

# **The Friends Study Guide**

## **The Friends by Rosa Guy**

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## Plot Summary

Fourteen-year-old Phyllisia Cathy is constantly picked on, not only by her classmates, but also by her white teacher. She immigrated to America from the West Indies with her parents and older sister Ruby. Because she is different, many of the poorer students try to beat her up for being smarter and better off than they are. Only one person sticks up for Phyllisia, and that person is Edith. Edith is poor and unkempt, and Phyllisia rejects her at first because of her social standing. However, in order to survive living in Harlem, she needs an ally; she befriends Edith and discovers that Edith is actually a nice person.

At home, Phyllisia is constantly compared to her beautiful mother and sister. Her father, Carter, who always says that Phyllisia is the plain one, ignores her. Even when she is beat up at school, the family ignores her in favor of talking about each other. For that reason, Phyllisia hates her father. To get back at him, Phyllisia decides to skip school with Edith, even though, at first, she is afraid her strict father will see her and punish her for being out of school. On her way home, she is nearly caught in a riot, but Edith saves Phyllisia and brings her back to Edith's run-down one-room apartment. When Phyllisia returns home, she finds out that her father has seen her with Edith. He forbids her to see Edith again.

Phyllisia, however, is not deterred by her father's threats. She continues to see Edith nearly every day until Edith's father suddenly goes missing, after which Edith drops out of school in order to find a job and take care of her family. Phyllisia begins high school, where she hangs around a popular girl, Marian, whom she had envied the year before. Just as her social life is beginning to bloom, Phyllisia's mother becomes very ill. Calvin forces Phyllisia and Ruby to return home right after school every day to take care of their mother. Phyllisia obeys, but at this point she feels compelled to find Edith to see how she and her family are doing.

After reconnecting with Edith, Phyllisia invites her over on the pretense of meeting her mother; however, Phyllisia's true motive is to elicit Edith's jealousy over her stylish home. When they arrive, Edith goes immediately to Phyllisia's mother and starts talking with her in an attempt to cheer her up. Phyllisia becomes jealous when Carter comes in the door.

Carter forces Edith out of the house because she is poor and he does not want his family to be seen with someone of her social class. Later, Phyllisia's mother softly scolds Phyllisia for inviting Edith over just to flaunt her wealth, although she admits that it is partially her and Calvin's fault for placing too much emphasis on superficiality. She tells Phyllisia that she will regret her behavior later in life. Soon after, Phyllisia's mother dies.

Phyllisia begins having nightmares about a woman calling out Phyllisia's guilt. She becomes extremely ill and can hardly walk. Ruby was diligent in taking care of her sister, but Calvin resents the attention that Phyllisia is receiving. Convinced that



Phyllisia is faking her illness, he forces her to get out of bed and eat. Phyllisia is too scared of him to protest.

Unwilling to defy her father, she is too scared to go see Edith, so she reestablishes her friendship with Marian. Ruby wants to go to a party at Marian's house, and persuades Phyllisia to come along. When they arrive, Marian's boyfriend makes advances towards Phyllisia; upset, she flees to Edith's apartment. Yet, when she arrives, she is afraid to face Edith and retreats, returning home. As Phyllisia approaches her house, she sees Calvin threatening Ruby with punishment for going out with boys. Calvin decrees that his daughters may only leave the house to go to school.

At first, Phyllisia complies with Calvin's orders, but gradually she begins to disobey, staying out later. She tells Calvin's friends that her father has gone mad, and they convince Calvin to give the girls more freedom. When Phyllisia begins skipping school to have a relationship with a boy, Calvin decides to ship both girls back to the West Indies to live with his family.

Phyllisia goes to say goodbye to Edith, and finds her alone in her apartment. Edith tells Phyllisia that two of her sisters have been taken away, and her father, brother, and youngest sister have died. Phyllisia realizes that she should have been there for Edith, and promises to would keep in touch after she returns to the West Indies. After her visit, Phyllisia returns home to talk with her father. As they converse, they are able to clear the air, realizing that they need to communicate with each other in order to have a better relationship. At the last, Calvin agrees not to send the girls away to the Island, but to let them stay in Harlem.



# Chapters 1-4

## Summary

The Friends is set in Harlem, New York during the 1960s. The novel begins with a description of Edith Jackson, a young girl who disobeys her teacher's rules. Phyllisia Cathy, a student in the same classroom, observes Edith's disrespect towards Miss Lass, a white teacher who is afraid of her black students. Phyllisia notices that Edith tries to be friendly, yet she considers herself better than Edith, due to her higher social standing. Phyllisia is from the West Indies, and she looks down on the native New Yorkers, especially the poor people. Phyllisia also believes that she is smarter, so she is always the first to answer Miss Lass' questions. Because of this, many of the other students bully Phyllisia. After class one day, a larger student and her friends beat up Phyllisia.

When Phyllisia arrives home after being beaten, her mother, Ramona, is shocked. She is also surprised to discover out that other students make fun of children who are smart. Ruby, Ramona's oldest daughter, admits that she pretends to be dumb so she can be popular. The girls' father, Calvin, encourages Phyllisia to fight back. He claims that daughters should be proud, as the Cathys are better than most people in Harlem. Calvin enjoys bragging about all of his nice things, especially to his friends, Mr. Charles and Cousin Frank; both men think Calvin should be less arrogant.

## Analysis

It is quickly made clear that racist themes will appear throughout the novel. Miss Lass is a white teacher who works in a predominately black school. She doesn't like her students, and she constantly belittles them and calls them derogatory words. At the same time, her students target her because of her skin color. Phyllisia also discriminates against her fellow students. She feels that, because she is from the Caribbean Islands, she is smarter and more refined than the other students, who are New York natives. This feeling of superiority explains why Phyllisia doesn't initially want to be friends with Edith. Edith is always crude and her appearance is disheveled; Phyllisia wants to foster friendships with pretty and tactful girls.

The Cathy family is comprised of many different kinds of personalities. Phyllisia, like her father, is proud, and wants people to think highly of her. Calvin believes that he is better than everyone else, and he wants everyone to recognize it. Ruby is an intelligent girl, but she is stuck on her looks and her popularity. She doesn't care if people think she is dumb, she would rather have friends. Ramona recognizes that her children need to be smart, but she is also caught up in other peoples' perception of her, albeit to a lesser extent than her husband. While each of the Cathys has a different way of showing his or her personality, they all place a high value on appearances.



## Vocabulary

monotonous, wiry, haughty, grudgingly, sulked, animosity, barring, girdled, belligerent, flourished, serpentine, dense, gesticulating, basin, aghast, ignoble



# Chapters 5-6

## Summary

The next day on the way to school, Phyllisia picks up a lead pipe, intending to use it for self defense. When she arrives, Edith joins her. She tells Phyllisia that she heard about the fight, and wants to help her. When they arrive at the classroom, Edith threatens the bully, who is shaken. This lets Phyllisia off the hook. At first, Phyllisia is angry at Edith because she will be expected to be nice to Edith in return for her help.

A few days later, Miss Lass begins picking on random people in the class. She intensifies the insults, saying that black people are all filthy like pigs; the students respond by calling Miss Lass a Jew. Phyllisia, upset at the yelling match, walks out of the classroom. Edith follows, and the two girls decide to skip school. As they explore New York City, Phyllisia realizes that she is having fun with Edith. While stopped at a corner store, Phyllisia notices that Edith has stolen a pencil sharpener.

## Analysis

At this point in the novel, Phyllisia still believes that her father is always right. She respects and admires him. On his advice, therefore, she decides to resort to violence to resolve her problems, even though her mother thinks she should focus instead on her education. Because Phyllisia is proud and independent, she gets angry at Edith for fighting her battle. She also knows that she is indebted to Edith for resolving the situation with the bully, which also upsets her, as she dislikes people she feels are beneath her. Phyllisia realizes that Edith is a formidable ally to have, as the other students seem to respond to her threats; however, she is still put off by Edith's disregard for her exterior appearance.

Miss Lass' outburst expresses an opinion common to some white people during the 1960s. Several vocal groups of white people claimed that black people were dirty and tainted; a threat to the "purity" of the white race. There are other racial undertones as students begin calling Miss Lass a Jew, which upsets her. Whether or not she actually is Jewish, the taunt is meant to be slanderous. Many Americans were angry over the influx of Jewish immigrants during the Nazi occupation of Europe, so anti-Semitism was common for years even after the occupation ended. To this day, racism in all forms, including racial anti-Semitism, has not been eradicated in the U.S.

## Vocabulary

sullenly, grimly, obstinate, ebbed, furtively, averted, covertly, clouted, protruded, insipidly, acidly, bristled



# Chapters 7-8

## Summary

After seeing Edith steal, Phyllisia reminds herself that Edith is not of her social class, and thus, is not a suitable friend. On their way back to Harlem the girls are caught up in the middle of a riot. It seems as if Phyllisia is going to be trampled, but Edith pulls her out just in time. On the way to Edith's house, Phyllisia sees her father Calvin in the riot, and hopes that he hasn't seen her. When they arrive at Edith's house, Phyllisia is appalled at how barren the apartment is. She meets Edith's family, and notices that they are all as shabby as Edith. Edith tells Phyllisia that her mother died in this same apartment; Phyllisia is disturbed and immediately leaves, running back to her own home.

Meanwhile, Calvin is bragging to Mr. Charles and Cousin Frank about his part in the riot, telling them he had played a major role, and that no cops were able to bring him down. When he sees Phyllisia, he confirms that he saw her in the mess, and asks her what she was doing there. Phyllisia recounts the story of the argument, how it was started by Miss Lass, and how she left school to avoid having any part of it. Mr. Charles and Cousin Frank are appalled that a teacher would say such horrible things to children, and are puzzled at Calvin's apparent lack of concern. After Mr. Charles and Frank leave, Calvin threatens Phyllisia, saying he saw her with a poor "ragamuffin." He forbids his daughter to be friends with anyone like Edith from now on.

## Analysis

This section shows the beginning of the divide between Phyllisia and her father. Seeing Calvin in the riot is the first time she feels truly afraid of him. Phyllisia wants her father to respect and adore her; she knows that by being caught skipping school she has let him down and likely damaged their relationship. It becomes clear that Calvin cares more about social standing than education when he is less upset by her leaving school than he is by the fact that Phyllisia is seen with Edith, a person he feels is unworthy of his daughter's friendship.

Calvin's prejudice is based solely on social class. Calvin has it in his mind that the Cathy family is special. Because they are from the West Indies, he believes they are more civilized than the New York City natives. Even though his family is also made fun of because of their heritage, he wants his daughters to be proud that they weren't born in New York. He considers most New York natives to be scum because they live in squalor. When he sees Edith, even for a split second during the riot, he judges her to be unworthy of his family's attention. In an effort to preserve the appearance of his family's social standing, he forbids Phyllisia to see her again.





## Vocabulary

maneuvered, ferocious, snarled, horde, mohair, wispy, prevailed, bypassed, diminishing, demise, indignation



# Chapters 9-11

## Summary

By summer, Edith and Phyllisia are meeting each other nearly every day in Central Park. Ramona is ill and getting worse daily, but Phyllisia visits Edith whenever she isn't taking care of her mother. Phyllisia tells Edith that her father is becoming increasingly controlling, exaggerating the stories to make them seem more egregious. Ever since seeing Edith again, Phyllisia has had to lie to her father about where she is going when she leaves the house. Still, Phyllisia uses her father's success to make Edith jealous. She boasts to Edith about Calvin's upscale restaurant, a fancy place with suited waiters. At home, Ramona pulls Phyllisia aside. She tells her daughter she is glad that she has a good friend like Edith. She asks Phyllisia to bring Edith over one day to visit, but Phyllisia resists, as she is ashamed of Edith and her appearance.

Days later, Phyllisia visits Edith's apartment. She apologizes for not coming earlier, and notices that Edith is distracted. She soon finds out the reason: Edith's father has disappeared. One day, he didn't come home from work and, since then, Edith has been trying to care for her sisters. Edith is worried that children's services will take her and her three younger sisters away, so she makes Phyllisia promise not to tell. In order to take care of her family, Edith has to drop out of school, and Phyllisia begins to drift away from her. She makes friends with Marian, a popular girl whom she had admired at school. Marian, though, seems obsessed with Ruby because she is pretty. At the Cathy home, the atmosphere is becoming tense. Ramona is pulling away from the family and has mood swings. One day, as Calvin comes home angry and looking for Ramona, she comes out in a trance. She begins ranting about the emphasis the Cathy family has placed on beauty. She reveals her bare chest, allowing her daughter to see that her breast has been removed due to cancer.

## Analysis

Phyllisia's relationship with Calvin continues to decline as time goes on. By the time summer arrives, she detests her father and makes up stories about how he mistreats her. Still, she uses his restaurant as a way to make Edith jealous of her family's wealth. Edith, however, doesn't seem to fall for the trap that Phyllisia sets. She ignores the comments about Phyllisia's higher social status and instead focuses on topics that are friendly. She is concerned for Phyllisia's mother and her ailing health, and she wants Phyllisia to enjoy the time that she has with her mother. Despite Edith's genuine concern for her, Phyllisia has difficulties realizing that Edith is her only true friend, and keeps trying to prove to Edith that the Cathy family is special.

Ramona's speech about beauty is a poignant moment in the novel. For the first half of the story, Ramona, like the rest of the Cathys, has shown signs of being obsessed over beauty. She might praise Ruby over Phyllisia, or beam whenever someone mentions



that she is beautiful. But during her illness (though it is never overtly stated that she has breast cancer), she finds that holding onto physical beauty is detrimental. Now that her breast is gone, Ramona realizes that she has put so much emphasis on looks that she has little else going for her. Because of this, Ramona pushes Phyllisia to make good friends and do well in school. She wants to teach her daughters that beauty will one day fade.

## Vocabulary

deliberately, grandstand, unblemished, unmanageable, impulsively, glibly, swanky, invalidate, enormity, pneumonia, plead, finality, relented, oppressive, frivolous, domineering, infectious, bier, engulf, eerie



# Chapters 12-15

## Summary

A new boy moves to Phyllisia's neighborhood, and begins to show interest in her. This infuriates Marian, but Phyllisia is elated that the boy finds her prettier. She feels she is beginning to look pretty, an important quality to her family. When Phyllisia tells her sister Ruby about the boy, Ruby responds by saying that boys from New York City aren't honorable. While this upsets Phyllisia, other problems take precedence. Watching as her mother's health continues to decline daily, she can't stand being alone with her; finally she breaks down and asks Edith to come over.

Upon arriving at Phyllisia's house, Edith heads straight to Ramona and begins talking about her life. Ruby joins the conversation, which is civil and pleasant. Phyllisia knows she should be happy, but she is upset that Edith hasn't gawked over the house's appearance. She wants Edith to be impressed; jealous of all the nice things the Cathy family owns. As Ramona and Ruby muse about how poor they used to be on the Island, Phyllisia begins to insist that she was never poor in her life; she wants Edith to think that her family was always wealthy. Calvin arrives home, after which he kicks Edith out.

Later that night, Ramona calls Phyllisia into her room. She gently admonishes her, insisting that she will one day regret the things she said in front of Edith. She apologizes to her daughter for the way she and Calvin have placed such a high priority on appearances. Then, just days after, Ramona dies. Although the family is bereaved, neither Calvin nor Phyllisia cry. At the funeral, however, Calvin breaks down and Ruby faints. Despondent, Phyllisia realizes that she needs a friend, and tries to run out of the funeral to find Edith.

## Analysis

Phyllisia is a young teenage girl, and is naturally excited that a boy is beginning to show her attention, as it proves, in her mind, that she is becoming attractive. However, her new "friend" Marian is not happy for her, as she is used to being the center of attention. Phyllisia and Marian's friendship is strictly superficial. Phyllisia wants to be Marian's friend because Marian is pretty, and Marian wants to be Phyllisia's friend because she admires Ruby, Phyllisia's sister and wants to be like her. Marian became friends with Phyllisia only to get closer to Ruby. When a boy chooses Phyllisia over Marian, Marian is upset because it means that Phyllisia might contest her in appearance.

Phyllisia's outburst in front of Edith is brought on by months of frustration. Phyllisia desperately wants Edith to be jealous, and admit that Phyllisia and her family are better than Edith's. Although she initially did want Edith to make her mother feel better and cheer her up when she was sad, her true intention was to show off in front of her friend. She didn't want Edith to know that the Cathy family wasn't always rich and glamorous.



The Cathys had a hard life on the island, but when this fact is revealed to Edith by Ramona and Ruby, Phyllisia becomes distraught; she doesn't want to admit her family was ever poor, like Edith's. When Calvin arrives home and kicks Edith out of the house, Phyllisia is, in a way, satisfied, as Calvin reinforces her belief in the Cathys' superiority.

Ramona's intuition tells her that Phyllisia isn't entirely as hard as her father. She sees enough of Calvin's attitude within Phyllisia to make her daughter's life difficult, but she knows Phyllisia still has a sense of humanity and kindness within her. During their conversation, Ramona tries to convince Phyllisia that she will someday regret treating Edith like a second-class citizen. She wants Phyllisia to realize that Edith is special because she is a good person. It doesn't matter how much money the Jacksons have, Edith has always been there for Phyllisia when she needs it, even when Edith's own world was falling apart. Ramona knows that a friendship like that is rare, and she doesn't want her daughter to waste it.

## Vocabulary

deliberately, incredulous, disposition, moderating, impersonal, wistful, prying, rebuke, sooty, impassioned, incredulous, efficiently, condemning, translucent, inevitably, complacent, vulturelike, nestled, abundance, gaping



# Chapters 16-17

## Summary

Phyllisia is having constant nightmares, which are making her ill. In her dreams, she sees a ghostly female figure bemoaning the guilt that Phyllisia carries over yelling at Edith. While Phyllisia can hardly eat or move from the bed, Ruby tries to nurse Phyllisia to health. When nothing seems to work, Calvin forces Phyllisia to eat. Although it makes Phyllisia sick at first, she doesn't want her father to think she is weak. Rather, she wants to prove to him that she is superior to him. Things have grown tense between Calvin and his daughters, as both Ruby and Phyllisia are sick of Calvin and his constant bragging.

Phyllisia longs to see Edith, and blames Calvin for not letting her go. Calvin has ruled that both Ruby and Phyllisia have to stay at home at all times when they are not at school. If they are allowed to go anywhere, both girls have to go together. One night, Ruby begs Phyllisia to go to a party that Marian was having. Ruby's boyfriend, whom she never gets to see because of Calvin's new rules, is going to be there, and Ruby is excited about the opportunity to see him. With much reluctance, Phyllisia attends the party with Ruby. At the party, the boy that Phyllisia likes is there with Marian. Things go well until the boy begins talking to Phyllisia instead of Marian. Marian's mother admonishes him, and Phyllisia runs from the party, tired of Marion's backstabbing and jealousy. She decides that she wants to see Edith, and runs toward her apartment.

## Analysis

Phyllisia's nightmares aren't of a real ghost; it's not her mother coming back to haunt her. Instead, the dreams are caused by Phyllisia's own guilt over hurting Edith's feelings. Ramona was right in that Phyllisia regrets treating Edith badly, and now Phyllisia doesn't know how to handle it. Her illness, which keeps her away from school and unable to eat, is her way of punishing herself. Calvin sees right through this, though, and he will not allow Phyllisia to feel sorry for herself. He insists that she eat, and Phyllisia sees this as a form of control, which she resents; she hates Calvin even more for forcing her out of her own self-pity.

At the party, Phyllisia catches a glimpse into the world that she desperately wants to be a part of. Surrounded by beautiful girls and boys, she was gets attention from one she likes. But Marian's jealousy and need for attention is so cutthroat that it makes Phyllisia extremely angry. She finally sees that nobody in the room is sincere; they only want to be the center of attention, surrounded by other pretty people. Girls like Marion only use Phyllisia and her plain appearance to make themselves feel even more beautiful. Instead, Phyllisia decides she wants to be around someone who can be a true friend.

## Vocabulary

deformity, submerged, mania, vindictive, smugly, adroitly, mortars, frivolity, insipid, peevisly, maliciously, compensated, sheepishly



# Chapters 18-20

## Summary

Phyllisia reaches Edith's apartment building, but hesitates to go in, as it is a bad neighborhood and she feels she might be in danger. Phyllisia also remembers hearing that Edith's older brother had been shot trying to run away from the police. She was afraid that if the police were canvassing the apartment, they would surely tell Calvin that she had come to Edith's house. Too afraid to proceed, Phyllisia turns and heads home. When she reaches their apartment, she sees Ruby's boyfriend outside, obviously beaten. Inside, Calvin is beating Ruby, berating her for being out with a boy. Later that night, Ruby defends Calvin, insisting that they need to explain things to him. Phyllisia, on the other hand, says she would rather put up with his torture than beg him for forgiveness.

While the two girls are cooped up in the apartment, Mr. Charles and Cousin Frank came in. They try to talk with the girls, but Phyllisia believes that Calvin had sent them to spy, and won't speak to them. Ruby, grateful for the company, talks with them both, revealing to her father's friends how Calvin has been treating them. The men are shocked. When Calvin comes home, the two men tell Calvin that he shouldn't treat the two teenage girls as if they were his hostages. They suggest sending Ruby and Phyllisia back to the West Indies, but Calvin says no, He wants both of his girls to be with him. Ruby is touched at her father's admission, but Phyllisia is not. Phyllisia decides she wants Calvin to send them back in order to hurt him, so she starts dating a boy named Jose. They meet daily in Central Park, and Phyllisia doesn't even try to hide the fact that she has a boyfriend.

## Analysis

Phyllisia always blames Calvin for her neglecting to see Edith. Some way or another, her mental picture of Calvin always gets in the way of her wants. It seems, however, as though Phyllisia is making up excuses for not seeing Edith. She still feels guilty about how their last encounter ended, and she doesn't want to face Edith because she believes that Edith will still be nice to her, even if she doesn't deserve it. Phyllisia brings her mental image of Calvin back home and projects it onto the real Calvin. She wants to see her father as the bad man in order to assuage her own guilt.

Mr. Charles and Cousin Frank are two of the only levelheaded characters close to the Cathy family. Each time they appear, they attempt to bring order and civility back into the family in order to patch up the rifts that have formed. Phyllisia, though, sees them as merely an extension of her father. While they do originally come to the house to check on the girls for Calvin, they sincerely wish to help and support them as well. His friends were shocked that Calvin would treat his daughters like prisoners, and confront him out of a true desire to help. Their suggestion to ship both girls back to the West Indies is partly so the girls will no longer have to live under Calvin's authoritative rule.



## Vocabulary

pendulum, astonished, dubiously, rebuked, fete, quipped sardonically, gallivanting, intervened, emphatic, tartly, provocative, glib, spiting



# Chapters 21-23

## Summary

At home, Mr. Charles and Cousin Frank wait for Phyllisia. Calvin has stormed out, angry over Phyllisia's dating, and the two men are there to try to patch the father-daughter relationship back together. The two men take Ruby and Phyllisia to Calvin's restaurant, and Phyllisia is surprised to see an overcrowded place with grimy men drinking and eating with little tact. Phyllisia sees now that her father is working as a short-order cook. He tells the four of them that he has made up his mind: Ruby and Phyllisia will return to the West Indies.

Although this is ostensibly what she wanted, Phyllisia takes the news hard. All she can think about is going to see Edith one last time before she leaves. She runs to Edith's house and enters, only to find that Edith is the only one there. Phyllisia asks her what has happened, and Edith tells her that things have gone downhill since her father went missing. Her older brother had been killed by the police, and her two youngest sisters were taken away by children's services. Unfortunately, the youngest one has just died from a rapid sickness. Now Edith is just waiting for someone to come and take her away to children's services as well. Phyllisia and Edith say their goodbyes, and Phyllisia leaves.

Phyllisia returns home to find Calvin packing her things. She accuses Calvin of not letting her see her best friend in months, blaming him for everything that has happened to Edith. As they begin talking, Phyllisia realizes that her father is not the monster she has made him out to be. She acknowledges that she has made up aggrandized falsehoods about him to cover up for her own inadequacies. After their talk, the two feel closer, and Calvin changes his mind, deciding to let the girls stay in New York City.

## Analysis

While Calvin is controlling of his daughters, Phyllisia shows time and time again that she doesn't actually care about going to see Edith as much as she claims. She makes time to go see Jose or go wherever else she pleases, yet blames her father, saying it is Calvin's fault that she doesn't see Edith. Phyllisia's imagined reality begins to break down, though, when she sees Calvin's restaurant. It wasn't the elegant establishment she once imagined, and she is shocked by the difference between her vision and reality. Now rather than seeing her father on the top tier of the social chain, she sees that has to serve others as a subordinate. He has to struggle to survive, just like Edith.

When Phyllisia finally goes to see Edith, it is the first time that she treats Edith like a true friend. For once, she doesn't immediately make the entire conversation about herself or her family's situation. She sees that Edith is truly hurting, and feels sorry for her. Edith gives up her entire childhood to salvage her family, and it is all for nothing because they



become separated, either by death or by legal intervention. At last, Phyllisia sees that Edith just needs a friend, someone to lean on for a while. Phyllisia responds with maturity and compassion, becoming strong for the person she called her best friend.

Phyllisia and Calvin finally make amends at the end of the novel. The events of the past few days have stricken Phyllisia hard, and uncovers the harsh reality that her father isn't the perfect man he's claimed to be. She becomes aware of the similarities between Calvin and herself, in that they have placed a high priority on appearance and social standing. She also accepts the fact that making outward appearances and social standing one's main focus in life is wrong. In trying to make amends, both father and daughter recognize their shared weakness and address it with each other. In this way alone, their relationship can begin to mend.

## Vocabulary

evasively, resolved, gallivanting, lisping, disheveled, withering, mockery, revelation, rickety, agitated, dictated, deprivation, prying, unrelenting, cringe



# Characters

## Phyllisia Cathy

Phyllisia Cathy is a young teenage girl. She emigrates with her parents from the West Indies to Harlem, New York in the 1960s. She is teased and bullied at school because she thinks she is better than everyone else in her class. She becomes superficial friends with Edith Jackson while dealing with difficulties at home. Her older sister is prettier than her, and she constantly lives in her family's shadow.

Phyllisia deals with problems pertaining to self-worth. She wants people to think that she and her family are wealthy, so Phyllisia puts on an air of sophistication. She believes that people are beneath her because they are less wealthy. She tries to surround herself with people she thinks are beautiful and popular, although she doesn't actually like them. Instead, it takes her a difficult journey to find that Edith is her true friend. It is almost too late before Phyllisia begins reciprocating Edith's friendship.

## Edith Jackson

Edith Jackson is a teenage girl who lives in Harlem, New York. Nobody really likes Edith, but they respect her because she is confident. For some reason, Edith is determined to become friends with Phyllisia. However, she doesn't want to be friends with Phyllisia just because Phyllisia has more money. She actually likes Phyllisia. It isn't until Edith stands up for Phyllisia that Phyllisia begins giving Edith friendly attention.

Edith comes from a very poor family. She and her brother are both thieves, and her mother has died. When he is at home, her father sits in a chair while Edith takes care of the entire family. She has three younger sisters as well as a brother. She has to drop out of school and become a housekeeper to make ends meet. At the end of the novel, two of Edith's sisters get taken away to protective custody, the youngest dies, and her brother is shot. She doesn't know what happens to her father, as he goes missing.

## Ruby Cathy

Ruby Cathy is Phyllisia's older sister. Phyllisia describes her as more beautiful than herself. She doesn't want to associate with Ruby; she thinks that Ruby and her friends are artificial and selfish. There are times when Ruby belittles Phyllisia and Edith because of their looks. She is also catty and gets bored easily. Ruby is very social, and she needs constant attention from someone because she is so obsessed with herself.

While Ruby is concerned with her appearance, she turns out to be very concerned with her family's well-being. When their mother is dying, Ruby takes it upon herself to see that Ramona is comfortable. She also tries to nurse Phyllisia back to health. When Calvin becomes agitated with the girls, Ruby wants to pacify the situation and make



peace. Sometimes she lapses back into her old self, but by the end of the novel, Ruby has transformed into a girl who is concerned about her family's relationship with each other.

## Calvin Cathy

Calvin Cathy is Phyllisia's father. He is a loud man who takes pride in his possessions. Due to his domineering and controlling nature, he also treats his family as possessions. He owns a restaurant and spends the majority of his time working. At first, Phyllisia believes that her father is completely infallible. Even though she has never seen it, Phyllisia thinks that Calvin's restaurant is a grand, spectacular place that caters to only the wealthiest, most exclusive people. Later, Phyllisia begins to think that her father is an overprotective jerk. By the end of the novel, she sees her father as a man who is just trying to give his family the best life possible. She sees that Calvin works in a small, sweaty, overcrowded restaurant that serves poor and vulgar people. Her image of Calvin is shattered, however, this is the catalyst which allows the two to mend their relationship.

## Ramona Cathy

Ramona Cathy is Phyllisia's mother. Phyllisia describes her as the most beautiful woman she knows, and many of the other characters tend to drift toward her because of her beauty and wonderful personality. Ramona has a different attitude than her husband; she wants her daughters to grow up respectful and with tact. However, she subconsciously still places a heavy weight on beauty. It is revealed later that Ramona has breast cancer. One night, she shows her daughters the scar on her chest where her breast was removed. She does this to prove that beauty wasn't all-important because beauty is temporary and can be taken away in an instant. As she becomes more ill, Ramona begins losing her mental faculties. After her death, Phyllisia sees the phantom of her mother in her dreams reminding her of the guilt she has.

## Marian

Marian is Phyllisia's neighbor. She is described as light brown and extremely pretty. Phyllisia often dreams about being her best friend at the beginning of the novel. Phyllisia later realizes that Marian is superficial and is not a true friend. Marian is jealous of the attention that Phyllisia gets from boys. She often puts Phyllisia down to make herself feel better. By the end of the novel, Phyllisia is wary of Marian and her selfishness.

## Miss Lass

Miss Lass is Phyllisia and Edith's teacher. She is a white woman teaching at a primarily black school in Harlem, New York. Phyllisia hates Miss Lass because Miss Lass always



picks her to be the class pet and answer all the questions. This causes the other students to pick on Phyllisia. Phyllisia, though, realizes that Miss Lass is diverting attention from herself. The other students are hateful toward Miss Lass, so she causes her students to bully Phyllisia instead. Miss Lass is called a Jew by the students, though it is never revealed whether or not Miss Lass is actually Jewish. Instead, she reacts violently to the insult and hurls back more slanderous terms at her students.

## **Jose**

Jose is Phyllisia's boyfriend. Near the end of the novel they skip school together and form a fast relationship. Their relationship almost becomes sexual after Phyllisia begins having problems with her family. While Phyllisia thinks that she is in love with Jose, she also uses him as a way to anger her father.

## **Mr. Charles and Cousin Frank**

Mr. Charles and Cousin Frank are two of Calvin and Ramona's friends. They often come over to see Calvin and help assuage his anger and aggression. While many of the central characters are focused on their own desires, Mr. Charles and Cousin Frank represent the voices of reason. Calvin uses them to spy on his daughters, but when they learn that Calvin is tyrannical in his obsession to protect his daughters from New York City and all the Americanization that can happen to two young, impressionable girls, they stand up to him in support of Ruby and Phyllisia.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Harlem, NY**

Phyllisia and her family live in Harlem, NY.

### **The West Indies**

Phyllisia and her family emigrated from the West Indies.

### **Central Park**

Edith and Phyllisia went to Central Park in Manhattan. Phyllisia often meets Edith, and later her boyfriend, Jose, in Central Park.

### **Phyllisia's Apartment**

Phyllisia's apartment is very elaborately decorated, and she brags about it to Edith.

### **Edith's Apartment**

Edith's apartment is barren because her family is poor.

### **Calvin's Restaurant**

Phyllisia brags about how grand Calvin's restaurant is, even though she hasn't seen it. When she finally does, it is the opposite of what she imagined it to be.

### **Lead Pipe**

Phyllisia picks up a lead pipe to use as a weapon against school bullies.

### **Pencil Sharpener**

Edith steals a pencil sharpener from a store, and Phyllisia sees her do it.



## **The Haunting**

After Phyllisia's mother dies, she is haunted by a ghost that reminds her of her mother, but really symbolizes her guilt over her rejection of Edith.

## **Operation Foodstrap**

When Phyllisia doesn't eat, Calvin forces Phyllisia to eat food every day, referring to it as Operation Foodstrap.



# Themes

## Friendship

With a novel called *The Friends*, it is no surprise that it has friendship as a theme. The novel is told from the standpoint of Phyllisia, a young girl who doesn't have any friends after she moves to Harlem, New York. At first, Phyllisia is too proud to make friends with people she feels are beneath her. She only wants to be friends with pretty and popular girls. They, however, don't want to be friends with her because Phyllisia is plain. For the majority of the novel, "friendship" is defined by superficiality.

It is a hard lesson for Phyllisia to learn, but through her constancy, Edith Jackson shows her that friendship means more than shared beauty. Friendship is substantial; one friend will be there when the other needs them. For example, Edith comes to see Phyllisia's mother when she is dying. Phyllisia asks Edith to come and lighten the mood, and Edith complies, helping Ramona break out of her depression. Phyllisia, however, keeps putting off visiting Edith until it is almost too late. It is only then that Phyllisia realizes that Edith is the only person who was always there for her and her family.

## Racism

The setting of *The Friends* is 1960s' Harlem, New York. During this time, many of the anti-segregation laws have already been put into place, however, black people still have to struggle to secure equal rights. Many white people remain afraid of black people, and prefer to keep the races segregated as much as possible despite the changing times. Miss Lass, a white woman teaching school in Harlem shows her fear of and discomfort with her students by belittling them to the point of overt racial insults. The friction between black and white resulted in riots all over the U.S. Phyllisia and Edith get caught in a riot in Harlem when they skip school, and Phyllisia almost gets trampled. Her father, Calvin, is involved in this riot.

Racism also shows itself within the black community as well. Marian, who is considered to be very pretty, is described as "light-skinned." Some immigrants from the West Indies, such as Phyllisia's, don't consider themselves black, even though they are dark-skinned. Although this is never specifically mentioned in the novel, perhaps this is part of the reason Calvin thinks of his family as superior.

At the beginning of the novel, the students accuse Miss Lass of being a Jew. This was used as a slanderous term for a long time, but especially in America after World War II. Many Jewish people flocked to America from Nazi-occupied Europe. Many Americans felt that their country was being overrun by immigrants, and anti-semitism grew; people began speaking derogatory things about Jewish people. Whether or not Miss Lass is actually Jewish is not revealed in the novel, however, the students use the term to hurt

Miss Lass, who is obviously upset by the accusation. Both sides recognize that being called a “Jew” is not considered a compliment.

## **America’s Influence**

The Americanization process is something that happens to all immigrants, especially the younger generations. The Cathy family is from the West Indies, so initially Phyllisia had a very different upbringing than many in America. Children in the West Indies are taught to be respectful of adults, and the Cathy children used to play outside all the time with their friends on the island. Phyllisia and Ruby are both intelligent and well educated from the lessons they received from school. However, once they came to America, the girls discover that being smart and playful make them enemies rather than friends. Ruby admits that she stopped being “smart” in order to make friends. Phyllisia begins skipping school to get back at her father.

According to Calvin, moving to America has harmed his children’s education and morals. He sees that his children are looking to become friends with the kids in Harlem, and he doesn’t want that. He knows that there are many people who might serve as a bad influence to his daughters, and he wants to protect them from that as much as possible. He controls his daughters’ lives because he fears their Americanization. He has formed strong opinions about the kind of people who live in America; at his restaurant, men are crude and swear to no end. He doesn’t want either Ruby or Phyllisia to be exposed to this type of environment. For this reason, he seriously considers sending both girls back to the West Indies. He believes that they will be safer on the island than in New York City.

# Style

## Point of View

The novel is told in first person point of view. Phyllisia Cathy is the narrator, and very limited in her scope. Her voice is self-centered as she is a teenage girl who thinks only about herself. Because they are colored by her perceptions, the other characters' motives are skewed, and they do not get an accurate representation. Phyllisia is very biased; many characters are portrayed in a negative light.

## Setting

The story takes place in Harlem, New York City during the ' 1960s' Civil Rights Movement. Harlem is a very dangerous place during this time as many riots are occurring around the neighborhood. 1960s Harlem is a predominately black neighborhood, and many people there feel like they are oppressed and ignored by the government.

## Language and Meaning

The language in *The Friends* is very colloquial. The novel is written for youth, so the language is set at their level. Also, the novel's narrator is a teenage girl. Although Phyllisia is smart, there is a limit to the breadth of her language. This vernacular makes it easier for the teenage audiences to relate and understand Phyllisia and her problems.

## Structure

*The Friends* is divided into three parts, and each part has a varying number of chapters. Each part coincides with a stage of Phyllisia's growth as she comes to understand what being a true friend is. The structure is easy to follow and provides a beginning, middle and end to Phyllisia's story.

## Quotes

My face was burned with shame. Sitting there and not answering was like begging. And why should I beg? I had done nothing to anybody.

That is what is called the Americanization process. You start out in school with a head full of sense and when you leave, it is full of nonsense.

I was always pleased around Edith and her sisters. They all thought I was pretty, all except Ellen, the baby, and she thought I was “beautiful.

Proud? Proud indeed!” I recoiled from the venom of her attack. “It is a trick! This thing beauty they talk about. Believe me, it is a low trick put out by God self.” Her face was flushed with anger. “He puts meaning into beauty, and reduces the meaning to nothing.

It a boy looked at them, it was because they were the answer to glamour ads. But if it was me, the boy had to be thinking of rape!

Edith’s charm in getting past ordinary obstacles of politeness immediately began to melt the oppressiveness of the apartment. It ought to have melted my resentment, too. That was why I had brought her. But it didn’t. How dared she sit there pretending she was not impressed by her surroundings!

I only knew that I had somehow been defending some precious truth about myself—about them, and no one seemed to appreciate it.

Guilt carries its own sickness, but it also carries its own cure. But a memory can do nothing that will stand up against time and experience.

Say you! Never in all my days before or since, have I seen a male, be he dog, cat, or man, so bold as you. Don’t take that out on these children. True, the Bible say that the sins of the parents and all like that—but it ain’t mean it that way.

Then, just like that, it was clear. I had seen things the way I wanted them to be. I had wanted to be the unhappy princess living with the cruel king of a father. I had wanted to be the daughter of the owner of a big restaurant. Perhaps it was because the kids in school had been so hard on me. I didn’t know. But I had wanted to be rich, to live in luxury, so that I could feel superior to them—to people like Edith. Calvin never lied to me. I was the fraud.



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

Who is Phyllisia Cathy? What role does she play in the novel? Explain her personality. What are her positive and negative traits?

## Topic 2

Who is Edith Jackson? What role does she play in the novel? What is her family life like? How does she treat Phyllisia?

## Topic 3

Compare and contrast Ramona Cathy to Calvin Cathy. What is important to them? Do they share the exact same values? In what ways do they coincide and differ? Does anything change their ideas and perceptions?

## Topic 4

Who is Ruby Cathy? What role does she play in the novel? Explain her progression in the story. How does Ruby change?

## Topic 5

Who is Marian? Why does Marian become friends with Phyllisia? How does she treat Phyllisia? How does Phyllisia feel about this?

## Topic 6

Explain the title *The Friends*? Is the title ironic? How? Which people are friends in the story?

## Topic 7

What does Phyllisia think a friend is? What does Edith think a friend is? What values are important to each girl?



## Topic 8

Explain the setting of the novel. Why is the setting important? How does the time and place help explain events and themes in the novel?

## Topic 9

Discuss three instances of racism in the novel. Which characters are involved? Why do the characters feel this way?

## Topic 10

Which characters place an emphasis on beauty and appearance? How does each perceive beauty and its relative importance? Do any of these characters change their perceptions? In what way? How do their ideas and values change along with their perceptions?

## Topic 11

What is Americanization? Why is Calvin afraid of New York City's influence on his daughters? What makes him think that the city will change them? What is his solution for the problem?

## Topic 12

Explain Phyllisia's relationship with Calvin. What feelings does she have towards him at the beginning, middle, and end of the story? What changes these opinions? What realization does Phyllisia have about her father?