treated well at all.

Commencement:

Francie is eager to see Jesse, but Jesse's plight seems the worst of all. He is overworked, not allowed an education, underfed and generally miserable. Francie's award for academic achievement is thrilling for her, but she does not see herself moving on in school.



Sunday at the Montgomerys and Janie Arrives

Sunday at the Montgomerys and Janie Arrives Summary

Sunday at the Montgomerys:

Francie must go to Clarissa Montgomery's to bake tea cakes and make icing. Jesse Pruitt happens to be there fixing a step on the gazebo. The two have a brief conversation. As Francie works, Clarissa comes into the kitchen and brings her the book she had been accused of stealing. Francie shows Clarissa how to sift flour, and Clarissa brings Aesop's Fables for Francie to give to Jesse.

Francie tells her mom about the nice gesture from Clarissa, but her mother tells her not to trust them, that they can turn on you depending upon their mood, and Francie knows this is true because she has seen it. Francie learns that Jesse's father has left home, and his siblings are in other homes, as well. Since Jesse left before Francie could give him his new book, she thinks of how she would like to continue to teach him, and thinks Miss Lafayette might help.

Janie Arrives:

Perry bangs on the door to get Francie's mom because his mother is in labor. Mama lets Francie go, too, and she watches how her mother takes charge and comforts her sister, Francie's aunt Lydia. Francie hears something out by the water pump. Granny arrives to help, and Francie is dismissed. She goes home and back to sleep. The baby's birth means a free day, and Francie's mother gives her money for coffee and a Scooter Pie. Granny comes by for a cup of tea, but is too tired to tell Francie stories of witches and haunts. She does mention Janie's good fortune to be born between two lights - daybreak and sunrise. Francie's mother attributes Granny's superstitions to ignorance and slavery days.

Sunday at the Montgomerys and Janie Arrives Analysis

Sunday at the Montgomerys:

We learn that Francie is polished in domestic chores, like baking cakes, thanks to her mother. The contrast between her capable ways and Clarissa's inexperience are marked, even though the Montgomerys are well-to-do and hold monthly teas for society women. Although Clarissa is nice to Francie, Francie wonders why Clarissa did not



speak up for her during the incident at Diller's Drugs, which reinforces for her that white people cannot be trusted.

Francie listens to the radio while she works and hears an ad about "danger" zones of the complexion. This concern is in stark contrast to the ones that face her family, and people like Jesse Pruitt and the Montgomerys.

Francie's desire to help Jesse read may not be due only to her generous nature, but the fact that she is attracted to him, especially after he saved her from the Butler girls.

Janie Arrives:

A birth in the family means a holiday from working for white people for Francie and her mother. Francie is also allowed to sleep until she wakes up naturally, something unusual for her.

Granny is an interesting character, who comes to the birth with everything she needs on her person. Noted again in this chapter is the fact that Francie is responsible for all of the family's writing and reading.



Scooter Pie...at Last!, Clarissa's Room and Daddy's Coming

Scooter Pie...at Last!, Clarissa's Room and Daddy's Coming Summary

Scooter Pie...at Last!

Francie buys the coffee and Scooter Pies, leaving the money on Green's counter while the men are angrily talking in back of the store. She hurries to her spot under the tree and opens her pie and book. She hears a banjo and sees a group of hobos, black and white, at the foot of the hill by the river. A young woman dressed like a man approaches Francie. Her name is Alberta; Francie gives her the rest of her Scooter Pie. Alberta has left the group of men to go to the bathroom, and admits she does not know if they are aware she is not a man. Alberta is headed for New Orleans, then to California.

Francie waves to the train as it passes and falls to sleep on the grass, dreaming that someone is watching her. She wakes up, eager to see her new baby cousin.

Clarissa's Room:

At work at the Montgomery home, Francie sneaks up to Clarissa's room with her to see her books. Clarissa shares with Francie that she is writing a book, larger and better than War and Peace. Her character will be named Natasha. Mrs. Montgomery assigns Francie's mother extra, unexpected chores. Francie realizes Clarissa has given her a copy of War and Peace.

Daddy's Coming:

A letter arrives from Daddy, saying he will be home on Sunday. Lydia quickly decides to go see her sister, excited about the news. Francie decides to buy her father a new pipe. Francie's auntie is now ill, and has visitors. Granny has come with a red feather to put around the baby's neck, which Mama confiscates. A woman named Mabel examines the baby and declares that she will be brown and have kinky hair. Francie overhears the women discussing a boy who is in trouble, with a reward for finding him. Francie spends the day washing and hanging out the baby's diapers. She catches a glimpse, again, of someone in the woods.

Scooter Pie...at Last!, Clarissa's Room and Daddy's Coming Analysis

Scooter Pie...at Last!



The men in the back of the store are preoccupied with whatever it is they are discussing - a foreshadowing of something to come. This is a good day for Francie, who gets to watch the train, get her pie, read her book and meet a new friend. The train always helps her think about the possibilities of life.

Clarissa's Room:

An uneventful visit to Clarissa's room yields a new book and a glimpse of a world that Francie will never know. Clarissa's room has matching fabrics and is bright and nicely decorated - a fantasy for Francie. Her new book is a nice gift, but the reader remembers what Francie's mother says about not trusting white folks.

Daddy's Coming:

With her father expected in four days, Francie is concerned about her auntie, but preoccupied with thoughts of buying her father's pipe. We don't know why Auntie and Mama exchange concerned looks over Mabel's assertion that the baby will be brown.

The discussion about the wanted boy foreshadows trouble, as the reader remembers Francie sensing someone in the woods earlier, seeing a flash of something now and having dreams of someone watching her.



Run, Jesse, Run and Serving on a Budget

Run, Jesse, Run and Serving on a Budget Summary

Run, Jesse, Run:

Francie goes to Green's to buy the pipe for her father. Mr. Green waits on a white woman first, who pushes Francie aside. White farmers huddle at Green's, talking. Francie spots Jesse Pruitt's photo on a "wanted" poster that accuses him of attempted murder, warning that he is armed and dangerous. When Francie leaves, Vell, Mr. Green's son, follows her and tells her he knows Jesse, and has seen him near Francie's home. Vell assures Francie he is not going to tell anyone. Francie asks Prez and Perry when they last saw Jesse. She is too upset to sleep, and talks to her mother about her fears of his being caught. Mama tells her Jesse is probably long gone, and they need to focus on her father's homecoming.

Serving on a Budget:

Francie and her mother are expected to serve tea at the Grace home, and Francie dreads seeing Holly there. Holly comes into the kitchen and threatens Francie about spreading lies about her. Later, when Francie serves Holly and her friends iced tea, Holly makes her go back to the kitchen more than once on the premise that her tea is not sweet enough. Francie finally brings it back without having added more sugar, and Holly approves. Mrs. Grace instructs Francie that no one is to get more than two shrimp wheels. Francie overhears the white women discussing Jesse Pruitt.

When Francie takes a tray of shrimp wheels down to the outdoor table where Holly and her friends are playing cards, she mentions that they are to have only two each, which embarrasses Holly. Francie goes on to say that Holly's daddy made a bad investment and Mrs. Grace is serving on a budget. The girls are suddenly reluctant to eat their shrimp; Holly calls Francie a simpleton. Holly tells her to take the shrimp away, and tries to put this behind her, but Francie knows she will remember it, just like Francie remembers the slap in the face that Holly gave her in the store.

Run, Jesse, Run and Serving on a Budget Analysis

Run, Jesse, Run:

Francie is truly frightened for Jesse because of the rumbling and unrest in the town and because she knows that the white men are capable of killing him. Vell, who has been referred to earlier as "retarded," also has the perception of Jesse's innocence. This is upsetting, particularly in light of the upcoming arrival of her father, which promises to be a happy day for her.



It is interesting that Mrs. Early scolds Francie in the drugstore for not answering Mr. Green quickly enough. All white people seem to be Francie's boss.

Serving on a Budget:

Francie's humiliation drives her to do things she knows she shouldn't. Having to serve these more fortunate white girls and endure the negativity they show her takes a strong person. Francie is every bit as intelligent as they are, but happens to have black skin. She and her mother automatically agree and defer to their bosses because of their extreme poverty and because that is what is expected of them. Although they are not slaves, they are still treated as inferior beings and they know not to wander too far from their place. Francie, knowing that the Grace family's financial problems might present a weak spot in their facade, chooses this issue to humiliate and embarrass Holly Grace. She plans it carefully so that it will sting Holly, just like the public face-slapping stung Francie. She plans to act stupid, because that is what they expect of her.



Waiting on Daddy and

Waiting on Daddy and Summary

Waiting on Daddy:

The family is bathed and shampooed, and Mama is baking a cake. Francie feels Jesse is in their woods and she wants to get some food and money to him.

Francie's mother uses a hot iron on her hair to straighten it. The next day Mama and Francie wait patiently; Mama occasionally hears noises outside and is disturbed. Francie goes to pick wildflowers and get the watermelon from the creek, when Perry calls out to Prez to join him fishing. The watermelon is missing and Francie sees signs of a camp fire. She tells Prez and Perry that she will take care of him until he can get to the Southern Pacific and go to California.

By early afternoon, Daddy has still not arrived and Mama has gone to see Auntie. When Francie returns to the empty house, she puts some food in a sack and tells Prez to hide it so they can take it into the woods as soon as they can.

"I Gotta Help Him:"

By dinner time, Daddy is still not there and the three eat dinner quietly. The next day when Francie goes to Auntie's, she hears Mabel saying that she had been frightened by seeing Jesse in the woods. Francie gets the food she has gathered and puts it in the woods where Jesse will see it.

Francie and her mother go to Miss Beach's to work. Francie sneaks up to Miss Lafayette's room and tells her that her Daddy did not show up. Miss Lafayette does not believe that Jesse hurt Mr. Bellamy, but warns Francie that what she is doing is dangerous, and that her family could be in peril if people find out that they are helping Jesse. Tearful, Francie says she has to help him. Francie touches Miss Beach's piano and wonders if she can count on her father.

Waiting on Daddy and Analysis

Waiting on Daddy:

Francie, her mother and brother are bitterly disappointed that their Daddy has not shown up, especially given the doubtful comments people have made. Mama has prepared a lot of food and they have all taken special pains to make things nice for his homecoming. A typical scenario in this culture at this time has the father leaving the family and not returning, and Francie and her mother do not want to fit into this stereotype, and do not want to be stuck having to work so hard just to survive. They also want to trust Francie's dad.

"I Gotta Help Him:"

Miss Lafayette, a reliable character in the story, does not believe Jesse is guilty either, but she sensibly warns Francie about the trouble that could ensue.



Signs in the Woods and Sheriff Barnes

Signs in the Woods and Sheriff Barnes Summary

Signs in the Woods:

Francie feels compelled to check the jars she has left, but Prez has already seen them, and they are empty. Prez says Mr. Bellamy, who was allegedly hurt by Jesse, does not look like anything has happened to him. Francie and Prez take more jars of food from the pantry and return to the woods to collect the empty ones.

Francie hears her mother muttering as she moves the jars around, obviously wondering why there are not as many as she thought. When confronted, Francie admits that she has been putting them out for Jesse, and her mother orders her to get the jars out of the woods before morning, afraid that they will get in trouble. Rain is coming and she thinks of Jesse. Although Francie understands the dangers, she does not intend to stop putting out food.

Sheriff Barnes:

Mama wakes Francie with a list of chores for the day, the most important being to retrieve the jars from the woods. Francie wakes Prez and assigns him the job of milking auntie's cow. As Prez and Perry busily collect bugs in a jar, the Sheriff's car approaches. The sheriff and his deputy ask the children if they have seen Jesse, showing them the wanted poster. Being perfectly truthful, Francie says they have not seen him, and that he had been in her class for a while. They ask Auntie, as well, who has also not seen Jesse. The two officers proceed to Francie's empty house and go inside, helping themselves to Daddy's cake. They proceed up Three Notch and, after talking to Miss Mabel, drive on toward the woods. The officers do not appear to have found Mama's personally labeled jars that say, "Lil's Kitchen," and they finally leave, driving toward town. Francie hurries home.

Signs in the Woods and Sheriff Barnes Analysis

Signs in the Woods:

Francie is somewhat excited and very determined to help her friend, but she does so in spite of the potential danger to herself and her family. Again, she finds ways to break the rules, hopefully without being caught. Her mother obviously respects Francie's desire to help the boy and does not punish her for stealing food from the pantry, but she is clearly worried. In the meantime, Auntie is not feeling well again, and all of her chores are falling to the children and Mama. Perry and Prez are playful little boys who find ways to escape chores with games and fishing, but Francie is burdened with work and stress, as is her mother.

Sheriff Barnes:

The sheriff and his deputy do not appear to speak disrespectfully to the children; however, they show their disrespect by entering Francie's empty house and eating Mama's cake. Their attitude toward black people is clearly displayed in this one act of rudeness. Deputy Withers hurts the little boys in fun as he walks by them, and one of them has carelessly spit on the property. The fact that the entire neighborhood could suffer from Francie's protection of Jesse indicates the cruelty of white authority figures toward the black community.



The Bascombs

The Bascombs Summary

Sneaking through the woods, Francie hears the voices of white men. She sees the Bascomb brothers, Billy and Jack, being abusive to Prez and Perry. They are threatening to take the little boys to jail, and Perry's arm has been hurt, his shirt torn. Francie runs quickly to Auntie's house. When Auntie learns what has happened, she is devastated and frightened. Mama arrives and is also very upset, angry at Francie and worried about the little boys. Suddenly Mama realizes that they need to get home in case the little boys are there. The house is empty; Mama throws away the remainder of the cake that had been eaten by the Sheriff. Auntie and Francie are crying.

They hear the sounds of cars, men and Mr. Early's yelping dogs, which he claims are able to smell a "nigra." The men and dogs are combing the woods. Unexpectedly, Clarissa Montgomery shows up in her uncle's car, the little boys, Prez and Perry hiding in the back seat. She had seen them hiding in the gazebo in her yard and waited until everyone was asleep to get them. Clarissa gets a good look at Francie's home.

The boys relate that they had retrieved the jars in the woods and buried them so that there would be no evidence against the family. When the Bascombs found them, they thought they looked suspicious and tried to take them to jail. The boys escaped when they stopped at the filling station. The little boys argue between them about who ran where, and they think the Bascombs let them get away.

Mama, concerned for Clarissa's well-being, tells her to get on home, and thanks her. As the search party leaves the woods, someone throws a beer bottle against their house. After all is quiet, Auntie, Perry and Janie go home. Mama does not think they found Jesse.

The Bascombs Analysis

This chapter does not end as badly as it might have, but Francie's actions have put everyone in jeopardy, even the white girl, Clarissa. The Bascombs are mean to the little boys, but apparently have not really harmed them, since Perry's injuries are from a fall, and the Bascombs had been heard laughing as the little boys ran away. The little boys, although they were not doing what they were told, have actually saved the day for Francie and her family by burying the jars. Even more interesting is that Clarissa, apparently, can be trusted after all. She is Mrs. Montgomery's niece; we do not know where her parents are, but she appears to be lonely. Her reluctance to leave Francie's house reveals a need for family that she does not have.

Mr. Early is a typical southern bigot whose hatred for blacks is not well concealed. Obviously, his farm hand had not actually been hurt by Jesse Pruitt, but they are using some story as an excuse to execute a black boy.



Jesse

Jesse Summary

Mam has to work unexpectedly for the Montgomerys, and Francie is doing work for Auntie with strict orders not to let Prez from her sight. A storm is coming and Francie realizes she has not seen her dog, Juniper, for days.

Jesse appears, bedraggled, dirty, hungry and thirsty. Francie gives him cornbread and her father's old shoes. He explains that he went to Bellamy to get his due wages. Bellamy fired him and when he refused to pay him what he was owed, Jesse decided to take a chicken. Bellamy fell running after Jesse and said Jesse assaulted him, but Jesse had not touched him.

The Sheriff drives up to the house and Jesse hides. Prez tells the Sheriff he and Perry were looking for kindling for Auntie yesterday, and ended up playing by the creek. While the Sheriff is getting a drink of water, Francie spies Jesse's feet; when the Sheriff asks her what is wrong she says she is concerned about her dog getting torn up by one of the bloodhounds last night. After the Sheriff is gone, Jesse says he is going to New Orleans to get a freight to California. Francie makes him hide in the shed, giving him food, water, a blanket and the book Clarissa gave her for him. Mama is given a ride home by Clarissa, and Francie, who has no time to sneak food out to Jesse, tells Prez to do it in the morning.

Francie and her mother go to work at Miss Rivers', a white school teacher. Francie overhears the Sheriff saying he is going to check some sheds and chicken coops. Francie runs, gets Mr. Grandy to give her a ride home, frightened that Jesse may be found. She thinks about Alberta's disguise. When she gets home, Francie is not able to find him anywhere, and quickly gets back to Miss Rivers' where Mama promises her a whipping in the near future. As Francie and her mother walk home, she explains why she left so abruptly, about Jesse hiding in the shed and Jesse's story about Mr. Bellamy.

On their walk, Francie brings up the subject of her father; Mama says they need to be patient. Mama wishes she could have a Sunday off to go to church like the white women. When they are home they realize there is a letter in the mailbox.

Jesse Analysis

As expected, Jesse is not guilty of attacking Mr. Bellamy, who had been cheating him of wages. But he is a survivor and feels confident about evading his would-be captors.

Francie is fairly adept at lying to white people, but always tells her mother the truth, even when she knows she will be in trouble. Apparently Francie has convinced her mother that she will go to any lengths to protect her friend, Jesse. The sheriff again



shows disrespect to the family by dropping his cigarette butt in Francie's mother's flowerbed.

Her mother seems resigned in this chapter - tired of working on Sundays and wishing she could have the rose garden she has always wanted. She does not whip Francie, but instead rests on her porch when they get home. She has been working seven days a week, taking care of her ill sister, supervising and caring for two children, one of whom gave her a fright, and dealing with her daughter's assistance to a wanted person.



Word From Daddy and Crawdads

Word From Daddy and Crawdads Summary

Word From Daddy:

Daddy's letter apologizes and says he is now thinking he can bring them to Chicago next spring. All three of them cry with disappointment, and Francie thinks maybe he actually does have another family. She can no longer picture his face. Mama has fixed a nice breakfast for them, but Francie feels angry, even at Jesse, for not saying thanks or goodbye.

At Miss Beach's house, Francie sees a photo on Miss Lafayette's dresser of a man. She decides she will marry a man of intelligence and means, not a railroad man. Treasure, the hated cat, plops on a pile of clean linens and refuses to get off, so Francie yanks the sheet and the cat flies across the kitchen. Angry, Miss Beach accuses Francie of stealing a half can of smoked salmon, which Francie blames on the cat. Francie accidentally slips that they won't be moving to Chicago; Lil tells Miss Beach the move is just delayed, but chastises Francie because now it will be all over town that they aren't moving. When Miss Beach asks Lil if she can spend two weeks working in the attic, Mama, who never refuses work, says she cannot be sure until about September.

Crawdads:

Francie has a rough time doing lots of work, thinking about Jesse and contemplating another whole year of being in Noble. Mama gives her the day off on Friday to go to her hill. She speaks with Alberta, who has returned from New Orleans for some reason. Alberta says she has not seen Jesse and, like him, leaves without saying goodbye.

Mama sends Francie alone to Miss Rivers' for cleaning. The Rivers' maid, Burnette, questions Francie about moving to Chicago. Francie wonders what it would be like to wake up every day without work to do, and only pleasantness in the day. Burnette instructs her to work on the parlor windows. Francie has tears thinking about Jesse and realizes that, just like her daddy, she might never see him again.

On her way home, Miss Mabel tells Francie she never did believe they would go to Chicago, and Francie calls her a mean woman who loves others' misery.

Francie's mother comes home with a big box. She tells Francie they will straighten things out with the Rivers' before they move, and that they need to get boxes from Greens, because they need to pack. They will give everything they are not taking to Auntie.



Word From Daddy and Crawdads Analysis

Word From Daddy:

After all of the stress they have been through, the dreaded news reaches them that Daddy has delayed their move to Chicago. Francie is clearly depressed over the loss of her tightly-held plans and dreams to move, as well as the loss of Jesse. Her sadness is mixed with anger. She is chided, instructed and bossed by so many people, and works very hard for a child. She is increasingly aware of the huge difference between her lifestyle and that of her rich employers.

Crawdads:

Francie's meeting with Alberta is also depressing because, not only has Alberta lost a tooth and is obviously deteriorating, she did not stay in New Orleans and still does not have a real plan. The world must seem extremely uncertain to Francie in every way.

Mama's comment about September foreshadows some kind of plan, and now she has come home with a mysterious box and a plan that only she knows, but it obviously involves a move to Chicago, whether they are sent for or not.



Mama's Got Plans and Moving Day

Mama's Got Plans and Moving Day Summary

Mama's Got Plans:

Francie and Prez carry empty packing boxes from Greens, and Prez tells Miss Mabel they are moving. When they get home, Francie peeks into the box Mama brought home and sees a new dress. Her mother arrives with a new fifty-cent piece to cover the extra work Francie had done at the Rivers'. Mama shows her new dress to Francie and Prez, and then presents them each with a box of new clothing. They are going by train with the money Mama has been saving for tickets. She had written to Daddy and told him to be ready to meet them. Auntie will move to Benson to be with her husband and will take most of the the things that Francie's mother owns.

Moving Day:

The family is hustling to get everything done before they leave. Mama has fried a chicken and baked another cake for Daddy to take with them. Juniper will go with Auntie. Uncle June will pick them up to catch the train. Their landlord has inspected the house and left in a bad mood, sorry to lose good tenants. Francie is suddenly sad and afraid about moving to a new place and going to school with white children. Uncle June finally picks them up and they head to the train station, while Francie quietly says goodbye to the house on Three Notch Road. Mr. Grandy drives up behind them and gets them to stop so he can give some mail to Francie. The mail from California is a picture postcard of an orange grove. The address on the envelope is written with childish spelling. Francie is tearful to realize that Jesse has made it to California. She decides that if he can make it, she can, too.

Mama's Got Plans and Moving Day Analysis

Lil Weaver shows tremendous strength in making the decision to move herself and her children to Chicago without help from their father. She has saved the money, bought the tickets and clothing, and is determined to follow through with their plans. Although things have not gone very well for the family up until now, she has taken the initiative to make a change rather than waiting for someone to make the change for them. She is an excellent role model of a strong, hard-working, kind and practical woman who has not let her misfortune get the best of her. This is a very uplifting story for all audiences, since everyone faces hardship and occasionally needs the courage to make a change.



Characters

Francie Weaver

Francie is a girl who loves to learn, and whose intelligence seems above-average. An avid reader, she is the favorite of her teacher, Miss Lafayette, who brings books to her and treats her with respect. Although she loves Nancy Drew, by the end of the story Francie is ready to tackle War and Peace. She loves her short stint as a teacher with Jesse Pruitt.

Francie knows that white people think all blacks are stupid. She occasionally uses this fact to excuse herself from some of her behaviors, such as revealing to an entire group of wealthy white girls that the family of their hostess is in financial trouble. She plans this carefully as revenge toward the girl who slapped and humiliated her when Francie was accused of stealing her own book in a local store. She wants this girl's humiliation to sting, just as her own had after being slapped. Francie is not spiteful or vengeful, but has a strong sense of justice and fairness.

Francie is aware that her life is less than it could be. As she works in the lavish homes of local white people, she is exposed to a way of life she can only dream of. She tries to imagine what it would be like to get up in the morning and look forward to only pleasantness all day. Most of her days are spent doing hard work. If she is not working with her mother in the homes of others, she is at home cooking, sweeping, tending to her younger brother or helping her Aunt with washing diapers. There is always work to be done, and her mother never turns down a job because the family desperately needs the money.

Francie is accustomed to stepping aside when white folks pass on the sidewalk, and speaking minimally, carefully and respectfully when addressed by a white person. She has learned that white people cannot be trusted, and her mother confirms that they can turn on you if you aren't careful. All white people in her culture presume to be authoritarian figures toward blacks, and Francie knows how to behave with them. She is always honest with her mother, however.

Francie's sense of fairness puts her family in danger when she tries to get food and shelter to Jesse Pruitt, who is falsely accused of attempted murder. When the incident is over and Jesse gets away without a goodbye, Francie becomes depressed, since her father has again prolonged their move. But she perks up and fills with hope again, as the move becomes a reality. She is saddened to leave, even though she has dreamed of leaving for a long time.

Lil Weaver

The real hero in this story, Lil Weaver is a very strong mother who does not hesitate to punish her children when they deserve it, but is an understanding, solid rock for them,



regardless. She teaches Francie how to work hard and how to treat others. She values honesty and trust, but is wise enough to know how to deal with the white people who run her life. When she is treated unfairly, she does not question it, but does what she is told. However, Lil grows tired of not being able to even attend church on Sunday. She works days and days without a break for people who depend on others to do the slightest task, and whose days are filled with frivolous activities. She is an accomplished cook and has taught Francie how to do everything, from laundry to polishing silver. When she has no answers for Francie, she advises her to pray.

When her husband disappoints her once again by prolonging the family's move to Chicago, Lil takes the money she has been saving and buys new clothing and train tickets. She wants a better life for herself and her children and, rather than waiting for him to send for them, she takes the initiative to make it happen. She accepts her station in society, but does not settle for a life of struggling this hard. She has high hopes for something better in Chicago and the reader is left knowing that she will achieve that.

Karen English does a wonderful job of portraying Lil Weaver as an exceptional role model under the harshest of conditions.

Jesse Pruitt

Jesse is sixteen years old when he appears at Francie's grammar school, wanting to learn. His mother, who has recently died, wanted him to be educated, so he walks six or seven miles each day to get to the school, hoping to abide by her wishes. He is illiterate, but kind and honest. He rescues Francie from the bullies who try to harm her after school. Francie is assigned to teach Jesse how to read, and he becomes good friends with her. However, he is forced by his father to leave school when planting time arrives. We learn later that his father abandoned him and his siblings soon afterward, and left Jesse to fend for himself.

While working on the neighboring farm owned by the Early family, Jesse is mistreated, underpaid and accused of not working hard enough. When he tries to settle the score with Mr. Early's farmhand, Mr. Bellamy, he is fired and accused of being uppity. Jesse goes back to the Early farm to take a chicken, which he feels he is owed. Mr. Bellamy falls down trying to chase Jesse, then accuses Jesse of assault with intent to murder. This sets off a manhunt for Jesse, who hides in the woods at Three Notch, eating the food left secretly for him by Francie.

Jesse's story is one of success; he plans to go to California where oranges grow. As Francie is leaving for Chicago, she receives a postcard from him with a photo of an orange grove. His success gives her hope for her own future.

Prez and Perry

Prez Weaver is Francie's little brother. He has chores every day, like Francie, and helps with planting and picking cotton at the nearby Early farm. Unlike Francie, he finds time



to play, fish and pass the time with his young cousin, Perry. Francie feels resentment, occasionally, because Prez is able to play and she has to work. Prez is easily frightened and is sensitive. He is a good little boy, but when Francie tells him to stay out of the woods, he and Perry go anyway. They find the labeled jars that Francie has been putting out for Jesse Pruitt, and bury them safely in the ground so that his family will not be blamed for aiding and abetting a criminal.

Prez's real name is Franklin, named after the last president.

Perry is Auntie Lydia's only child until the birth of her daughter, Janie.

Auntie Lydia and Uncle June

Lydia is married to Uncle June, who works in another town called Benson. Also a resident in Three Notch, she is close to her sister, Lil, and is a good mother to little Perry. She becomes somewhat ill after giving birth to her daughter, Janie, and depends upon the support and help of her sister and her niece, Francie.

When Lil and her children leave for Chicago, Lydia and her children join Uncle June in Benson where he works in a turpentine factory. Lydia's house is where Lil and Prez spend a good deal of their spare time, when they have it. Lydia becomes hysterical when she learns that Perry has been taken by the Bascomb brothers. Uncle June comes to pick up the Weaver family to take them to the train when they are leaving for Chicago, and then to take his own family back to Benson with him.

Miss Lafayette and Miss Lattimore

Miss Lafayette is Francie's teacher with whom she is close friends. Miss Lafayette lives in Miss Beach's boarding house, where Francie and her mother are employed to do laundry. Miss Lafayette may be ill; she has been in Louisiana for two weeks on some kind of "mysterious business," and seems as though she doesn't feel well when she returns. She brings Francie a new Nancy Drew book, and has brought her books in the past. She encourages Francie and appreciates Francie's hunger for learning. She is probably responsible for the academic achievement award given to Francie at the end of the school year.

Miss Lattimore is the principal at Francie's school. She is gruff and very busy, and is not personable. She has been substituting for Miss Lafayette in the beginning of the story. Miss Lafayette returns, much to the students' relief.

Clarissa Montgomery and Holly Grace

Clarissa Montgomery is the niece of Mrs. Montgomery who employes Francie and her mother for household work. The Montgomery home is beautiful, as is Clarissa's room, and Francie tries to imagine what it would be like to live there. Although Clarissa is a



member of the group that has treated Francie poorly, she shows an interest in Francie and gives her a book. Later, when Prez and Perry are hiding near the Montgomery gazebo, Clarissa drives the boys home to Three Notch without her uncle's knowledge. She seems to enjoy the family atmosphere in Francie's humble home. She gives Francie a book to give to Jesse Pruitt, and later returns Francie's Nancy Drew book to her that was confiscated at Diller's. She is the kindest white person in the story.

When Francie is unable to get a Scooter Pie at Green's, she is forced to go to Diller's Drugs where white people shop. Holly Grace is at Diller's with her friends. Francie has seen Holly steal a tube of lipstick before. When Mr. Green accuses Francie of stealing the Nancy Drew book that she brought in with her, she knows that Holly Grace has taken one of the books. She tries to tell Mr. Green to check Holly's purse, and tells him about the lipstick, but Holly attacks her and slaps her face in front of them all, and Francie is forced to leave her book behind, humiliated and angry. Later, when she is serving luncheon food and drinks to Holly, Francie warns the girls to just take two shrimp because Holly's mother is serving on a budget due to her husband's bad investing. This humiliates and enrages Holly, which is Francie's goal.

Augustine and Helen Mae Butler

The Butler sisters are extremely poor and are not very good students. Older than Francie, they resent her for her scholarship and her confidence. They are angry girls and, when Francie refuses to give Augustine the answers to a test, the two ambush her after school. They back off considerably after Jesse Pruitt steps in on Francie's behalf.

When Augustine learns she will be held back in school, she leaves the classroom. The next day she returns with welts on her legs and, although she has been very mean to Francie, Francie feels sorry for her, and is grateful that she is not as limited by her own circumstances as Augustine is.

Miss Beach and Treasure

Miss Beach is not a white woman but is fair skinned and owns Miss Beach's Boarding House for Colored. Francie and her mother wash, boil, hang and fold the boarding house linens every week under Miss Beach's condescending and watchful eye. Miss Beach often reveals her doubt to Francie and her mother that Francie's father will return or send for them.

Miss Beach has a superior attitude, which seems to transfer to her cat, Treasure. Treasure scratches Francie for no reason. Francie locks the cat in a wardrobe and forgets to let him out. On another occasion, she shakes a sheet to get the cat off of the linens, and hurls him across the room.

Miss Beach accuses Francie of eating a can of smoked salmon that was left on the counter, but Francie knows it was the cat. Francie truly hates Treasure, who is treated better than Francie herself.



Francie sees a photo of Ms. Beach's new "beau," and hopes that some day she too will marry someone of means who is educated, and not someone like her father who works on the railroad.

Sheriff Barnes and Deputy Withers

This is the stereotypical southern male sheriff. He is disrespectful toward black people and treats them as though they are bad children. He goes inside the empty Weaver home and helps himself to cake, flicks a cigarette butt in Lil Weaver's flower garden, and speaks to the children with mocking suspicion. He is all too conscious of his power and is eager to use it, even if the cause is unfair, such as in Jesse Pruitt's case.

Withers is the same as the sheriff. He spits on the ground carelessly, and talks to the children with suspicion.

O.C., Nola and Violet Grandy

The Grandys are kind neighbors in Three Notch who own their own farm. They seem to be aware of what is going on and people turn to them for help. They try to reassure Lil, Lydia and Francie when the little boys get taken away. Later, when Francie rushes away from her job at the Rivers' home to warn Jesse that the sheriff is on his way, Mr. Grandy gives her a ride in his truck. At the end of the story when the family is driving away with Uncle June to catch their train, Mr. Grandy follows them and flags them down. He has mail for Francie, which turns out to be Jesse's postcard from California.

Miss Mabel

Miss Mabel is a know-it-all neighbor in Three Notch who collects and administers medicinal herbs. She is known as the Three Notch Road moocher because she asked Francie to buy her some coffee, and did not pay her back. She sits on her porch and watches people. She implies that Francie's father will never return for them, like so many others, and is a gossipy, negative voice in their group of acquaintances. Francie finally accuses her of enjoying other peoples' misery and questions her Christianity.

Alberta

Alberta is a woman who dresses like a man and lives with the hobos at the foot of Francie's hill. The men are either unaware she is a woman or they do not care. Alberta and Francie become acquainted when Alberta climbs the hill and talks with her. She has no education. She plans to get to New Orleans and hop a freight to California. Later she shows up, missing a front tooth, and tells Francie she had gotten as far as New Orleans but has come back to Noble. Her stepfather is mean when he drinks; it seems as though Alberta may be a victim of domestic violence.



Granny the Midwife

Granny is the local midwife in Three Notch who arrives at Auntie Lydia's to help her give birth to Janie. Granny wears an apron with deep pockets where she keeps the tools of her trade. She is very superstitious and Francie enjoys her stories about ghosts and witches. Francie's mother does not allow her to believe in Granny's stories, and attributes them to ignorance from slavery days. Granny feels Janie is special because she was born between the two lights of daybreak and sunrise.

The Earlys

Mr. and Mrs. Early own a farm in the area and employ local people to help out with farming chores. Mrs. Early shoves Francie's purchase aside so that she can be waited on first at Green's store. Mr. Early participates in the false story about Jesse Pruitt, who worked there briefly under Mr. Bellamy cutting wood. The young boys, Prez and Perry, occasionally work at the Early farm.

Myra Montgomery

Mrs. Montgomery is a wealthy woman who employs Francie and Lil for housework. Her niece, Clarissa, has come from Baltimore to live with her. She has decorated Clarissa's room in bright cheerful colors to cheer her up. We do not know what has happened to Clarissa's parents.

Juniper

Juniper is Francie's family dog. He is loyal to them, especially to Prez, but he does take off into the woods for an extended period. He is probably with Jesse Pruitt for some time, since he turns up at Francie's house shortly before Jesse. When Francie's family moves to Chicago, Juniper stays with Auntie.

Janie

Janie is the name of Auntie Lydia's new baby that arrives soon after school is out. Francie helps Aunt Lydia, who does not feel well after the birth, by washing and drying Janie's diapers.

Vell Green

Vell Green is Mr. Green's retarded son, with whom Francie is friends. Later in the story, Vell admits he knows that Jesse Pruitt is in Francie's woods, but promises not to tell anyone.

Mr. Pruitt

Mr. Pruitt is Jesse's father. When he appears to take Jesse out of school for late spring planting, Jesse feels his presence and flinches. His father is harsh and rough with him, shoving him out the door.



Objects/Places

Three Notch

This is a rural region of Noble, Alabama where several black families reside. A road runs through it, but it is heavily wooded. Francie and her mother live here, as well as Auntie Lydia, Miss Mabel and a few others. The families seem to have formed a loose-knit community, illustrated by their concern that the community will suffer if the white folks find out that Jesse Pruitt is being protected in their woods.

Early Farm

The largest farm near Three Notch is owned by Mr. and Mrs. Early. It is probably a cotton farm, and employs quite a few people from the area, including little Prez and Perry who help plant and pick. It is a source of work for some very poor people, and is where Jesse Pruitt is working when he is cheated out of his wages.

Trains

Francie's favorite thing is to watch the local train zoom by and wave to it. Her father is a pullman on a train, and she expects one day to get on a train and head for a new life in Chicago. To Francie, the train represents opportunities. This particular train goes up to Birmingham, AL.

Shoes

Francie's father sent her a pair of good Oxford shoes from Chicago. She does not put them on until she gets to school because she wants to keep them clean. They are very important to her.

When Jesse Pruitt shows up, bedraggled and starving, Francie gives him her father's old shoes to wear. As the sheriff is looking around for Jesse, Francie sees the toes of her father's boots poking out from under the drape on the wardrobe.

Her mother makes her wear certain shoes when she walks to town, which make Francie's feet hot.

Scooter Pie

Francie loves Scooter Pies, which she buys at the local stores. They are a cellophane-packaged chocolate covered graham cracker-marshmallow sandwich, popular in the south.



Nancy Drew

Nancy Drew Mysteries were written for young girls and are novels about a young white woman who plays detective. They are apparently popular during this time. Miss Lafayette brings one for Francie, and there is a rack of them at Diller's Drugs.

Cakes

Cakes are special in Francie's life. Her mother bakes a cake when they are expecting her father to return. The sheriff helps himself to their cake when they are not home, and Francie's mother tosses the rest in the garbage, as if it has been tainted. Francie knows how to bake and frost cakes from scratch from working with her mother. She bakes cakes for teas and social events for the white people who employ her.

Francie's mother bakes a cake, again, for her husband to take on the train with them to Chicago. Cakes are a special gesture.

Books

Books are an important part of this story. Francie is very fond of books. Miss Lafayette brings her books, Clarissa gives her books, and she takes a book to her favorite spot to watch the train go by. She gives a book to Jesse Pruitt for Clarissa. Clarissa confides in Francie that she plans to write a book. By the end of the story, Francie is ready to read the huge book, *War and Peace*, on her train ride to Chicago.

Chicago

Chicago is where Francie's father is living, working as a pullman porter in the train system. He has promised to send for them, and to come home to get them, but so far has not followed through on his promises. In Chicago, he has promised Francie that she will have piano lessons, go to school alongside white children and that she, her mother and Prez will not have to work. Chicago is where she dreams of going as she watches the trains go by, and where she intends to some day visit a real library. At the end of the story, Francie does leave for Chicago with her mother and brother.

New Carlton

Sixteen year old Jesse Pruitt lives in New Carlton when he starts school at Francie's grammar school. He is forced to walk six or seven miles to get to school each day, and is late every day. Eventually his father takes him out of school to help with planting.



Florida and California

Jesse Pruitt dreams of going to Florida and California where oranges grow on trees. He does end up in California, and notifies Francie by sending a post card with a picture of an orange grove.

Gazebo

Mrs. Montgomery owns a beautiful large house with a gazebo outside where she entertains guests with outdoor brunches. While working in the kitchen, Francie sees Jesse fixing one of the steps on the gazebo. It is a symbol of opulence and a source of day-dreaming for Francie. When Prez and Perry break away from the Bascomb brothers, Clarissa finds them hiding near the gazebo.

Woods

Jesse Pruitt hides in the woods at Three Notch. The woods represent a haven for those who do not live in town or in large estates. They protect Jesse for many days while he is on the run. The little boys, Perry and Prez, play in the woods, and the creek that runs through them. There is a sense of fear and mystery about the woods at Three Notch, as well as comfort. Mabel sees Jesse in the woods and is frightened. Francie and her mother hear noises in the woods. The sheriff and his men make searches through the woods.

Crawdads

Francie's mother feels that people who say negative and discouraging things about the family's plans to move to Chicago are like crawdads in a barrel. If they can't get out, they don't want anyone else getting out.

The South

Although slavery has not been in effect for quite some time, the residual prejudice and superior attitudes toward African Americans prevails in this small Alabama town. Even Francie knows that things have to be better in Chicago. There is a lingering assumption among whites in this story that black people are stupid, lazy and exist to be used to make the white man's life more comfortable.

Laundry

Karen English gives us a glimpse into what it must have been like to do laundry before there were automatic washers and dryers. Francie and her mother do laundry for the local boarding house by scrubbing, double-boiling and hanging out the sheets and



linens. Francie scrubs and hangs out to dry her baby cousin's diapers. Doing laundry takes tremendously hard work in this story.

New Clothes

New clothing is a rare event for Francie and her family. Her graduation dress is very fancy, by her standards, and her mother fusses to get its hem just right. When Mama brings home a new dress for herself, she hides the box away like a valued treasure. Later when she brings home new clothing for Francie and Prez, they are amazed and excited.

Hunger

There is a consistent mention of hunger in this story. The Butler girls go to school without any lunch. Jesse Pruitt goes to school without lunch and later hides in the woods for days without food. This poverty is a contrast to the lifestyles of Francie's employers, where people eat fancy foods, like shrimp and mayonnaise cake.



Themes

Hard Work and Perverserance

In spite of a certain degree of pessimism in the community, Francie's mother is an example of someone who works hard without complaining, knowing that if she tries hard enough and saves diligently enough, she can improve her circumstances. She has taught her children the value of hard work and, although there are times when the children are discouraged and feel they will never get out of Alabama, Mama proves to them that she is right. She is able to take the doubting comments in stride. There are those who almost seem to hope she will fail, but she does not let them stop her.

Another illustration of this concept is Jesse's Pruitt's determination to get out from under his oppressive circumstances and start a better life. Jesse walks seven miles to get to a school where he is blatantly out of place. After his father leaves him and his siblings, he fends for himself, doing odd jobs like fixing Mrs. Montgomery's gazebo steps and cutting wood for Mr. Early. He is poor, but he is certainly not lazy. Ultimately, he is able to escape the south and get to California, as he planned.

In contrast, Miss Mabel is one who would rather sit on her porch and be negative about life. Clearly, she is not headed for a better life, and she seems to secretly hope that her neighbors will fail, as well. It is also ironic that she is the one who is frightened by Jesse, rather than taking an interest in him and trying to help him. Miss Beach is another character who tries to warn Lil that lots of men go away like this and do not return.

Francie's father tells them in his letter that Chicago is a place where, if you work hard, you can do anything.

English does an artful job of comparing different types of characters and showing us the results of their respective attitudes.

Hope and Possibilities

In this story, even Granny, the midwife, is still influenced by slavery days. Only a few generations removed from that time, Francie's mother and her father know that African-Americans are no longer legally bound to serve others, and that there is hope for something better. Although Lil Weaver defers to her employers and does not question their unfairness, just as one would have behaved as a slave, she does not lose sight of who she is and what she is capable of doing.

Francie, the first one in the family who has learned to read, has been able to "see" other worlds through her reading, and knows that there is much more than what Noble, Alabama has to offer. She is perplexed when her hobo friend Alberta returns to Noble by choice. Francie does not want to settle for her current life of hard work and second-class citizenship because she is aware that there are other possibilities. She has seen



that white girls can be bad and knows that they really have nothing over her except their socio-economic status. She dreams of having a day with nothing but pleasantness and no work, like some of the wealthy white people she knows. The train that she loves represents possibilities to her, a theme that sustains her.

Trust

Trust is a major element throughout this story. The underlying tension of Francie's father's possible motives or failure to do as he has said presses the family about trust. Although her mother does not openly question it, there is talk that some men who leave for railroad work end up having more than one family. When he puts off their move yet again, Francie does wonder about this, but her mother stays silent.

There is a bond of trust between Jesse and Francie, sealed by her tutoring of him and her openly demonstrated concern about him. He hides in her woods, perhaps, because he knows he can trust her to cover for him. She trusts that he has not committed the crime of which he is accused. A very strong bond of trust exists between Francie and her mother. Francie does not lie to her, even when it would be better if she did. They depend upon each other in many respects, and her mother trusts Francie's literacy, as well.

The other side of this coin is that Francie is warned not to trust white people, and for good reason. She has seen firsthand that, if it becomes convenient, they will turn on her. This is clearly illustrated in Holly Grace's treatment of her in the drug store. At this time and in this community there is no real trust between blacks and whites because of the imbalance of power. When Clarissa befriends Francie, Francie's mother warns her not to trust her. The reader does wonder whether Francie will end up being in trouble for going into Clarissa's room and accepting the books that Clarissa has given her. When Clarissa drives the two little boys home, a certain bond of trust is finally developed between Francie and Clarissa.

There is an assumption that the story about Jesse's crime is false, since, when it comes to blacks, white people cannot be trusted to tell the truth. It is an interesting dynamic that, hopefully, will someday simply be a peculiar aspect of America's social history.

Literacy

Francie's great love of reading is what propels her toward a better life. She cannot wait to get to Chicago and find a real library. She is fascinated by Clarissa's access to lots of books, and by the end of the story, is about to read *War and Peace*. Her pleasure over teaching Jesse to read and her high marks in school reveal her love of learning. Francie wins the academic achievement award at the end of the year.

Literacy in Francie's culture is highly valued because it is the key to everything. Those who can read are far more able to move up in the world than those who cannot. Francie's mother depends upon her to do all the reading and writing of correspondence

and business in the family. At this time in history, African-Americans were only beginning to have educational opportunities and those who could read were in the minority, since most spent their days laboring on farms and plantations. The white girls in the story are all well educated. Clarissa's cousin is in college. White girls read and play cards, rather than work.

Although Francie reads Nancy Drew mysteries in her spare time, she has already read *Silas Marner* and *David Copperfield*, and she is ready to undertake *War and Peace*, a huge book by Tolstoy, by the time she leaves for Chicago. As her world opens up, her reading material becomes more complex.

Style

Point of View

This story is narrated by the main character, Francie, through whose eyes we see her world. It is written entirely in first person, although Francie, as narrator, does speculate occasionally, such as guessing what Jesse might be thinking. Francie shares with the reader her hopes, doubts, anger and love through dialogue, monologue and narration. In this way, her reading audience is allowed, for a time, to be Francie and see life through her eyes, which is not always rosy. We are also able to see first-hand the reasoning behind the tricks Francie plays when she "innocently" remarks about Holly Grace's financial problems, and when she deliberately locks the hated cat in a wardrobe. Francie never calls herself a good girl and is not self-righteous, but after walking in her shoes through this story, her character is revealed as clearly lovable and strong.

Setting

The American south, in one of its most deeply entrenched regions of slavery, is a uniquely disturbing and fascinating study. Noble, Alabama, where Francie lives with her mother and brother, is a place where grand mansions stand tall and beautifully landscaped. Only a short distance away is a road in a forest where shacks are rented by African Americans who still make a living serving those who are more fortunate. At the beautiful home of the Montgomerys, guests wander on the manicured grounds and eat brunch in a gazebo. Clarissa's beautiful bedroom is brightly wallpapered and her cousin's room is empty because he is away at college. Servants take care of the smallest details here and in the Grace household.

In stark contrast is Francie's home, where its inhabitants make do with only the bare necessities. Francie and her mother sleep in the same bed, and they wear the same clothing day after day. In the Montgomery kitchen, there is equipment and utensils and a store of food, as well as a radio to listen to. Their floors are waxed and their silver polished. In Francie's kitchen, her mother is able to bake cakes and prepare meals, but they are meager and simple, consisting primarily of foods that have been canned by her mother, or fish caught by her little brother. Francie sweeps their barren front yard with a broom. The little homes are surrounded by woods. The tenants are mostly hard-working people who scrape together a meager living by attending to the needs of the wealthy.

Although Karen English contrasts these two settings, there is one point in the story that we truly see the value of Francie's lifestyle. When Clarissa brings home the two little boys who have escaped from the Bascomb brothers, she seems to not want to leave. We can assume this is because there is a sense of family that is lacking in Clarissa's household.



Language and Meaning

Karen English's language is casual and highly readable. Her sentences flow easily and, as Francie is telling the story, we are able to see through her eyes with her own language and grammar interspersed. Occasionally Francie gives us a glimpse of the dialect that was common in her world, with words such as "ain't" and other marginal grammar. However, Francie tells an intelligent story written by what could have been an older, more educated Francie. The story allows us to look at her world as it was, complete with its flaws. Moreover, we are allowed to see Francie, herself, with all of her flaws. Although the period of history and the state of Francie's culture could seem depressing, the story is humorous and entertaining.

Karen English uses narration paired with dialogue to reveal detail that we might not have otherwise known. An example is Alberta's explanation of her stepfather's cruelty when he is drunk, and Francie's earlier observation that Alberta is missing a tooth. From these two passages we can conclude that Alberta is the victim of abuse and this is why she has chosen the life of a hobo.

Structure

Karen English's novel is 199 pages, consisting of 23 chapters of varying lengths. The chapters are named, but not numbered. Although there is a sequential plot to the story, it is also a "slice of life" story that covers the period of one spring and summer. It can also be considered a coming of age story, since the plot takes us from Francie still being in grammar school to her big move to Chicago for a better life. It is the story of a few months that involve the dramatic event of Jesse Pruitt's acquaintance, as well as Francie's final few months in Alabama. We do not know much about what happened in her life prior to the beginning of the story, except that her father left the local pulp mill and took a job as a pullman porter in the train system. During this same few months, Francie's aunt gives birth, her brother and cousin get abducted, she wins the academic achievement award and she has a couple of intense moments with white girls, not necessarily in that order. Thus, it is a special period in her life, examined in detail for the purpose of this story.



Quotes

"At one point she passed the door and said, 'You better pray to God for your soul.' I knew she was right. Every once in a while I did some hateful things and I just didn't know why." Pg. 10

"Holly Grace, Mrs. Grace's blond, butter-wouldn't melt-in-her-mouth daughter, said something to Clarissa, then moved over to the cosmetics aisle. She lifted a lipstick out of a socket display, opened it, and ran the tube across the back of her hand. She stared at her hand for a moment, looked around, then recapped the lipstick and slipped it into her pocket. My mouth dropped open." Pg. 25

"Two little white girls came toward me, holding hands. I stepped sideways to get off the walk." Pg. 25

"I hurried to stand up. 'Aw, no you don't,' Augustine said, readying herself to shove me again. But just then Jesse, appearing out of nowhere it seemed, grabbed her from behind, nearly lifting her off her feet, before setting her aside. She went down on her butt hard, her eyes wide with surprise." Pg. 36

"Miss Lafayette looked at me closely and recited: "Hold fast to dreams For if dreams die Life is a broken-winged bird That cannot fly." Pg. 43

"'You want to stand there, you little black pickaninny an call me a thief?' Her face was as red as mine would have been if it could show. She reared back to strike me again, but Mr. Diller caught her hand. 'That ain't necessary, Holly.' Joe Diller, who'd been in the back room came out now to stop the ruckus. 'Let me take care of this.' He turned to me. 'You get on out of here and don't let me see you set foot in Diller's Drugs again.' I looked at my book in Mr. Diller's hand. My eyes started to fill with tears, but I willed them away. That man knew in his heart that the book belonged to me. But he was gonna stand there and act like I'd done something wrong, just to save face. I don't understand white folks sometimes. I'd be too scared to be so mean." Pg 60-61

"Then Mama looked me over, narrowing her eyes. 'Don't you be too fooled by that. I've seen 'em friendly one minute and turn just as fast the next. Depending on their mood.' I'd seen the same thing. Soon as you began counting on white folks to be one way, they'd remind you of your place. I didn't care. I had my book back." Pg. 75

"'If you'd just put enough sugar in it in the first place, I wouldn't have to worry myself with stirrin' it all the time.' Holly Grace held it out to me. I took it and went up the sloping lawn again. Once in the kitchen, I counted to twenty, then took it right back out to her. She took a sip, smacked her lips, and announced, 'Now, that's better.' Then, with a whisk of the back of her hand, she waved me away. I went back up the hill, grinning." Pg. 107



"No, ma'am, Your mama is serving on a budget and she said to make sure that nobody at this tea gets any more than two shrimp wheels. She just can't afford it since your daddy messed up a lot of his money on a bad investment.' I stopped short. I was saying too much and it might make her suspicious. She started to rise out of her chair. I backed up a little." Pg. 111

"Holly picked up her cards and took a sip of tea, in an attempt to put the whole thing right out of her mind. But as I made my way back up the hill to the kitchen, I knew she wouldn't be able to. Like I was gonna remember that slap, she'd remember this — always." Pg. 112

"Mama had washed my hair in castile soap. We all had our baths in the big tin tub in the kitchen. Now I sat on the steps, letting my hair dry in the last of the sun's heat. As it dried, it slowly grew into a woolly bush around my face. Mama was going to straighten it after she finished baking Daddy a welcome-home cake." Pg. 113

"That night, in bed, I smelled vanilla. Mama must have put a couple of dabs behind her ears." Pg. 115

"'I don't care.' I pretended to be looking up at the branches overhead. But I held my head back to keep the tears at bay. 'Anyway, I think Jesse will get to the Southern Pacific and it will take him all the way to California. We'll take care of him until he can get away. I'll give him the money I got saved, and we'll bring him food.' Both boys looked at me with admiration, which made me feel clever." Pg. 119

"'Francie.' She pulled me down beside her and looked at me closely. 'Listen to me. What you're doing is dangerous. Do you know what they'd do to your family if it was discovered you were aiding that boy in any way — what would happen to the colored community around here?' 'I gotta help him.' 'You might not be able to.' 'I have to.' Tears filled my eyes. I grabbed her laundry bag and hurried out." Pg. 126

"'They're going in our house,' Prez said. 'I can see,' I said. Before long, Sheriff Barnes came out with a hunk of Daddy's cake in his hand, his mouth so full it was pushing out both cheeks. 'He's eatin' Daddy's cake,' Prez said. I went over to the deputy's glob of spit and kicked dirt over it." Pg. 137

"'You comin' with us anyway. Now stop that blubbering. We takin' you to jail for aidin' and abettin.' 'We didn't do nothin',' Perry cried, sounding as if he was lying. 'Shut your mouth,' Billy said through gritted teeth. 'You was up to something' and we all know it.' For a frantic moment, I nearly rushed out from my hiding place, but fear paralyzed me. With repugnance, I saw Perry's whole shirtsleeve had been nearly ripped off. There was a bloody gash on his arm. I buried my face in my hands and squeezed my eyes tight, willing myself not to make a peep until their sounds faded away completely. Perry was hurt. I stood up, my knees nearly buckled, but I knew I had to get home." Pg. 141

"I flinched at the flurry of yelps and snarls from Mr. Early's dogs. He was proud of those hounds. They were used to tracking. 'They love it,' Prez had heard him bragging one



time. 'You see, nigras got a particular smell and they can find one and zero right in.'" Pg. 147

"I looked over at Clarissa, who was surveying our front room. The sink pump, the kerosense lamp, Mama's Diller's Drugs calendar...She sat down without being asked and listened to Prez's story as if she'd never heard it before." Pg. 151

"Miss Rivers was visiting with her sister. They sat at a little table under her big live oak, having tea and cake. What was it like to wake up every morning and have only pleasantness to fill your day? To have not a speck of work to think of? To have money enough to hire people to take care of all that you didn't want no part of? I might as well have wondered what it was like living on Mars." Pg. 184

"Mama had sent a telegram to Daddy to tell him we were coming and he just better get ready for us. And he better meet our train. Pulling in Sunday morning." Pg. 192



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the issue of trust, and how it affects Francie's life. Whom does she trust? Whom can she not trust? How is her trust for people colored by the society in which she lives?

Discuss the character, Holly Grace. What type of family life must Holly have? Is her mother a good role model for her? Is she the kind of daughter that will go on to be a good citizen? Why, or why not?

Prez and Perry are fast friends. Why do they prefer the company of one another? What are their lives like on a daily basis? Does it seem that they will stay in touch as they get older? What bonds them?

Is Francie a lonely child? Why, or why not? Support your conclusion with examples from the story. Read carefully to make your determination.

Discuss the character of Lil Weaver. She spans her children — is she a good parent? Why, or why not? Does she provide a positive or negative role model for Francie and Prez?

What might Clarissa Montgomery's circumstances have been? Why might she have some empathy toward Francie and her family? Imagine some scenarios that would explain why she has moved from Baltimore to live at her aunt's house in Noble.

The jars in the woods could have meant massive trouble for Francie and her family, as well as the black community at Three Notch. Why is this? What is it about the jars that could be incriminating?

Discuss the character, Granny. Although she is not a fully-developed character, she has some interesting traits, for some interesting reasons. Do a close reading about Granny and discuss who she represents.

Why does Francie's mother call the lower back of Francie's head "the kitchen"? Why did they feel the need to straighten Francie's hair? How does their hair-straightening process compare to today's?

Francie has grown up knowing how to bake. Re-read the passage wherein she is baking tea cakes for Mrs. Montgomery. Do children nowadays have these skills? Why, or why not? Would it be desirable to have some of Francie's knowledge?