

Gathering Blue Study Guide

Gathering Blue by Lois Lowry

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Contents

Gathering Blue Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	4
About the Author.....	5
Plot Summary.....	7
Chapter 1.....	10
Chapter 2.....	11
Chapter 3.....	13
Chapter 4.....	14
Chapter 5.....	16
Chapter 6.....	18
Chapter 7.....	20
Chapter 8.....	22
Chapter 9.....	24
Chapter 10.....	26
Chapter 11.....	28
Chapter 12.....	29
Chapter 13.....	31
Chapter 14.....	33
Chapter 15.....	35
Chapter 16.....	37
Chapter 17.....	39
Chapter 18.....	41
Chapter 19.....	43
Chapter 20.....	44



[Chapter 21..... 46](#)

[Chapter 22..... 48](#)

[Chapter 23..... 50](#)

[Characters..... 52](#)

[Objects/Places..... 55](#)

[Setting..... 57](#)

[Social Sensitivity..... 58](#)

[Literary Qualities..... 59](#)

[Themes..... 61](#)

[Themes/Characters..... 64](#)

[Style..... 67](#)

[Quotes..... 70](#)

[Topics for Discussion..... 72](#)

[Essay Topics..... 74](#)

[Ideas for Reports and Papers..... 75](#)

[Further Study..... 76](#)

[Related Titles..... 77](#)

[Copyright Information..... 78](#)

Overview

Gathering Blue, published in 2000, offers a disturbing yet hopeful view of the future that challenges readers to reflect critically on the social values and political directions of the present. It is the story of Kira, an extraordinarily talented young girl who finds herself suddenly orphaned and taken to live in a mysterious government compound near the center of her village. There she meets other equally talented and creative children, and together they discover the truth about themselves, their parents, and their society. In the end, Kira learns that in order for her village to survive and to prosper, she must overcome her own fears and break down age-old patterns of superstition and isolation so that she may "gather the blue."

About the Author

Two time Newbery Medal winner Lois Lowry was born March 20, 1937, in Honolulu, Hawaii. Her father, Major Robert E. Hammersberg, was a dentist serving in the same army hospital where Lois was born. Lois's mother, Katherine, was a schoolteacher. Lois has an older sister, Helen, and a younger brother, Jon.

In 1940, the Army moved the Hammersbergs to New York, and in 1942, after the outbreak of WWII, Lois's father was posted to the Pacific theater. Lois's mother then moved Lois and her sister to Amish Country in Pennsylvania to live near her mother's family. This early, prolonged separation from her beloved father and the very close relationships that it engendered between Lois, her mother, and her two siblings strongly influenced many of the books that she would later write.

Jealous of her older sister's newly learned skill and fascinated by the relationship between letters and sounds, Lois learned to read when she was only three years old.

Lois has always liked doing things on her own terms and in her own way. Even as a very young girl, she preferred reading to the more typical children's games and pastimes. Partly because of her exceptional reading ability, Lois was allowed to skip second grade and graduated from an all girls' high school at the age of sixteen. Even then she knew she wanted to become a novelist.

When Lois was nineteen, she dropped out of college to marry a young naval officer, becoming Lois Lowry. She has four children and many grandchildren, many of whom would figure prominently in Lois's many novels. In 1973, at the age of thirty-six, Lois finally received a college degree.

She began publishing short stories soon after. Her first novel, *A Summer to Die*, about a teenager's struggle to come to terms with her older sister's death, was published in 1977. Illustrating the many parallels between Lois's own experiences and her stories, Lois lost her own older sister to cancer when Helen was just twenty-eight. Loss of a loved one is a frequent theme in Lowry's novels. Lowry was divorced at age forty, just as she was beginning her writing career.

Lowry's many succeeding novels continue to chronicle the lives of typical adolescents who have found themselves in exceptional times or situations. Notable among these are the several novels featuring her precocious teenage protagonist, Anastasia Krupnik, whom Lowry claims she patterned after her two "quite nutty" daughters. In addition to patterning many of her characters after family members and friends, Lowry's novels are often partly autobiographical in nature. For instance, *Autumn Street* is about how a character named Elizabeth Lorimer moves into her grandfather's house in Pennsylvania at the outset of WWII, just as Lowry herself had done. Lowry has always had an affinity for animals, especially horses and dogs. All of Lowry's novels involve animals in some way, often a dog, like Branchie in *Gathering Blue*.



Lowry claims she always starts a book knowing how it will begin and how it will end. She writes on a regular basis, whenever she is at home. She advises others who want to write for young people to read as much as possible, reflecting her own lifelong love of books and reading.



Plot Summary

In a simple village best described as a future-past society, a small group of officials, known as the Council of Guardians, rules over the populace. The Guardians live in the only modern structure in the village, the Edifice, where they administer the laws of their people, while maintaining their history by performing an annual ritual called the Ruin Song. An ornate robe depicting scenes from the song and an intricately carved staff, both of which require extremely skilled care, aids the Singer of the Ruin Song.

Gathering Blue is a tale of two teenagers both blessed and cursed with the skills necessary to care for these objects, and their gifts will lead them to discover some unpleasant truths about the Guardians and their society as a whole.

Kira, a teenage girl with a leg deformed from birth, has just bid farewell to her dead mother. Fierce beasts had dragged off her father before Kira was born. Her society scorns the infirm, usually casting them aside and leaving them to die. Unsure of her future, Kira returns to her home and finds her neighbors attempting to take control of her land. After a potentially fatal confrontation with Kira's neighbors, led by an aggressive woman named Vandara, it is agreed that the fate of Kira's home will be decided by the Council of Guardians, the leaders of the village who reside in an impressive building known as the Edifice.

The Edifice is a remnant of an ancient society and is the only conventionally modern building in the village. The council hears Vandara's case against Kira, and a Guardian named Jamison is appointed to represent Kira. Jamison is familiar with Kira's family and is aware she possesses an extraordinary skill in needlecraft. The council decides that Vandara may take Kira's land but that Kira's life will be spared. She will reside in the Edifice and assume the role her mother filled before her death as the keeper of the Singer's robe.

Kira's village relies on an oral history known as the Ruin Song that is sung once a year by the Singer, who wears an elaborate garment depicting scenes from the song. The Singer also carries a staff that helps him or her maintain his or her place in the Song. Both of these objects require much skilled care, and Kira is recruited to take care of the robe.

Kira moves into the Edifice with the help of her young friend, Matt, and she soon meets Thomas, a boy about the same age as Kira, who has also become a ward of the Guardians after his parents were killed. It is Thomas' job to maintain the Singer's staff with his skill in woodworking.

Kira soon begins studying the art of dyeing under an old woman named Annabella at her home deep in the woods. Annabella tutors Kira in the cultivation and use of various plants to make different colored dyes, which she will use to make thread to maintain the robe. When Kira asks if the old woman can make blue thread, a rarity in Kira's village, Annabella says she lacks the necessary plants to make the dye. She mentions others



that live far down an old path leading away from her home that have the means to make blue.

Kira and Thomas become friends as they tend to their daily duties, and Matt, along with his dog Branch, becomes like a little brother to them. Jamison mentors Kira as her skills develop under Annabella's tutelage, making sure Kira performs her duties in time to be ready for the Gathering, at which the Singer will officiate the annual ceremony of the Ruin Song.

Kira travels each day by foot through the forest to study with Annabella and learns much about the art of dyeing from the old woman. Meanwhile, Matt continues to visit her frequently at the Edifice, spending as much time as possible away from his dismal home in a poor area known as the Fen.

During one of Kira's trips to Annabella's cot, Kira is certain she hears unseen beasts in the forest stalking her. When she tells Annabella about her harrowing journey, the old woman dismisses the idea that there are beasts in the forest, and Kira soon brings the conversation up with Jamison. Jamison seems visibly upset by Annabella's claims that there are no beasts, stating that such talk is dangerous.

Over time, Thomas becomes convinced that he keeps hearing a crying child somewhere in the Edifice, and he, Kira and Matt investigate one rainy day. Living in a locked room directly below Thomas', they find a very young, frightened girl named Jo. Matt is familiar with the girl, since she is known throughout the Fen for her beautiful singing voice. Kira befriends Jo by speaking through the locked door's keyhole on a subsequent visit, and with the aid of a wooden key Thomas carved as a boy, Kira secretly visits Jo in her room almost daily.

Two days after she spoke out against the existence of beasts in the forest, Annabella is found dead in her home. Kira is shocked by the news and begins to think that Annabella's death may not have been a natural one. Both Kira and Thomas begin to have suspicions that the Guardians are responsible for the deaths of their parents, but they keep their ideas to themselves.

Kira and Thomas finish their work on their respective objects after months of painstaking toil, and they notice that Matt has not been seen for a few days. They travel to Matt's home in the Fen and learn that Matt has gone in search of a gift for Kira.

The time of the Gathering arrives, and the entire village converges on the Edifice to hear the Ruin Song. Kira and Thomas are treated with great respect for their work on the robe and staff, and the Singer begins the lengthy Ruin Song. Seated in the front of the Edifice, Kira notices that Matt has finally returned, and he joins them for lunch during a break in the song.

Back in Kira's room, Matt presents Kira with his small gift, a scrap of blue cloth, which he has obtained by traveling down the path from Annabella's home. He excitedly tells Kira that a larger gift is still on the way.



The Ruin Song resumes, and Kira comes to a sickening realization. As soon as the ceremony is over, she rushes back to her room with Thomas following, preparing to tell him the horrific secret she has learned. When they get to the room, however, they find a strange blind man waiting for them.

Matt gleefully introduces the stranger as his big present, and the man reveals that he is actually Christopher, Kira's presumed-dead father. During a hunt before Kira was born, Christopher was struck from behind, blinded and left for dead by his political rival, Jamison.

Christopher was saved by a society of disabled people who live together in a different village a few days' walk from Kira's village. His sight gone and his memory damaged, he was unable to return to Kira until Matt arrived in search of blue. Christopher tells his story and then invites Kira to return to his village with him to start a new life.

Kira considers his offer overnight and prepares to leave with her father in the morning. She finally remembers the horrible discovery she made during the Ruin Song, that the Singer, while revered by the villagers, is actually a bound prisoner. Kira caught a glimpse of the shackles around the Singer's ankles and realizes that the Singer is a prisoner of the Guardians.

Kira considers the fate of the Singer and her own role as the tender of the robe. She selflessly decides that she will stay in her village and work toward creating a better future for her people by working within the system. She thanks her father and sends him home, but she vows to stay in touch with him through Matt. Kira plans to one day join her father, but not before she has done all that can be done to affect change in her own village.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Kira, a teenage girl with a deformed leg, is waiting for her mother's spirit to leave its body in the Field of Leaving. Custom dictates that the living must watch over the bodies of deceased adults for four days to allow the spirit safe passage into the afterlife. Kira's father, Christopher, never came back from a hunt when she was still an infant, and he is presumed dead, leaving Kira an orphan after the passing of her mother.

Once Kira senses that her mother's spirit has finally departed, she begins to worry about her future. Born into a society that usually euthanizes crippled children, Kira was saved from death by her mother's refusal to follow the custom, though the rest of the villagers regard Kira with contempt. Custom also dictates that the belongings of those who die from illness be burned, leaving Kira with no parents, no possessions and no home.

Kira walks back toward her home, hoping to salvage anything that might have escaped the cleansing fire. Despite her disability, she resolves to rebuild her home and forge a new life for herself. She runs into her young friend, Matt, a boy from a nearby area called the Fen. Matt asks Kira about the Field of Leaving, as the younger children are forbidden from entering it. He also quietly warns Kira that some of the villagers have been talking about running her out of the village in order to take over her family's land to build a corral for small children and chickens. With her worst fears realized, Kira considers her next move.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The first chapter introduces the reader to the story's main character, Kira, and places her in a very uneasy position. Born with a deformity into a society that usually euthanizes the sick and crippled, Kira finds herself alone for the first time in her life.

While Kira's society seems to embrace some sort of spirituality, evident in the custom of watching over the spirits of the dead as they leave the body, her people are also strikingly unsympathetic to the infirm. There is little to no sentimentality shown by anyone regarding Kira's loss. In fact, Kira sees her mother's brother tending his dead wife while she watches over her mother, but there is only a brief acknowledgement of one another and no comfort offered by either party. Further, Kira's uncle will likely have his children taken away with his wife gone, emphasizing the callous nature of the society.

Kira is in a dark and uncertain place emotionally. She has suffered a tragic loss and has no idea what the future has in store for her. Still, she remains strong in the face of the uncertainty before her.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Kira returns to the smoldering remains of her home and finds that virtually all of her possessions have been destroyed. The garden that she and her mother tended is still intact, though, and someone has left a stack of saplings for building nearby. As Kira arrives, a woman emerges from the bushes and begins stealing carrots from the garden. Kira shouts at the woman and drives her off, but not before the scornfully laughing woman steals her fill. Hungry from her vigil in the Field of Leaving, Kira sits and eats from her garden.

After finishing the meal, Kira inspects the saplings, and Vandara, an imposing woman from the village, immediately emerges from a nearby clearing. Tall, muscular and bearing a scar reputedly caused by an animal attack, Vandara is respected and feared throughout the village. Vandara confronts Kira, plainly stating that Kira is no longer useful or welcome in the village and that Vandara has claimed Kira's space.

Other women soon join the confrontation, looking to Vandara for leadership. They plan to use Kira's space to build a corral to contain their young children and their chickens, and they see no use for a handicapped girl in their village. Vandara picks up a rock, threatening Kira with it, and the other women follow her lead. Her mind racing, Kira considers what her mother might have done in a similar situation, and she calmly points out that she is entitled to a hearing before the Council of Guardians.

A conflict that results in death is punished by the death of the killer in Kira's village, so the women put down their rocks and agree to take Kira before the council the next day to decide her fate. Safe for the moment, Kira begins planning her next few days based on the hope that she will be allowed to stay.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Though Kira knows her home has been destroyed by fire, she instinctively returns there. She is grateful that she at least has some food in the garden, but her relief is short-lived when the other women move in to claim her land. This chapter gives the reader a better idea of the culture in which Kira lives.

The imagery in the description of Kira's village indicates a fairly primitive society akin to what things were like in medieval times. People live in very small hut-like dwellings called cotts and grow their own food. There is a distinct class structure in place, with Kira and her mother belonging to the middle laboring class. A poor class living in a place called the Fen and a ruling class called the Guardians are referred to, but not yet explored.



A pack mentality is evident as the women rally around Vandara against Kira, but Kira shows exceptional poise and courage as she faces the potentially fatal confrontation. The power and influence of the Guardians is implied, as the women back down and defer to arbitration of the conflict in lieu of publicly stoning Kira. Capital punishment is in effect and appears to be an effective deterrent in Kira's village.

Human life seems to be cheap in Kira's village, as the women nearly kill her in order to take her land to build a pen to corral their unruly children along with their chickens. It is telling that the mothers would treat their children in the same fashion as their livestock.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

A messenger arrives at dawn, directing Kira to meet the Council of Guardians at midmorning. Kira washes and grooms herself and then proceeds to the Council Edifice to learn her fate. The Edifice is an ancient building that resembles a modern-day church and serves as the headquarters for the Council of Guardians.

Kira arrives at the Edifice and enters the hearing chamber, where she stands before the twelve men of the council, the protectors and administrators of her village. She remembers and performs some elements of ceremony from watching other events in the past, and she is relieved to note that the council nods in approval.

Vandara soon joins the proceeding and stands as Kira's accuser. Unlike Kira, Vandara is dirty and barefooted, having made no special effort to impress the council. Vandara is permitted to speak first, and she makes her bitter case against Kira's usefulness. In her mind, Kira secretly agrees with most of Vandara's points, but she knows that she has much to offer despite her disability.

The council cuts Vandara off, having heard enough of her side of the conflict. They inform Kira that she is not required to defend herself, being of a young age. She may request that one of the council members defend her, or she may speak for herself. Kira agonizes over the decision for a few moments and then decides to trust her fate to one of the council members.

Chapter 3 Analysis

This chapter establishes Kira's society as a patriarchy, where men have all the power. Women are viewed as second-class citizens, forbidden from learning to read. The twelve members of the Guardian Council are all men, and they represent the most significant link to the reader's modern-day society. The twelve members of the council mirror the structure and basic function of an American jury system, though their powers extend beyond deciding the outcomes of simple trials. They are the rulers of Kira's people and the keepers of their history.

This chapter is the first to speak of the Ruin, a catastrophic event that wiped out almost all of human civilization. The story of the Ruin and preventing another event like it are central themes to the story and will come into play much later in the tale.

Kira appears to have at least one supporter on the council, though she is unsure why. The rules of her society clearly show disdain for those with disabilities, but she is hopeful the council will find her valuable. She decides to let fate take over as she trusts her defense to one of the council members.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The council member Jamison is appointed to represent Kira. A strong, confident man about the same age as Kira's mother, he took notes during Vandara's accusations. Jamison rises, and using his notes, addresses Vandara's charges one by one.

Kira stands silently as Jamison recounts the charges, marveling at the usefulness of being able to read. To help soothe her nerves, she runs her fingers over a scrap of cloth she stitched with intricate patterns to pass the time as she tended her dying mother. The patterns are unlike anything Kira has ever seen, and she showed it to her mother just before she died.

Jamison refers to the written code of law and points out that there are amendments that state that exceptions can be made to all of the laws Vandara tried to use against Kira. He knew Kira's father, Stephen (later known as Christopher), and watched as he was dragged away by the beasts on the great hunt. The majority of the council seems to agree with Jamison, but they break for lunch midway through his defense. Food is provided, and Kira only eats half of her meal, as one of the charges against her is that she eats too much.

During the break, Kira leaves the building and finds Matt waiting for her. He asks her about the meeting, knowing Kira is in danger. Matt reminds her that Vandara is a dangerous woman who was once accused and acquitted of poisoning her own child. He also tells Kira that he and some of his friends have begun gathering saplings to build Kira a new cott in case she wins the arbitration.

The council resumes, and though it continues in much the same way that it began, Kira senses a change in the tone of the proceedings. She suspects that something of significance has taken place among the council members during the recess, and she feels that she might have a chance of escaping with her life.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Kira takes a leap of faith, as she trusts a complete stranger to defend her usefulness and her very life. Kira is wise enough to know that she may not be capable of mounting an effective defense, and in the end, this proves to be the correct decision.

The value of the written word and the knowledge it can provide are reinforced during the trial. Without the notes he took during Vandara's testimony, as well as the written code of laws, Jamison would have had a much more difficult time defending Kira.

The scrap of decorated cloth that brings Kira comfort during the trial is a significant object throughout the story. It represents a link to her past and her mother, as well as

symbolizing the talent for needlework that makes Kira special. It will also be a conduit through which Kira channels spiritual knowledge as the story progresses.

Vandara's scar represents the ugliness present in her character. While superficial appearances are not always indicative of a person's character, they are sometimes well suited. The villagers see the scar as a sign of strength, as Vandara is reputed to have received the scar by repelling a beast attack. The rumor of her child's poisoning also adds doubt about her character. While never proven, the suspicions about the nature of the child's death contribute to Vandara's dark reputation.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

When the council resumes, they bring with them a large box containing the Singer's robe, a ceremonial vestment worn only once a year at the singing of the Ruin Song, the lengthy oral history of Kira's people. Jamison questions Kira about her skills and the training that she received from her mother.

Kira learns that the woman who trained her mother in the arts of cloth craft, Annabella, still lives and might be called upon to teach Kira about dyes. Vandara, sensing that the proceeding now favors Kira, requests that a decision be rendered immediately. The Guardian Council decrees that Kira will remain with them and take on the role previously served by Kira's mother, the tending of the Singer's robe. She will maintain and complete the decoration of the unfinished robe. They inform Vandara that she may take possession of Kira's land to build the pen for her children and dismiss her.

Kira is sent to collect her belongings before she begins her new life in the Edifice. She meets Matt along the way, who eagerly listens to Kira's fate. He is happy she will not be sent to the Field, offering to build her a new cot. The reader learns that Matt nursed his companion dog, Branch, back from health after it had been injured, though it lives with an injury similar to Kira's. Matt mentions that he managed to save some of Kira's belongings before her home was burned, and he promises to deliver them to Kira when she goes back to the Edifice.

With plenty of time before she must return to the Edifice, Kira stops by the weaving shed where she worked. The women treat her as if she was never gone, and Kira learns that one of the weavers has recently broken her arm beyond repair. With her injury preventing her from working anymore, the woman will likely be sent to the Field, and her five children will be given away.

The other women offer Kira the empty loom, assuming that she is ready to become one of them and perform a more useful duty. Her path, however, lies with the council, and she thanks them and heads home to say goodbye to the place where she has lived her whole life with her mother.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The wisdom of the council is evident as they rule in favor of both women, allowing Vandara to have Kira's land, while at the same time seeing Kira's worth as an artisan. Jamison's intimate knowledge of Kira's skills is somewhat suspect, however, and foreshadows some unfortunate revelations to come later in the novel.

A parallel exists between Kira and Branch, Matt's dog. Both of them have a bad leg, though Branch's is the result of an injury, while Kira's is a birth defect. Matt's rescue and



rehabilitation of Branch shows the kindness of his character and explains his easy friendship with Kira, who is regarded as something of a social outcast because of her deformity.

Kira revisits the weaving shed and the remains of her old home before reporting for her new duties, representing a farewell to her old life and the passage into her future. Though they do not say it, the women realize that Kira has changed and matured. The women in the weaver's shed embody the relatively callous nature of Kira's society, as they nonchalantly speak of their doomed coworker and offer Kira her loom before the injured woman's fate has even been decided.

Strong gender roles clearly exist in Kira's village, a patriarchal society. When a man's wife dies, her children are taken from her and given to other women to raise. The men are for hunting and governing, and the women are for raising the children and tending the homestead.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Kira returns to the Edifice and finds Matt and Branch waiting there for her as promised. Matt carries with him the bundle of things he has managed to save from the burning of Kira's home, and he offers to carry it to Kira's new quarters.

Jamison, the Guardian who defended Kira during her hearing, is waiting for her inside to take her to her room. Kira asks if Matt and Branch could help her carry her things to the room, and though he looks less than pleased, Jamison allows them to help. Jamison leads them through the Edifice to Kira's new quarters, and they are unlike anything Kira and Matt have ever seen.

Kira has lived in a dirt-floored hut with no window her entire life, sleeping on straw in the most modest of accommodations. Now, Jamison presents her with her new home, complete with elegant furniture, a bathroom with running water and an adjacent workspace for her new job. Looking around, Matt cautiously asks if Kira is to be held prisoner, though Jamison seems shocked by the very notion.

Jamison offers to allow Matt and Branch to stay with Kira, but Matt decides to return home. She examines the objects Matt has brought her, and she is thankful for what he has managed to save. Kira is delighted to find her mother's pendant, her threading frame, some medicinal herbs and some of her mother's old clothing. Among the clothing, Kira finds a skirt her mother wore while working, and Kira decides that, over time, she might be able to outline the many colored stains with thread, embellishing it into a costume of sorts. Kira eventually drifts off to sleep in her new bed, finding comfort in the decorated scrap of cloth in the bed next to her, looking through the window at the moonlight and thinking of her mother.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Kira sets off for her new life with practically no apprehension or fanfare. Living with her handicap has given her courage and strength, and her character is evident as she fearlessly begins a new chapter in her life.

Jamison, her defender during the hearing, assumes the role of mentor and father figure as he ushers her into the Edifice. He has literally saved her life, and she is grateful and respectful to him. Jamison will be instrumental in shaping Kira in her new role at the Edifice.

The Edifice itself is a symbol of the fallen society that preceded Kira's. Though it is never specifically identified as such, the Edifice is a church that has survived the Ruin. There is an ironic juxtaposition in that the seat of the government resides in a religious temple, whereas in modern American society, there is a strict separation of church and



state. The Edifice also raises the possibility that God may have spared His own house, while allowing the destruction of everything around it. The novel never treads very deeply into theology, focusing more on society than religion, but the Edifice and its religious undertones bear consideration.

A stark contrast is evident between the conditions inside the Edifice and the conditions in which the general populace lives. Kira is welcomed into a life of comparative opulence, complete with running water, an unheard of convenience. The rest of the village lives with modest accommodations, and in the case of those living in the Fen, abject poverty. Because of her skill, Kira goes from fighting for her life one day to living a life of privilege the next.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Kira wakes and eats the hearty breakfast that is brought to her room. Though she has some idea that the bathroom is for washing, she is unsure of how to use the fixtures and decides to take a walk to the stream where she has always tended to her hygiene. Before she leaves the Edifice, she encounters Thomas the Carver, a boy of similar age that she is familiar with from the village. Thomas has a room almost identical to Kira's in the Edifice, where his job is to carve intricate items out of wood.

Thomas has been in the care of the Guardians since both of his parents were killed by lightning, and he briefly explains to Kira the way things work around the Edifice. The tenders act as servants, providing Kira and Thomas with food and whatever help they might require. Kira is allowed to do as she pleases, though she is expected to do the work to which she has been assigned, and the Guardians will check on her progress daily. Thomas asks one of the tenders to show Kira how the bathroom works, and she returns to her quarters.

After lunch, Kira decides to examine her workspace. She stares at the Singer's robe, almost in awe of it. She has never been allowed to touch the robe, but now she finds herself its keeper. Jamison soon joins her, asking how she is enjoying her accommodations. He asks if Kira has all the necessary materials and tools to begin her work, and she reluctantly admits that she has not examined them.

Opening the many drawers in the workroom, Kira is dismayed to learn that the threads available to her are all white. Her mother died before she was able to teach Kira the art of coloring, and Kira admits to Jamison that she still has much to learn. Jamison seems disappointed, but he decides to send Kira to study the art of dyeing under Annabella. He points out that the robe will not be needed for several months and that Kira should have plenty of time, but she senses a tone of urgency in his voice. Jamison leaves, and Kira decides to examine the robe and plan what needs to be done. She will beg Annabella for help first thing in the morning.

Chapter 7 Analysis

As Kira struggles to adjust to her new life, she reverts back to what she knows. Her reluctance to explore the bathroom in her quarters is indicative of her uncertainty and reluctance to experiment. Rather than risk causing problems by misusing the strange facilities, Kira makes the simple task of grooming herself unnecessarily difficult by limping down to the stream to which she is accustomed.

Kira finds an answer to her loneliness in Thomas, and he is a kindred spirit to help her ease into her new life. Similar in age and circumstance, Thomas is instrumental in Kira's



transition. An only child, Kira found companionship in her friend Matt and now lives just down the hall from another brother figure in Thomas.

This chapter contains the first hint that Kira's arrival at the Edifice might be the result of foul play. Thomas, a boy with extraordinary skill in woodworking, loses both of his parents to a freak accident. Kira, a girl with exceptional skill in needlework, loses her mother to a swift and unexpected illness. Though no one makes any connection between these events, other facts will come to light later in the story to arouse the children's suspicions.

When Jamison visits Kira, her fears of being inadequate to work on the Singer's robe resurface, and while Jamison shows some minor disappointment in her lack of coloring skills, he remains positive and finds her a tutor. At this point, Jamison is cautious about showing Kira his eagerness to have her work on the robe, not wanting to distract her from her studies.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The next day, Matt and Branch accompany Kira into the woods to find Annabella's home. Jamison told them that they should be safe as long as they stayed on the path, and though they can hear various creatures in the woods, nothing sounds menacing. During the journey, Kira asks about Matt's father. The boy explains that he, like many others in the Fen, does not have a father, though he does not seem saddened by it.

Kira mentions her own father, showing Matt the pendant that she now wears to remember her mother and father. When Kira says the pendant was a gift from her father to her mother, Matt is confused. Kira explains the concept of giving sentimental gifts to loved ones, and Matt admits that gifts are never given in the poverty-stricken Fen.

Kira and Matt soon arrive at Annabella's modest hut and find the old woman tending her impressive garden. Annabella recognizes Kira at once and knows why she has come. She invites Kira to sit and rest and provides the three with a drink from her well. Annabella tells Kira that she must come every day to learn all the plants and what colors they yield, and she begins going over them almost immediately. Kira pays close attention, knowing that her very life may depend on gaining the knowledge her mother was unable to pass on before her death.

Before Kira and Matt begin the walk back to town, Annabella makes Kira recite what she is able to remember from her first lesson. Kira recalls a fair amount of what she has been taught, and Annabella seems pleased. Annabella gives her some colored thread to begin her repairs on the robe, though she reminds Kira that she will still need to learn to make them on her own. Kira asks if Annabella knows how to make blue dye, and the old woman admits that she does, though she has none. Making blue requires a particular plant that she does not have, though she points to an overgrown path into the woods at the edge of her garden and speaks of others yonder (far away) that have some.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Kira's journey through the forest is a common metaphor for any rite of passage. By traveling into the woods to meet her new mentor, Kira begins to literally and figuratively tread the road that she will follow for the remainder of her days.

Ironically, Matt, a very small boy, and Branch, a disabled dog, are Kira's protectors on her travels. One would hardly consider such a pair to be fierce guardians, but given Kira's limited mobility, Matt and Branch become more valuable than they might be to someone in perfect health.

Annabella represents the wisdom of the elders. In Kira's society, one's name continues to grow by the syllable as one ages. Matt, being very young, is only one syllable. Kira, in



her teen years, has progressed to two syllables. Jamison, in the prime of adulthood, bears three. Annabella, clearly considered elderly by today's standards, has the honor of a four-syllable name and commands a certain respect from the children because of it.

The relationship between Kira and Annabella is also a metaphor for the symbiotic nature of life. The threader needs the dyer to color her materials, and the dyer needs the threader to make use of her product. Such is the way of life, with all things depending on something else.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Back in the Edifice, Kira inspects the robe, deciding where she can begin her repairs. As she works, she recites the names of the plants and their uses, diligently trying to learn them all. Thomas stops in her room to visit and then offers to write the names of the plants so that he might help her study. Women are forbidden from learning to read and write, so Kira accepts his help, but she takes care to avoid looking at the words for fear of learning how to read.

The next morning, Kira visits her mother's old color garden in hopes of salvaging some of her mother's plants. The sight of the pen already being constructed where her home once stood saddens her, but she is surprised to find some of her mother's color plants still growing. She quickly harvests what she can and hurries back to the Edifice, enduring taunts from the passing Vandara along the way.

One morning, Thomas visits Kira in her room, asking if she had been awakened in the night by a sound like a child crying. Kira, a little surprised by the question, says that she slept soundly, and Thomas shrugs the notion off as a bad dream he might have had. He presents Kira with an intricately carved box as a gift, and she places her decorated scrap of cloth in it for protection. Kira shyly explains that the scrap seems to speak to her sometimes and appears to have a life of its own. Thomas admits that he has a carving from his childhood that makes him feel the same way. Kira learns that Thomas has been given the task of repairing the Singer's staff, the ravages of time have worn away its carvings.

As the days progress, Kira begins to shorten her study time with Annabella in order to begin the actual work on the robe. She is awed by the complexity and sheer scope of the artistry featured on the robe. It tells the history of her people in pictures, and she knows that she is doing important work. Kira finishes her work on a sleeve one evening and finds that her fingers are aching, and she retrieves the decorated scrap of cloth from its box and places it in her pocket, seeking its inexplicable comfort.

Kira walks down the hall and enters Thomas' room just as he is finishing his day's work. The two have become good friends and have begun eating their evening meals together. They can hear the sounds of the men preparing for the next morning's hunt in the plaza below. Kira notices with dismay that Matt has selected a spear, apparently intent on joining the hunt, despite his youth.

Panicked, Kira begs Thomas to help her stop Matt from going on the hunt. At first, he does not understand why she would care if a tyke would go on the hunt, pointing out that there are too many of them anyway. Once she explains that Matt is her friend, Thomas begins to show concern. Kira feels a throbbing coming from her hip and discovers that the sensation is coming from the scrap of cloth. It feels like a warning.



Chapter 9 Analysis

This chapter reminds the reader that women are forbidden from being literate in Kira's village. This is a strange contradiction in a society that appears obsessed with maintaining its history. After all, it is Kira's sole responsibility to maintain the robe containing their past, just as it is Thomas' job to maintain the staff serving the same purpose. Preventing an entire gender from learning a more permanent method of record keeping is at odds with remembering the past.

The concept of the oral tradition is a strong theme throughout the novel, and its validity comes into question when the reader finally hears some of the Ruin Song late in the story. It will come to light that time and the transient nature of human memory have corrupted the Ruin Song, though the degree of inaccuracy is never addressed.

At this stage, Kira displays a desire to learn to read and write, but she is still bound in her mind by the traditions of her village. She takes special care to avoid learning the skills in deference to the ways of her village. Meanwhile, the connection between Kira and Thomas deepens as she learns of his official role as keeper of the Singer's staff. Now more than just a friend, Thomas has become a co-worker.

Thomas' lack of concern for Matt's safety as the boy attempts to join the hunt reinforces the cheapness of life in Kira's village. He does not show any concern at all for the boy's life until Kira impresses Matt's importance to her upon Thomas. In modern society, children are generally protected to extremes, but Thomas shows no inherent concern for the children, actually pointing out that he feels there are too many of them, implying that they would be better off to lose some during the hunt.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Kira and Thomas make their way down into the crowd of shouting, arguing men preparing for the hunt. It is a place for men only, as they behave brutishly before every hunt, with much boasting and conflict. Thomas leads the way, and as they weave through the men, one of them grabs Kira. She fends him off with her walking stick, hurrying to find Matt.

Kira and Thomas soon find Matt, who is showing off his spear to his surrounding friends. He has covered his underarms and chest with swamp grass in an effort to simulate body hair, and the smell is overpowering. Thomas disarms Matt and gives the spear away, and the three of them return to the Edifice.

Back in the Edifice, Thomas gives Matt and Branch a much-needed bath, after which Kira joins them. The three of them share a pleasant meal together. Afterwards, Matt tries to take Kira's pendant, but she says he cannot have it because it is a special memento of her parents. Matt wants a gift, as he has never received one, and Kira and Thomas give Matt a bar of soap, which he solemnly accepts before leaving for his home.

After Matt leaves, Kira tries to explain to Thomas the feelings she sometimes gets from her decorated scrap of cloth. She shows it to him, but it seems devoid of the comfort or life that it sometimes exudes when she is alone. Thomas understands completely, and he shows Kira the bit of wood he carved as a child, confiding that it feels exactly the same way to him. Their objects seem to warn them of danger and to soothe them when they are uneasy, and this unlikely connection makes their friendship stronger than ever.

Chapter 10 Analysis

The gathering of men preparing for the hunt symbolizes mankind at its most basic. The men behave only a shade better than the animals that they are preparing to hunt. The trappings of civilized society fall away, and the men behave brutishly, the distillation of man's subjugated animal nature.

When Kira is detained by one of the men in the crowd, he refers to her as a trophy. It is unclear whether the remark is meant as compliment or an insult about Kira's bad leg, and the interpretation is left to the reader.

Matt, still far too young to realistically join the hunt, represents the impetuosity of youth and the desire to mature. He goes so far as to disguise himself with moss to appear older, and while holding his spear, he gains respect from the other boys of similar age.



Thomas, upon learning of Kira's strong attachment to Matt, steps into the role of husband to Kira and father to Matt as he helps to stop the boy from endangering himself on the hunt. As Kira and Thomas share their private feelings about their respective special objects, their connection deepens, though their relationship remains strictly platonic throughout the story. The objects represent the power of their individual gifts, and since these artisans will record the future on the Singer's robe and staff, the objects also represent youth's ability to create the future.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Kira arrives at Annabella's hut very early one morning, out of breath and scared. She is certain that a beast was stalking her as she walked through the woods. She could hear it growling at her just off the path and out of sight. Annabella can see that something is wrong and asks Kira about it, but when Kira speaks of beasts stalking her, Annabella dismisses the idea. She takes Kira inside for some tea to help calm her down.

Annabella continues to teach Kira the names and uses of the various plants that she grows, but Kira repeatedly insists that she has heard the beasts in the woods. Finally, Annabella tells Kira that there are no beasts, and if Kira heard something in the woods, then it was a human pretending to be a beast to keep her afraid of the woods.

Back at the Edifice, Kira speaks with Thomas about her experience in the woods and the conversation that followed with Annabella. During their conversation, Kira and Thomas realize that neither of them has ever actually seen a beast, not even a dead one, nor do they know anyone who has. Kira has been told that her father was taken by beasts on a hunt, but she has never been given any proof.

Kira and Thomas part company for the evening, both wondering about the existence of the beasts. Kira falls asleep holding her scrap of cloth and thinking about what Annabella said. The scrap seems to offer answers about her father, but they are lost in her mind as she dreams.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Kira's frightful passage through the forest represents the universal fear of the unknown. She can hear sounds coming from the forest, but she cannot identify them. This uncertainty makes the sounds all the more frightening. Compounding this uncertainty is the unquestioned belief that there are dangerous beasts lurking in the forest, making for a very harrowing trip for a young girl with limited mobility.

Annabella, with the wisdom of her advanced years on her side, comforts Kira and assures her that there are no beasts. This comes as a shocking idea to Kira, whose life has been so altered by the unseen beasts. If Annabella's claim is true, it raises many critical questions about the Guardians, as well as Kira's very society.

Both Kira and Thomas show respect for their elders, even while questioning Annabella's claim about the nonexistence of the beasts. They speak of those with four syllable names with reverence and do not take her claims lightly. Annabella's simple statement about the beasts sets the wheels in motion for the final stage of the novel, when Kira makes some startling discoveries about her life and her people.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Kira wakes with the feeling that something is fundamentally different, but she cannot decide what has changed. There is something at the back of her mind, but it refuses to come forward. She decides to let it go, hoping that it will come back to her later.

Outside, a storm lashes the Edifice with rain, preventing Kira from making the trip to Annabella's hut. Kira inspects the robe and recalls a recent conversation with Jamison. He tells her that she will begin working on decorating the blank patch of the robe once they celebrate this year's Gathering. Jamison senses her apprehension, but he tells her that the Guardians will tell her what they want to depict on the space reserved for their community's future.

Again, Kira finds herself marveling at the intricate story of the repeating cycle of ruin and rebirth preserved in the robe's stitching. She wishes that she had some blue thread to repair the skies on the robe, but she remains uncertain about Annabella's statement that blue is to be found with others down the disused path leading from her garden into the wild.

Thomas comes to visit Kira in her room, and she learns that Matt and Branch have walked through the storm to join them. Thomas is certain that he has heard a child crying in the night again from the floor below, and since they have never been forbidden from doing so, the three of them decide to explore the Edifice in search of the strange sounds.

Chapter 12 Analysis

This chapter deals primarily with the unseen mysteries surrounding Kira and her progress toward uncovering them. When she wakes, she feels as if she is on the verge of discovering some important truths, but they are lost in the fog of her dreams.

The raging storm outside is a classic symbol of conflict and difficulty. Frequently, storms are used to build the dramatic tension in fiction, playing on the relative insignificance and helplessness of humans against the power of nature. Being forced to stay indoors encourages the characters to look within themselves, and Kira reflects on the cycle of violence and peace depicted on the robe.

The author takes care to plainly identify blue as the color of peace. It is rather ironic that blue is one of the only colors Kira is unable to make or obtain, implying that perhaps lasting peace is beyond her people.

The idea that the Guardians will dictate the future to Kira for inclusion on the blank section of the robe reveals how the Guardians view their role in Kira's society. More

than just the keepers of history and the protectors of the people, the Guardians fancy themselves the architects of the future. They have a plan for society, and they will use the robe to make their vision a reality.

Thomas' belief in the mysterious crying child brings up some disturbing questions. Who is this child? Why is it crying so frequently? Kira, Thomas and Matt shows signs of maturing when they decide to investigate on their own, while at the same time justifying their expedition with childish logic; since no one had specifically forbidden them from roaming the Edifice, they conclude it must be okay.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Kira, Thomas, Matt and Branch walk downstairs and find the floor to be almost identical to the one on which they live, a long corridor lined with closed wooden doors. They come to a corner, and Thomas stops suddenly, motioning for the others to remain quiet and unseen. They hear footsteps, and soon they hear Jamison knocking on one of the doors.

The door opens, and several voices, including the crying child's, float down the hallway. Kira is unable to understand what is being said, but she can hear that Jamison's tone is much harsher than she has ever heard it. He speaks to the child, and the girl begins to sing in an extraordinary voice. Matt whispers that he knows the girl from the Fen and that she is even younger than he is. They decide to return to Kira's room so that they may talk freely.

Back in Kira's room, Matt explains that the singing girl in the room, Jo, lived in the Fen until her mother died from sickness. Jo's father, while watching over his wife's body in the Field of Leaving, committed suicide by stabbing himself in the heart, leaving Jo an orphan. Both Kira and Thomas are stunned by the story and how similar it is to their own, and Thomas quietly implies that there may be more to their parents' deaths than they previously thought.

Kira resumes her work on the robe with the aid of extra lights provided by her tender, and Jamison checks in to review her work. Kira asks him if he has ever seen any beasts, and Jamison says that he has seen many of them in the forest, including the ones that took her father. Kira tells Jamison of the sounds she heard following her in the woods, and he assures her that she will be safe as long as she stays on the path. She tells Jamison of Annabella's claim that there are no beasts, and he appears shocked and angry at the suggestion. Jamison speculates that Annabella's age is beginning to cloud her mind and that it is dangerous for her to speak that way. He leaves Kira to her work, and she senses that her scrap is again offering her a warning, though she knows not why.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Jamison's harsh tone with the singing child, though only implied, comes as a shock to the reader. Up until this point in the story, Jamison has been portrayed as a kind and gentle mentor. His change in demeanor, particularly when it is caused by a small child, is jarring.

When Matt explains the story of Jo's parents to Kira and Thomas, the children begin to become uneasy about the similar circumstances that have brought the three of them to



the Edifice. All of their parents died under somewhat suspicious circumstances, and this pattern is becoming more apparent to the children with time.

Kira begins to explore her doubt of the beasts when she speaks with Jamison in her room. She still trusts him, despite witnessing his conduct with the child downstairs. Jamison assures her that she will remain safe as long as she stays on the path, while at the same time emphasizing how dangerous the beasts are. His logic seems flawed, and Kira decides to risk telling him about Annabella's claim that there are no beasts.

Jamison's reaction to Annabella's assurances that there are no beasts foreshadows the action to come. While attacking Annabella's credibility, he goes so far as to say that her idea is dangerous, though he never specifies how it is dangerous or to whom. It will be the last time that Kira is able to trust Jamison.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Hoping to make up for the day lost to the storm, Kira wakes early and prepares to visit Annabella. Just as she is about to enter the forest, one of her friends from the weaving shed, Marlena, calls her over to chat. Marlena tells Kira that she is missed around the shed and that Matt has been doing a poor job as her replacement.

Kira asks Marlena, who lives in the Fen, if she knew Jo, the singing girl. Marlena says she knew of her and her voice, but she didn't know Jo personally. Marlena whispers that people said Jo's songs were not only beautiful, but also prophetic. They conclude their chat, and Kira sets off again for Annabella's.

Before Kira can enter the woods, Matt arrives and informs Kira that Annabella is dead and already in the Field. Kira is shocked, having had tea with the old woman only two days prior. Matt mentions that Jamison was watching and walking with the men who took Annabella to the Field, and Kira decides to seek Jamison's advice on what to do now that Annabella's help is no longer available.

Kira begins searching the Edifice for Jamison and winds up near the room with the crying child. She decides to knock on the locked door and has a brief but curious conversation through the door's keyhole. The girl behind the locked door, Jo, is frightened and unaware that both her parents are dead. She begs for Kira's help in finding her mother, and though Kira does not tell the girl of her parents' fate, she promises to return to help her.

Kira returns to her room and finds Jamison waiting there to deliver the news of Annabella's death. He appears sympathetic, but Kira finds herself suddenly suspicious of Jamison's intentions and does not mention meeting Jo.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Kira's visit to the weaving shed represents her looking into the past, and ironically, it is there that she discovers Jo may be having visions of the future. The reader also learns that Matt has taken over Kira's old duties in the shed, perhaps as a means to feel closer to her in her absence.

When Kira learns of Annabella's death, she is immediately suspicious of the circumstances. Jamison's presence at Annabella's side as she is dragged to the Field hints at the notion that he is somehow involved in her death, and the idea is not lost on Kira. She finds it morbidly convenient that the old woman dies only days after speaking out against the existence of beasts, and Kira remembers Jamison's comment that such talk is dangerous.



Kira's search for Jamison throughout the Edifice represents her larger search for truth. She has begun to question many things about her life and the Guardians, and she is unafraid to seek the answers. Kira's conversation with Jo raises even more questions. Why is Jo isolated and held captive? Why is she unaware that her parents are dead? Jo's situation reminds Kira of her first day at the Edifice, specifically of the time Matt asks Jamison if Kira is to be held prisoner. Jamison reacts with obvious surprise at the question, but Jo's situation seems to contradict his response.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

At midday on the day of Annabella's death, Kira sees the men constructing a new dyeing place for her near the Edifice. It looks to be a much grander facility than Annabella ever had, and Kira mourns the loss of her friend and teacher. The men also bring all of Annabella's materials, and Jamison tells Kira that Annabella's cott still stands, should she wish to live there herself in the future. Since Annabella died in her sleep, there is no need to burn her home.

Kira asks Jamison if she may watch over Annabella's spirit in the Field of Leaving, but he says that her work on the robe is more important and that time is short. Someone else will watch over the old woman's spirit so that Kira can finish her task before the Gathering. After Jamison leaves, Kira begins to wonder how anyone found Annabella's body in her remote home, and she suspects foul play.

Later, Kira questions Thomas about his experiences when he first came to live at the Edifice. She tells him of her late visit to the child's locked room, and Thomas seems to recall being locked in his room as a small boy, though he believes it was for his own protection. Kira also tells him about her conversation with the woman from the weaving shed and the idea that they, as artists, might have some sort of psychic gift.

Kira asks Thomas to come with her that evening to visit Jo in her locked room, though she is not sure how she can help a girl behind a locked door. Grinning with mischief, Thomas shows her a wooden skeleton key he carved when he was younger to escape his own locked room. It will open any of the simple locks in the Edifice, and he offers to help Kira visit the girl, though they both feel certain the Guardians will not be happy about it if they are caught.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Kira continues to mature and displays some excellent critical thinking. She realizes that it is highly unlikely Annabella's body would have been discovered so quickly, being in an isolated cott deep in the woods. This revelation solidifies her suspicions of foul play and chases away the small amount of trust Kira still feels for Jamison.

Kira mourns the loss of her friend and mentor, and she feels guilty that she will have a much better workplace than Annabella ever had. Kira's spiritual connection with the old woman is evident when she asks permission to watch over Annabella's spirit in the Field of Leaving, just as Kira did for her mother. Jamison, however, reinforces the society's lack of compassion when he refuses Kira's request. He states that her work on the robe is more important, implying that the robe is more important than the old woman's very soul.

Thomas, who has been very responsible and mature throughout the novel, shows that he, too, was once like Matt when he explains about his skeleton key. The comparison between the two boys is intentional and shows that even the most irresponsible child may grow into a respected and valued adult.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Evening arrives, and Kira and Thomas wait for the tenders to finish their daily duties before venturing downstairs to visit Jo. Kira takes her scrap of cloth and advises Thomas to bring his special carved wood and his key, hoping that their objects will warn them if they are in danger.

Kira and Thomas make it to Jo's room without incident, and his key works perfectly. They find Jo sound asleep, and Kira gently wakes her. Jo is at first frightened, but she soon calms down once she realizes that Kira is the girl she spoke to through the keyhole. The girl again asks for her mother, but Kira explains that she cannot be brought, though Kira and Thomas live just above Jo's room.

Jo complains that the Guardians are making her learn all new songs and that her old ones came to her naturally. She does not enjoy singing the songs they make her learn. Thomas instructs Jo to climb her furniture and knock on her ceiling with a hairbrush if she really needs help, since his room is directly above hers. They test the plan, and Jo is able to knock on the ceiling easily.

Kira tucks Jo back into bed and gives her a kiss on the forehead, just as a mother would, and Kira and Thomas return to their respective rooms. Alone in her room, Kira ponders why the three of them have really been brought to the Edifice. She looks at the Singer's robe and wishes she could leave her duties and let her hands make the patterns that they once did so freely. For the first time, she cries in despair.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Kira and Thomas' expedition to Jo's room is an example of youthful rebellion. They have both assumed adult obligations, but they are not above childish transgressions. They are certain the Guardians would not approve of their visit to the young girl, but Kira feels obligated to fulfill the promise she made through the keyhole.

Thomas' wooden key represents the children's ability to unlock the future. Each of them has been tasked with creating a future described by the Guardians, but the true power rests within the children. Their skills will carve the staff, decorate the robe and sing the song of the future. By using their skills without the consent or direction of the Guardians, the children show that they are capable of being more than the puppets of the Guardians.

Kira further develops her maternal instinct as she tries to protect Jo from the truth about her parents. Both Kira and Thomas treat the child with marvelous sensitivity and compassion, unconsciously adopting her into their platonic marriage.



Jo's complaints about being forced to learn new songs makes Kira think about her own situation. Both of the girls long to use their gifts the way they once did, with joy and personal expression. Of the three, only Thomas seems to have found a balance between using his gifts to serve the Guardians and using his skill as he pleases. Kira feels a profound sense of loss when she realizes she no longer feels any joy from her gift, and she weeps in despair.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

A new day dawns, and at midday, Kira asks Thomas to accompany her to the Fen in search of Jo's home. Kira wants to see the place that was home to Jo and is home to Matt. Though he is surprised by the request, Thomas agrees. They have not seen Matt in two days, and they are curious about his absence.

Along the way, Kira and Matt pass the weaver's shed, and the women there tell Kira that Matt has not been seen for days, though they are glad of it. Vandara and her friends also snarl like beasts and laugh at Kira, though she ignores them and continues on toward the Fen. They encounter some of Matt's friends, who say that Matt has run off, though they have no idea to where.

As Kira and Matt enter the Fen, Kira is appalled at the squalid conditions in which its people live. There is filth and a terrible stench that permeates the place, and the ramshackle homes are crammed closely together. It is a depressing, impoverished place to live, and Kira is shocked that Matt and Jo could come from such a place. They feel the women and children of the Fen watching them with distrust and decide they should not waste time.

Kira and Thomas stop to ask for directions to Matt's home, and Thomas trades an apple for the information. They follow the directions and find Matt's cott, a disgusting hovel filled with his angry mother and siblings. Matt's mother says that he has gone and that she is glad to be rid of him. One of Matt's brothers tells Kira that Matt has decided to live with Kira and Thomas, but first he went on a journey to find them a gift. The child says that Matt and Branch have gone to find Kira some blue, though Kira is not sure what the boy means.

As Kira and Matt return to the Edifice, she wonders if Matt was perhaps taken like Jo, but Thomas argues that Matt has no valuable skills. Kira, remembering how Matt is always able to make them laugh and smile, disagrees.

Chapter 17 Analysis

This chapter serves mainly to illustrate the significant differences between the class levels in Kira's society. It begins in the relative splendor of the Edifice, with its running water and clean convenience. Compared to other areas of the village, the Edifice is almost paradise, and it is representative of modern society.

As Kira and Thomas travel to the Fen, they must pass through the area in which Kira and Thomas used to live. Housing most of the skilled workers and average citizens, this unnamed area represents the middle class. It has its problems, but no more than any average modern neighborhood. The Fen, on the other hand, is barely habitable. There

is little sanitation, and the people who live there are barely surviving. It is overpopulated and joyless, and it is representative of the poorest areas of modern society.

When Kira asks one of the citizens of the Fen about Jo's singing, the woman is fleetingly happy at the mere memory of the child's voice. Remembering that the child, and with her, a beautiful singing voice, is gone forever, the woman falls deeper into despair. This scene is symbolic of the rich stealing from the poor for their own gratification, and it reinforces the hopelessness of the Fen.

Before Kira and Thomas learn of Matt's fate, they discuss the possibility that he might have been taken and imprisoned like Jo, but Thomas dismisses the idea on the basis that Matt has no useful skills. Kira, however, displays a mature sense of worth when she recognizes that Matt has less tangible qualities that make him valuable.

Matt's quest to obtain a suitable gift for his friends before moving in with them is a metaphor for the quest for peace and an offering to those who would be his saviors. Matt sees an opportunity for his personal peace in leaving the squalor of the Fen to live with Kira and Thomas, but he feels he must prove his worth by presenting them with a gift. He decides to bring Kira the color blue as an offering; bringing her the color of peace will bring about his own peace.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

The time of the Gathering is fast approaching, and the people of the village are beginning their preparations. Thomas has finished his work on the staff, and Kira has completed her work on the robe. Kira asks her cloth scrap for answers about Matt's whereabouts, but it gives her no answers, only comfort. She continues to visit Jo in the night, telling her jokes and stories. Jo tells Kira that when Jo is the Singer, she hopes she will be able to make up her own songs again.

Jamison reviews Kira's final work on the robe with great approval. He compliments her skill, and they sit and talk of the Gatherings of past years. Jamison recites brief passages of the Ruin Song, which he has heard many more times than Kira, and they speak of a scene on the robe which Kira found particularly challenging. It depicts buildings much taller than any Kira has ever seen, all of them in flames. Jamison recites the names of places that were destroyed, including Bogo tabal, Timore toron and Totoo.

Kira asks about the Singer, since she only ever sees him at the Gathering. Jamison explains that the Singer remains separate from everyone else, practicing the song between Gatherings, much as she and Thomas have their own duties.

Jamison tells Kira that once the Gathering has passed, she will begin work on the blank section of the robe. There, he says, Kira will tell them the future with her needle and thread. Kira is apprehensive about starting her new work so soon, but Jamison firmly indicates that they have been waiting for Kira for a long time.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Kira and Thomas have finished their work on their respective objects, but there is no sense of relief. If anything, things seem tenser. The Gathering has not even taken place, and already Jamison is talking about Kira starting on the blank section of the robe. His urgency about creating the future is apparent, and Kira has her reservations about taking part in the process.

Kira continues to secretly mother Jo, and their bond strengthens. While it has not been formally announced, Jo's comments foreshadow her becoming the new Singer. She confides to Kira that she hopes to create her own songs once she is made the Singer, giving Kira hope that she, Jo and Thomas might be able to forge the new future without the influence of the Guardians.

Kira, still worried about Matt, asks her decorated scrap about her friend. By this point, it is fair to say that Kira's scrap and Thomas' wood chip represent religion. They find comfort in these talismans and essentially pray to them in the same way others might pray to a crucifix. While there is a vague spirituality evident in the practice of watching



over the spirits of the dead in the Field, there is never any mention of an organized religion of any sort in Kira's society.

When Kira and Jamison discuss the Ruin Song, the reader gets further insight into the Ruin. The names of the places contained in the Song have been convoluted by the passage of time and the inefficiency of the oral tradition. "Bogo tabal, Timore toron, Totoo," by moving the breaks in the letters, is easily reinterpreted as "Bogota, Baltimore, Toronto, too..."

This inaccuracy underscores the key contradiction in Kira's society. The Song is maintained as a way to avoid repeating the violence and waste of the past, but in keeping the majority of its citizens ignorant and illiterate, Kira's society makes this goal far more difficult to achieve.



Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

On the day of the Gathering, Kira is awakened by the muted sounds of the villagers converging on the Council Edifice to hear the Ruin Song. Usually loud and unruly, the people proceed solemnly and respectfully with their entire families. Kira and Thomas have been told to wait in their rooms until the tenders come for them, and they are soon led to places of honor on the stage in front of the entire village, seated near the Worship-object.

The Chief Guardian speaks to the assembly and introduces Kira as the Robe-threader and designer of the future and Thomas as the Carver of the future. Then, Jo is brought in and introduced as the Singer of the future, and the villagers show respect to the three children.

Finally, the Singer enters the hall, clad in the magnificent robe on which Kira has toiled for months and holding the staff that Thomas has painstakingly restored. The people are awestruck. Their work has restored the objects beyond anyone's expectations.

Kira hears a strange, intermittent metallic scraping that she is unable to identify, but she dismisses it as the Singer takes his place. The room is silent as the Singer begins the Ruin Song with words familiar to some, "In the beginning..."

Chapter 19 Analysis

The Gathering represents the culmination of Kira and Thomas' work, and the villagers appreciate the artisans' skills and efforts when the robe and staff are revealed during the ceremony. Though they are presented as persons of honor, Kira and Thomas remain humble before the assembly, aware that they have achieved honor only by virtue of their extraordinary talents.

The ceremony itself appears to be modeled after the Catholic traditions. The Edifice is described in more detail, painting a clearer picture of a church. The Worship-object is described as a cross, but it is never named as a crucifix. The overall appearance of the Singer evokes images of priests in full ceremonial garb, and the Ruin song begins with the same words as the Bible's Old Testament.

Despite the relatively coarse nature of the community, the proceedings are decidedly somber. Even those from the Fen appear to view the proceedings with reverence, and there are no disruptions. However, Kira is puzzled by a strange sound as the Singer takes his place on the stage. Something feels amiss, and she finds it difficult to concentrate on the ceremony because of it.



Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

The Singer continues the Ruin Song for several hours, during which time Kira's mind wanders, and the reader learns that Kira has secretly been teaching herself to read during her color review sessions with Thomas. She has told no one, since women are forbidden to read, but she takes secret pleasure as her literacy grows.

Thomas calls Kira's attention to a shadowy figure stealthily making its way toward the front row of the hall. Soon, she is delighted to see Matt take a seat in the front row. The ceremony is still in progress, so she is unable to speak to him. She can see that he is holding something proudly in his hands, though she cannot see what it is. Shortly after Matt's arrival, the ceremony breaks for a lunchtime intermission.

Jo is allowed to dine with Kira and Thomas, and when they return to Thomas' room, they find Matt and Branch eagerly awaiting their return. After a jubilant reunion, Matt tells of his journey to get Kira a gift so that she will like him best. He has journeyed for days down the path Annabella mentioned had the color blue and brought her two gifts, one big and one little. The little gift is a square of blue cloth, and Kira is amazed that Matt was able to find it. The big gift, Matt says, is still coming.

Matt tells Kira that the people down the path were broken like her, referring to her bad leg. Some were similarly disfigured, and others broken in different ways. All of them were quiet and nice, though. Whatever their physical condition, they have plenty of blue, and there are no beasts in the woods.

After lunch, everyone returns to the council hall to resume the Ruin Song. The Singer returns to the stage, and Kira again hears the strange metallic sound. Just as the Singer begins, Kira, terrified, realizes what the sound is.

Chapter 20 Analysis

Kira, despite her early attempts to follow protocol, has begun to learn to read in secret and enjoys it. Kira's expanding knowledge offers hope that, one day, perhaps all women will learn to read, and society will be better because of it.

Kira is overjoyed when she discovers Matt has returned. Her excitement must be tempered and her reunion with her friend delayed because of the ceremony, symbolizing the ways in which her new position has interfered with her own personal desires.

Matt's journey has numerous implications. He confirms Annabella's claims that there are no beasts in the woods, and he discovers an abundance of blue among a different



society down the path less traveled. It is no accident that the society that Matt describes as "quiet" and "nice" has an abundance of blue, the color of peace.

Matt also explains to Kira that the village is full of people like her, with disabilities, and that they live together in harmony. The infirm are not shunned and left to die, but rather cooperate and find value in one another. Kira's joy at Matt's return and his wonderful tale is cut short, however, when the ceremony resumes and she realizes what the strange sound is. The chapter ends without revealing the source of the sound, heightening dramatic tension.



Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

As the Ruin Song finishes, the crowd rises and sings the finale with the Singer, a resounding, "Amen. So be it." The Singer himself calls Jo to his side as he finishes, and she enthusiastically joins him for the final phrase to the crowd's thunderous approval.

Kira immediately limps up to her room, Thomas chasing after her, imploring her to tell him what is wrong. Kira prepares to share her terrible new revelation with Thomas, but when they arrive at Kira's room, Matt meets them with his big gift.

Kira enters the room and finds a strange man of about her mother's age sitting in her chair. His head and face are terribly scarred, and his eyes are blind. He wears a blue shirt from which Kira's small gift has been torn. The man has brought her the plants to make blue dye, and she is dumbfounded as to why a total stranger would give her so precious a gift.

The man tells Kira that he followed Matt most of the way back to the village, but he made the last part of the journey by himself. He has been here before, and he was able to navigate by the feel of the sun on his face and the smells around him. The man insists that no one be told that he is in the Edifice. Hesitantly, he confesses to Kira that his name is Christopher and that he is her father.

Chapter 21 Analysis

The Ruin Song's religious parallels are reinforced by the mass chanting of its finish, "Amen. So be it." The contents of the song are left to the imagination of the reader, but the snippets that are actually revealed in the text appear to be a mixture of the Bible and the history of Kira's world.

By examining what little is revealed of the Song, as well as the images described on the Singer's robe, the reader may infer that Kira's society is a future version of this world, one which has regressed technologically and sociologically following a series of cataclysms. The fact that technology is practically nonexistent in Kira's society seems to be an indictment of modern society and its dependence on technology.

When Kira returns to her room and finds the strange blind man waiting for her, she momentarily forgets her horrific realization. She is wary of this stranger, unsure of why he would present her with the extravagant gift of blue plants. She remains courteous, despite her recent shock and excitement, a testament to her maturity.

When Kira learns that the strange man is actually her father, the novel veers into more biblical parallelism. Christopher, the prodigal son, essentially returns from the dead and

offers salvation to his crippled daughter. His presence is also incontrovertible proof that Jamison is a liar.

A sense of danger mixes with this curious reunion. It raises serious questions about Jamison, particularly when Christopher is adamant about his presence being kept secret from everyone in the village.



Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

Christopher tells his tale to Kira, beginning with the day that he was reportedly carried off by beasts. In the days when Katrina was still carrying Kira in her womb, Christopher was a skilled hunter and respected within the village, with an appointment to the council pending. He had many jealous enemies who wanted his seat on the council, and on the day of the great hunt, a man attacked him from behind, clubbing, stabbing and blinding him, leaving him for dead.

Christopher was dragged to the Field of Leaving, half-dead and delirious with pain. Strangers came in the night and comforted him, carrying him to their faraway village to heal him. There, he was able to regain his strength, though he would never be able to see again. The village was populated with injured people from other surrounding villages, and its citizens worked together to support one another in harmony.

The blows to Christopher's head had been meant to kill him, and though Christopher survived, his memory had suffered great damage. For a long time, he was unable to remember anything about his former life or his family, and by the time he could remember, he could not find his way back. Finally, he resigned himself to his fate and made a good life in his new village until the day Matt stumbled into his life and told him of Kira.

Kira listens raptly as her father tells his tale, and she tells him of her deformed leg and her mother's fight to keep her alive. Christopher is proud of his wife and daughter, and he never married in his new village. He invites Kira to leave and start a new life with him in his new village, but she excitedly tells him of her honored position as the Robe-threader. She assures Christopher that her mentor, Jamison, will find a place for him in the Edifice. At the mention of Jamison's name, Christopher stiffens. He is certain that it was Jamison who tried to kill him on the hunt.

Chapter 22 Analysis

Christopher is literally and figuratively stabbed in the back when he is attacked from behind by his comrade, Jamison. Ironically, Jamison has always maintained that Christopher was killed by beasts, and as Jamison is the one responsible for Christopher's injuries, he secretly refers to himself as a beast. Tragically, by killing Kira's mother and attempting to kill her father, Jamison becomes Kira's father figure.

In the Catholic religion, Saint Christopher is regarded as the patron saint of travelers. Ironically, Christopher's injuries prevent him from being able to travel back to his daughter without the aid of Matt. His blindness and damaged memory make it nearly impossible to make the trip alone.



The fact that Christopher is also disabled helps to establish the connection with his daughter. He was taken before his daughter was even born, and due to Jamison's treachery, he will never be able to see his daughter. Their connection is immediate, however, and once Christopher explains why he has never returned, Kira accepts him as her father.

Kira's village, with its brutish hunts, poverty-stricken Fen and callous attitudes toward the crippled, represents aggression and discontent. Christopher's village, on the other hand, is described as a peaceful, harmonious place to live, full of people who would embrace Kira, regardless of her disability. Christopher's village represents the acceptance that has always been out for reach for Kira in her own village.



Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

Kira wakes the next morning before dawn and goes to her garden to tend the flowers that her father has brought her. She ponders many questions, realizing that her mother was most likely poisoned in order to bring Kira under the protection of the Guardians. She assumes that similar fates befell Thomas' and Jo's parents, and in thinking of Jo, Kira remembers the thing that horrified her during the Ruin Song.

The metallic clanking Kira and Thomas heard during the ceremony was created by thick metal shackles that bound the ruined, bloody feet of the Singer. Kira caught a glimpse of his bonds as he ascended the stage and saw the horrific scars caused by the shackles.

Though Kira had been planning on returning to her father's new village with him to start a new life, she decides that she must remain at the Edifice and do her best to write a better future. She resolves to use her artistry to make a better future for everyone, not just the future the Guardians want her to write.

Christopher understands and respects Kira's decision to stay. They decide that Matt will take Christopher home and act as their messenger, and one day, Kira will join her father in his village. As he leaves, Christopher gives his daughter a bundle of blue thread, unraveled from the shirt in which he had arrived. Kira bids farewell to her father and her young friend, and she returns to the Edifice to do her part in forging a better future.

Chapter 23 Analysis

The return of Kira's father, long presumed dead, gives Kira much to consider. She decides that the Guardians are to blame for many of her village's problems, as well as countless murders.

The treatment of the Singer comes as a shock to both Kira and the reader. Throughout the novel, the Singer is spoken of with reverence, but he is ultimately revealed to be little more than a prisoner. The shackles around the Singer's ankles are symbolic of the mental prison which the Guardians strive to maintain for the villagers. As long as they are able to control the Singer, they can remain the architects of the future and the rulers of the uneducated masses.

Kira sees that this fate lies in store for Jo, and this realization ultimately persuades Kira to remain in her village as the keeper of the robe. She sacrifices her own chance at happiness with her father in a more understanding society in order to keep working to affect change in her own village. If Kira leaves with her father, things will remain the same or get worse, and Kira is confident that she can make a difference for the better. Her selflessness may be the key to forging a better future for her people, and she feels comfortable with her decision.

The novel winds down with many disturbing revelations about the nature of things in Kira's village, but Kira's decision ends the tale on a hopeful note. She will maintain contact with her father through Matt, and perhaps one day, the two villages will unite and form a better society for everyone.



Characters

Kira

A teenage girl, Kira is orphaned as the story begins. Born with a deformed leg, she is scorned by the other villagers. She possesses a keen talent for needlework, learned in part from her mother. She becomes a ward of the Guardians and lives in the Edifice, where she assumes the duties her mother left behind as the keeper of the Singer's robe. Thrust into maturity by her mother's untimely death, Kira gains a significant amount of maturity in a short time over the course of the novel.

Kira begins the story as a frightened girl, though she is determined to make a new life for herself. A lifetime of struggling against her handicap and the society that views the weak and infirm as useless has toughened Kira, and this toughness allows her to overcome any obstacles she encounters.

Though still considered a child, Kira behaves with more maturity and common sense than many of the adults she encounters in the story. She adopts a maternal attitude toward her younger friend Matt, and later in the tale, toward the future Singer, Jo.

Ultimately, Kira's sense of compassion demands that she stay in her village in an effort to improve the conditions for her people. She is able to see things from a different perspective due to the life she has led because of her handicap, and this understanding has the potential to benefit everyone in her village, though it will come at the cost of great personal sacrifice for Kira.

Thomas the Carver

A boy about Kira's age, Thomas becomes her friend when she moves into the Edifice. He has extraordinary skill in wood carving, and he became a ward of the Guardians after both of his parents were killed in a storm. His assigned duty is to restore the Singer's staff, a holy object that aids the Singer in keeping her place during the Ruin song. Having already spent several years living with the Guardians, Thomas helps Kira adjust to life in the Edifice. Along with Kira, he gradually realizes how they have all come to live in the Edifice.

Thomas functions as Kira's friend and confidante throughout the story, being similar in situation and skill. Both of them have lost their parents and find themselves called upon to do important work, and they are about the same age. Their relationship deepens as the tale progresses, though it never goes beyond a platonic relationship.



Matt

Kira's friend Matt is a nine-year-old boy from the lower social group of people living in the Fen. Cheerful, mischievous and resourceful, he is like a little brother to Kira and helps her whenever he can. He always travels with his dog, Branch.

Matt's family lives in squalor in the Fen, and at one point during the novel, his mother says that she is glad to be rid of him. Even Thomas proclaims that Matt has no worthwhile skills, though Kira is able to see otherwise. She recognizes the good in Matt's heart, as well as his fierce loyalty. Matt undertakes what could be a perilous journey in order to retrieve Kira a present, and through a happy accident, he brings Kira the best present she could hope to receive in reuniting with her presumed-dead father.

Jamison

A member of the Council of Guardians, Jamison is appointed to defend Kira at her hearing. He reportedly saw Kira's father get taken by the beasts on the great hunt. He becomes Kira's advisor once she moves into the Edifice, tracking her progress on the Singer's robe. At the end of the tale, it is revealed that Jamison attempted to murder Kira's father and most likely orchestrated the deaths of Kira's mother and Annabella.

Annabella

A very old woman, Annabella trained Kira's mother in the arts of cloth and thread dying. She lives alone, deep in the woods. She acts as Kira's mentor and completes the training that will enable Kira to do her work on the robe. She meets a suspicious end after speaking too boldly against the existence of beasts in the forest.

Katrina

Kira's mother, Katrina, has died from a brief and unexpected illness as the story begins. In life, she tended the Singer's robe, making repairs to the revered garment. She fought to keep Kira after she was born with a deformed leg, raising her alone.

Christopher

Kira's father, Christopher, died when Kira was an infant, reportedly killed while on a long hunt. Respected within the community, he was chosen to be a guardian. The end of the novel reveals that he was left for dead by his rival, Jamison. After being rescued from death by a society of handicapped people, he lived among them, blind from his injuries, until returning to Kira at the end of the story.



Vandara

A cruel and physically menacing woman, Vandara tries to take Kira's space in the village by force. She bears a scar on her face, reputedly from fighting a beast. Local legend suggests that she was responsible for poisoning one of her own children.

Jo

A very young girl with a beautiful singing voice, Jo has been orphaned and taken to live in the Edifice. She is slated to become the Singer of the future. A former resident of the Fen, her voice brought joy to those who lived around her.

Marlena

An older friend of Kira's, Marlena works in the weaving shed.

Branch

Branch is Matt's dog, so named for the splint Matt used to set the dog's broken leg when he rescued it. Branch is Matt's constant companion, and the boy will not go anywhere without him.



Objects/Places

Field of Leaving

The villagers watch over their dead for four days in the Field of Leaving, until the body's spirit departs. It is said that dangerous beasts come in the night to devour the dead. It is the only overt example of spirituality in Kira's relatively callous society.

The Fen

The poor area of Kira's village, the Fen is a dismal slum. Crowded, unsanitary and full of hopeless people, it is the area where Matt and Jo were born. It houses the lowest class of people in Kira's society.

The Council Edifice

A comparatively splendid building left over from the time before the Ruin, the Edifice serves as the headquarters for the Council of Guardians. Though never specifically identified as such, it appears to be an old Catholic or Christian church that survived the Ruin. It still has working plumbing, though it does not have electricity.

Cott

Cott is the term for the simple hut-like dwellings in which most of the people of Kira's village live. A very basic sort of structure, the cott that Kira leaves behind has a dirt floor and no windows.

Kira's Decorated Scrap of Cloth

A scrap of ordinary cloth that Kira decorated to pass the time while she tended to her dying mother, Kira's cloth features a design unlike anything Kira has ever seen. It seems to Kira that her hands did the work themselves and that she only observed. Kira treasures this scrap, and it almost speaks to her sometimes. The scrap acts as a psychic channel for Kira, and she learns to trust the things it tries to tell her.

Thomas' Piece of Decorated Wood

Very similar to Kira's decorated scrap of cloth, Thomas' piece of decorated wood seems to speak to Thomas in the same way. He carved a piece of wood with intricate designs as a child and has kept it close to him since.



Thomas' Wooden Key

Carved by Thomas during his early childhood years in the Edifice, the wooden key opens any door in the building. It represents youthful rebellion and the quest for truth, and the children are able to use it to befriend Jo, the young girl who will one day become the new Singer.

The Singer's Robe

With intricate stitching, this magnificent garment depicts the history of Kira's people. It shows, in minute detail, the story of the old society's ruin in an attempt to educate the people so that another catastrophe might be avoided in the future. There is a large portion of the robe that remains vacant, and Kira is expected to decorate it with visions of the future which the Guardians hope to create.

The Singer's Staff

Covered with intricate carvings, the staff helps the Singer stay on track during the Ruin Song. Like the robe, it features a large portion that is reserved for the future. Thomas is expected to carve the future there, based on what the Guardians dictate.

The Worship Object

Described only in passing during the Ruin Song ceremony, the object appears to be a crucifix, reinforcing the idea that the Edifice was once a Catholic or Christian church.

Annabella's Cott

Set deep in the woods, Annabella's simple home is far removed from the village proper. Kira's long walk through the woods to this place of learning is symbolic of her passage into adulthood.



Setting

Gathering Blue is set in a non-specific, dystopian (anti-utopian) future. Sometime in the distant past, a terrible catastrophe has occurred, forcing a once socially and technologically advanced civilization into a rapid disintegration that the people in Kira's village call the "Ruin." Fragments of that civilization survive in small, isolated enclaves of simple, superstitious people ruled by local oligarchic (governed by few) "Councils," whose primary task is to preserve a memory of the past and to guide the future of their people. It is in one of these enclaves that the action of Gathering Blue takes place.

Gathering Blue begins in the "Field of Leaving," as Kira awaits the "diggers" who will come to bury her mother once her mother's spirit has been given sufficient time to exit her body. The setting is a medieval-like village, isolated from the rest of the world by a dense and forbidding forest inhabited by awful beasts and creatures of the night. Life in the village is primitive and hard. Space is at a premium.

The people in Kira's village live in small huts crudely built of tree limbs and mud, and are engaged in a day-to-day struggle for survival. The village people grow vegetables in small gardens and the village men hunt wild animals in the fields outside the village. The women carry water from the nearby river. There is no tolerance for people with physical handicaps who can no longer contribute their share of work to the good of the community. Those who are injured or diseased are removed from the village and taken by the "dragers" to the field outside the village to die.

After her mother's death, Kira becomes a ward of the "Council of Guardians." The compound to which Kira is taken to live is called the "Council Edifice." The Council Edifice is an island of safety, comfort, and mysterious anachronism. Outside the Edifice, there is hunger and primitive living conditions. Within the Edifice there is hot and cold running water, soap, and many of the personal comforts that we associate with a more modern setting. It is the only remaining structure from a time before the "Ruin," an event in the village's history that, some time in the distant past, nearly destroyed the civilization that evolved into Kira's culture. It is never made clear to the reader how widespread that destruction was, or whether it was of natural or manmade origins.

Within the village there is a subculture called the Fen. People who live here do the dirtiest, most difficult work of the village.

Even though life in the village is difficult for all the people, for the people in the Fen it is all the more distressing, even more crowded, even more noisy, even more dirty. One of the young protagonists in the story, Matt, lives there. The children in the Fen are treated harshly by their parents and grow up quickly. At nine, Matt is, for all intents and purposes, on his own. His mother does not grow concerned when he disappears for days at a time. Matt has somehow found Kira and they have become friends. Before Kira's mother died, Kira regularly told stories to the children of the village, including Matt.

Social Sensitivity

Lowry demonstrates a sensitivity to people with handicaps and the way they are often resented by "normal" people in the world, either because they are seen "not to contribute" or because they are shown special consideration for their handicaps that others are not. Kira has been taught to be ashamed of her deformity, but she refuses to let it make her less of a person. Like many other people with handicaps, her physical weakness is compensated by her mental resolve and her extraordinary talents.

Gathering Blue also demonstrates that there are many people in the world who see past a person's handicap. In this story, Thomas never seems to notice that Kira has a crippled leg; and Kira's friend Matt seems determined to find ways to help her compensate for her infirmity. Often in the narrative, Kira or someone else mentions that it is doubtful that she will ever find a mate.

Matt even attempts a little matchmaking with a boy from outside the village. However, readers may be lead to imagine that Kira is missing something, and that she might find romance close at hand, in the person of her new friend and fellow artist, Thomas.

In Gathering Blue, Lowry shows some lack of concern for those who are typically forgotten by mainstream society, the people who live on the "wrong side of the tracks." In this case, the wrong side of the tracks is the Fen. She portrays these people as being less articulate, filthy, and loud and tasks them with the least desirable jobs in the village. They are violent and greedy.

The people of the Fen are portrayed as poor parents who mistreat their children and allow them to wander about with little or no supervision. When Kira goes to the Fen looking for Matt, she finds that Matt's mom does not know or seem to care where her nine-year-old son is, only that he stole some food when he left. "Good rid to him," is her comment when Kira asks about his absence.

Gathering Blue also addresses child abuse.

Children in this story are often neglected and abused, valued only for what they can contribute to the family and to the village.

They are "taken," moved and traded from family to family as best benefits the community, with no regard for their feelings or their needs. Children who are born weak or deformed are immediately taken to the field and put to death. Children who get sick or injured suffer the same fate. Children have no rights, and adults in the story take advantage of them whenever they can, like Vandara, the woman who took Kira's land to build a pen to corral the neighborhood children.



Literary Qualities

The most remarkable literary quality reflected in *Gathering Blue* is its readability.

The language is chosen carefully so as not to insult young readers or adults while at the same time providing access for younger or less experienced readers. As is typical in her novels, Lowry uses dialogue as a key element in her character and plot development. The story is told from the third person, limited omniscient point of view, allowing the reader inside the mind of the main protagonist, Kira. Lowry also relies upon devices like foreshadowing, inference, allusion, careful diction, integrated motifs, and figurative language to enhance and enable her telling of *Gathering Blue*.

Lowry doesn't overuse the technique of foreshadowing; however, she does use it skillfully. Kira's resolution to rebuild her burned cottage in the face of almost insurmountable odds hints to her continued resolve and her eventual decision to stay in the village and work to build a new future for the people, also in the face of daunting obstacles. Her penchant for storytelling foreshadowed the role she will eventually play in creating a new future for her people.

Readers are asked to make many inferences as they negotiate the plot of *Gathering Blue*. One example is the role of Jamison in the deaths of Kira's parents and of Annabella.

Not until the end of the story is the connection made directly, when Kira's father tells the story of his disappearance. However, throughout the book, clues and references are made that point to his complicity. Readers are led to assume he is not all that he seems and that he may have a dark side.

Another example of inference is found in the description of the Edifice. References to colored glass in the windows, an enormous chamber, a bell in a tower, and the crosslike "object of worship" all lead the reader to infer that the Edifice was once a church.

Several allusions are made that add texture to the mood of the story and help the reader better understand situations and plot elements. For instance, Lowry's use of the word *Way* to refer to natural law and Kira's requisite four days of mourning are reminiscent of Navajo culture. Additionally, the *Ruin Song* makes unmistakable references to stories from the Bible and to events in recent history such as the great wars and the destruction of modern cities.

Magical inspiration is a motif integrated into the characters of Kira, Thomas, and Jo.

Each discovers their artistic talent in an almost supernatural flood of creative inspiration. Kira and Thomas maintain a unique relationship and even a kind of dialogue with the products of their first creative experience, Kira's scrap of embroidered material and Thomas's piece of carved wood.



This magical quality fits neatly into the near medieval context within which the story is set and adds to its charm. It also invites the possibility of more magic that will break down the walls of ignorance and isolation and somehow lead the village into a better future.

Lowry uses careful diction and colloquial expressions to tie the village and its people to the reader by using contemporary expressions like "hubby" for husband.

Using old, out of use words like "tyke" help establish the mood of decay. The speech of the people from the Fen is filled with non-standard expressions to illustrate their separation from mainstream life in the village and to give them additional color and depth. Lowry uses double negatives, calculated errors in verb tense and pronoun usage, and other non-standard expressions such as "filched," and "iffen" to make Kari's wayward young friend from the Fen, Matt, believable and complete. Jo's use of expressions like "kissie" and "wavie" help her character take on a sense of freshness and innocence.

Lowry makes sparing but effective use of figurative language in her writing, using personification like "whisper a breeze" and metaphors like "centered fragments of her childhood life" to add depth of meaning and imagery to her narrative. Onomatopoeic words like "clatter" used to describe the sound of the looms in the weaving shed enhance the readers' understanding and their overall reading experience.



Themes

Loyalty

Jamison, who appears to have Kira's best interests in mind when he defends her during the hearing, hides terrible secrets. He betrays Christopher's trust on the hunt, literally and figuratively stabbing Christopher in the back in order to achieve an appointment to the Council of Guardians. Later, Jamison acts as Kira's protector and father figure, even though it appears he conspired to murder Kira's mother and her mentor, Annabella. Though he feigns compassion, Jamison shows loyalty to no one but himself.

Conversely, the relationship between Kira and Matt is the epitome of loyalty. Though they are not bound by blood ties, they behave as though they are brother and sister or, at times, mother and son. Though Kira is looked upon with scorn because of her disability, Matt goes out of his way to treat her with kindness and respect at all times.

Matt convinces his friends to help build Kira a new cott, should she be allowed to stay after her hearing. He acts as Kira's protector during most of her travels through the forest to Annabella's cott, though he finds the excursion dull. He endures baths in order to spend time with her at the Edifice.

Near the end of the tale, Matt risks his own safety in order to bring Kira the gift of blue. He wants to show Kira how much he loves her, and he ventures into the unknown to bring her the best gift he can think of. Once Kira has made her decision to stay in her own village, he agrees to act as an intermediary between the two villages, though it will not profit him in the slightest.

As for Kira, she exhibits loyalty at every opportunity. She watches over her dying mother and then guards her spirit in the Field of Leaving. Kira offers to watch over Annabella's spirit in the Field as well, though they are little more than strangers. Kira does her best to protect Matt, exemplified by her mad dash to stop him from participating in the hunt. She also shows loyalty and integrity when she honors her promise to visit Jo in her room, though it might cause problems with the Guardians.

The Strong vs. The Weak

Kira's society literally leaves those with debilitating injuries or birth defects in the Field of Leaving to die. Those with disabilities are viewed as worthless, and the dialogue, with its casual callousness, supports this notion. When Vandara leads the pack of women against Kira in an effort to steal Kira's land, it appears to be a case of the strong abusing the weak, but Kira, by using the fear of legal reprisal, manages to win the confrontation.

Kira is born with a deformed leg, and despite her infirmity, she is eventually appointed to one of the most honored positions in her village. She can barely walk, but her skills enable her to help carry the history and future of her people in the work that she does



on the robe. Ironically, Jamison, the person arguably responsible for hurting Kira more than anyone, recognizes her worth and saves her from being discarded.

Christopher's village, a society principally comprised of people with disabilities, also takes up this theme. By banding together and helping one another, the villagers have been able to build a functional society based on compassion. One can argue that these people, who have existed peacefully while battling their own physical limitations, are stronger than those in Kira's village, who exist in relative tension, even though they are all in good health. At the end of the story, Kira decides to make it her mission to create a bridge between these two cultures in an effort to create a more balanced society.

Coming of Age

Since most of the principle characters are still considered children, their passage into adulthood and the responsibilities they must assume play a major role in the story. Kira begins the story as a relatively sheltered child, but she is forced to take on very adult situations almost immediately. The first few chapters find Kira fighting for her very life, and she does so with amazing poise, particularly with regard to her mother's recent death.

Kira conducts herself as an adult throughout the entire story. In most situations, she is the most rational and responsible person, acting as the moral compass for the other characters. Her growth is subtle, but significant, as she makes some very difficult adult choices at the end of the novel.

Thomas' maturation is more evident throughout the story. When Kira meets Thomas, he is pleasant and polite but lacks understanding and compassion. When Kira notices Matt trying to join the hunt, she has to beg Thomas to help her retrieve the boy. Thomas fails to see the value in rescuing Matt, commenting that there are too many children running around the village as it is.

Thomas' lack of emotional development is likely the result of growing up in relative isolation inside the Edifice. Taken out of a family structure at a young age, Thomas lacks the experience of a family dynamic and finds it difficult to understand why Kira would care about Matt.

As Kira and Thomas' friendship grows, the reader will notice that Thomas begins to show more compassion. He worries about the source of the cries in the night and leads the expedition to investigate. He attempts to comfort Kira when Matt goes missing and agrees to accompany her to the Fen to search for the boy.

Matt begins the story as a typically rambunctious boy, occupying himself with childish mischief and simple fun. He quickly shows his desire to be older, applying moss to his body to simulate body hair in an effort to join the hunt with the men. He takes on some very adult responsibilities, notably in guarding Kira on her journeys through the woods.



Matt also develops emotionally, showing a growing maturity and concern for the feelings of others. On his journey to Christopher's village, he notes young men that he thinks Kira might consider attractive mates. He tries to convince her that the other village might make her happier, even though Kira's departure would cost him his best friend.



Themes/Characters

Kira is lucky to be alive. Babies born with deformities such as Kira's crooked leg are almost always taken away from the mother and left in the field outside the village to die; it is the Way of her people. The Way is harsh and impersonal. The Way is their law. It demands that everyone in the village be able to work, to contribute, to earn the right to live. Those that can not are weeded out and disposed of. However, due partly to a stubborn mother, partly to an influential grandfather, and partly to her own stubborn refusal to be separated from her mother, Kira survives to grow into an intelligent and talented young woman. Both Kira's grandfather and her mother are respected people in the village. Kira's grandfather had once been a member of the Council of Guardians, the ruling body of the village. Kira's mother, Katrina, had a special and valuable talent. She knew how to extract dyes from plants and how to embroider colorful images into the weave of the otherwise colorless, prosaic textiles that are the norm in the village. Because of Katrina's skills, she is chosen to maintain the "Singer's Robe," a unique and very important ceremonial garment worn only once a year at a celebration called the Gathering.

One of the significant themes in *Gathering Blue* is the way society reacts to people with handicaps. The people in Kira's village shun and resent handicapped people.

Villagers who become handicapped, either through injury or disease, and children who are born with physical imperfections are almost always condemned to death. There seems to be no compassion or sympathy for others. The people seem only concerned with their own well being and survival.

Another significant theme is control. In the village, the instruments of control are the Council of Guardians and the bell in the tower of the Council Edifice. The bell tells the people when to start work, when to stop, and when to gather for meetings, when to celebrate, and when to arm against danger. The Council of Guardians is the governing body of the village. The Guardians control the tower bell, interpret and enforce the Way, mediate disputes, and preserve the history of the people. The Guardians live and meet in the Council Edifice, an ancient stone structure in the center of the village. The Edifice is the only structure known to survive the Ruin. It was once a church, and the guardians have adopted a role similar to that of clergy.

Once a year, the people of the village are called to the Edifice for a Gathering, where they hear the story of their history sung to them by the Singer. As the Singer sings the narrative, he points to corresponding places on the Robe where the story is embroidered. In his hand, he holds a staff into which the same story has been carved in relief. The "Ruin Song" tells the way it has always been, demonstrating a never-ending pattern of ruin and rebuilding, perpetuating the Way and validating the role and the authority of the Guardians.

The Guardians also use fear to control the people and discourage them from venturing away from the isolation of the village. They perpetuate a lie that there are awful beasts



lurking in the forests and fields surrounding the village. In truth, the most ferocious animals are rabbits and deer. They use force to protect their secret. Annabella, one of Kira's teachers, and a symbol of learning and wisdom, dies mysteriously after telling Kira the truth about the beasts of the forest.

Control is also evident in the rigid separation of the classes, the definition of strict male and female roles, and the isolation of family units. Women had certain jobs like making cloth, raising children, and tending the family garden. Men had different jobs like being a butcher and going on hunts to gather meat for the village. Only certain people were allowed to learn reading and writing. Kira was frightened and felt guilty when she realized she was inadvertently learning to read Thomas's record of plants and dyes. The most privileged and educated people in the village were the Guardians.

Jamison, the Guardian responsible for identifying and then guiding the young artists brought to the Edifice, best represents the theme of control and the role of the Guardians in village life. On the surface he is kind and genuinely concerned. He acts as an advocate for the children and visits them regularly. However, Jamison is also the Guardian that seems to be the most responsible for the sudden deaths of their parents and of Annabella. This manipulative, subversive duality characterizes the role of government in *Gathering Blue*.

Perhaps the most significant theme of *Gathering Blue* is creativity and artistic expression. Creativity is presented as an almost supernatural influence on those who have been gifted with it. The monotony of day-to-day existence and years of struggle for simple survival has systematically siphoned imagination and creativity out of the people of the village. The Council of Guardians recognizes the power of creativity and attempts to channel it to suit their needs, to shape a new future. To that end, children who demonstrate creative talent are orphaned and then brought to live in the Council Edifice, where their creative talents are put to work creating a future that fits the only pattern they know, that of the "Ruin Song". The parents of Kira, Thomas, and Jo all died immediately prior to their being brought to live in the Edifice.

Kira grew up helping her mother and learning her mother's craft. She also made herself useful gathering scraps of cloth from beneath the looms in the weaving sheds.

Though she was crippled and walked stiffly with a stick, she managed to do her share of work and was liked and respected by those who knew her. One day, while practicing the art of embroidery on a small scrap of cloth, Kira's fingers and the bone needle in them seemed to begin to work on their own, as if the patterns and images appearing in the cloth were the work of the cloth itself.

Though she could not explain it to anyone, that magical scrap of cloth became Kira's muse and advisor. It seemed to communicate with her, giving her direction and inspiration. When Kira was brought to the Edifice, she was put to work first repairing the Singer's Robe as her mother had done, and then restoring it. After coming to work in the Edifice, Kira's connection with her magical scrap of cloth started becoming weaker and weaker.



Thomas is another young person who has been brought to live in the Edifice. His talent is wood carving. Thomas demonstrates his artistic talent and creativity at a very young age and lives and works in the Edifice most of his life. He is told his parents were killed in a storm. Thomas's fingers, like Kira's, seem to have a mind of their own when carving. Like Kira's scrap of cloth, Thomas keeps his first truly creative wood carving with him at all times.

Also like Kira's cloth, the piece of wood represents his creative instincts, guiding and inspiring him, both personally and artistically. Thomas is put to work restoring the Singer's Staff, a wooden rod with the entire history of the world carved into it.

Thomas notices that the more he carves the Singer's Staff, the less his special piece of wood seems to speak to him.

The youngest of the artists living in the Edifice is Jo. Jo is little more than an infant when her parents died and she is brought to the compound. Kira discovers Jo locked in her room in another section of the Edifice after hearing her crying in the night. Jo is to be the new Singer, replacing the aging, existing Singer who is, like Jo, held prisoner somewhere within the Edifice and who is released once a year to sing the Ruin Song at the Gathering. Jo's talent for music and singing emerges when she is very young. It is as though she had been born with the ability to sing and to create songs. Her songs are beautiful and fresh. They bring happiness and hope to those who hear them.

In the Edifice she is forced to memorize the old songs, the songs of the Robe and the Staff. Once again, the creative and artistic energy of the children is stifled by measures that seem to be designed to perpetuate the status quo and continue to validate the Way.

After learning the old songs and restoring the old stories in embroidery or wooden relief, Kira, Thomas, and Jo are told they are to complete the Song, the Robe, and the Staff by creating the future, a future guided by the past and the Way, a future much like the present.

Hope is added to the mix of themes in *Gathering Blue* by the pluck, the innocence and the imagination of the young protagonists. Kira offers her stubborn belief in herself, a strong compassion for others, and in a dream of a better, brighter, more colorful future. Thomas, the wood carver, demonstrates a candid openness, an unqualified friendship, and a willingness to explore new ideas and challenge accepted truths.

Matt, the precocious, totally fearless, dirtyfaced boy from the Fen who challenges authority and accepted beliefs to protect Kira's belongings after her mother's death and to bring her the blue from an inconceivable "yonder," brings his energy, his bravery, and his willingness to go where none have gone before along with selfless dedication and loyalty to friends.



Style

Point of View

Gathering Blue is told from a limited third-person omniscient view, centering on Kira's experiences. The action is always described in relation to Kira, though the reader occasionally gets limited insight into the thoughts and feelings of the other characters, mainly through dialogue.

The surprise impact of the story, the realization that Kira's society lives in a primitive future that is the result of the destruction of contemporary society, requires that most descriptions of objects and places remain vague throughout the novel. Descriptive details about the Edifice and its contents are not provided until the last few chapters, and they are still somewhat obscure at the end of the novel, leaving the reader to make the final interpretive leaps.

Most of the novel takes place in the present, but two main plot points are told as recollections by relatively minor characters. Kira's mother, in the form of a favorite bedtime story, tells of how she fought to save Kira from being left to die in the Field of Leaving, as was the custom for deformed babies. Kira's father tells of his experiences on his fateful hunt and his subsequent assimilation into the other village in the form of a long narrative memory. Though both of Kira's parents spend very little time as active characters in the narrative, their stories carry significant weight in the overall story.

Setting

The story is set in a simple village that evokes images of feudal European agrarian villages. The dwellings in which most of the citizens live are primitive, described as little more than huts made of wood with dirt floors. The society has some industry, however, and skilled artisans work in the village. The level of available technology is primitive, and this is evident in the use of manual looms in the weaving shed and the lack of plumbing anywhere but in the Edifice.

The Edifice itself is a remnant of the more advanced civilization that destroyed itself long before Kira's birth, and as the seat of a morally questionable government, it is the only location to have any modern conveniences. The fact that it once served as a church underscores the religious undertones present in the Ruin Song.

The area known as the Fen is often referenced but visited only briefly late in the story. It illustrates the rigidly layered class system present in Kira's village. The elite live in the Edifice. The working class live in Kira's part of the village, and the poor live in the Fen.

Christopher's village is only spoken of during the story of his disappearance, but he describes it as being a far more hospitable village for those with disabilities. The fact that his village has an abundance of blue, the color of peace, according to the author, is



no accident. The peaceful and harmonious lifestyle Christopher describes is a sharp contrast to the quietly desperate feel of Kira's village.

Language and Meaning

The language of the characters helps the reader identify the class of the speaker. Those living in the Edifice are considered to be the village's elite, and as such, they speak perfect modern English. They have access to books and records, and the benefits of their scholarly advantages are evident in the limited examples of their speech.

The people living in the middle class area of the village speak average English, occasionally peppered with colloquialisms and grammatical errors. The vocabulary includes words that have fallen out of modern daily speech, such as "tykes," "aye" and "yonder." By using words most readers are familiar with but do not use, the author adds to the sense of familiarity and antiquity.

The people living in the Fen are considered the lowest rung of the societal ladder, and most are lacking any formal education. Consequently, their language is full of errors and childish permutations of words. Matt is the primary example of the language of the Fen, but since he is still a young child, he may not be representative of the average intellect. Phrases like "a crusty of bread" and "they be making me remember everythings" indicate an ability to effectively communicate, however poor the grammar may be.

The narrative voice remains objective throughout the novel, observing the story without much editorializing. It takes care to paint Kira as a strong character, avoiding the temptation to make her an object of pity in an unfortunate situation.

Structure

Divided into twenty-three chapters that average ten pages each, *Gathering Blue* is designed to be readable in small doses. Often found in young adult sections of libraries and bookstores, this format may be more appealing to younger readers than longer, more involved chapters. There are three basic stages of the story, with the middle portion making up the bulk of the novel.

The first stage is brief and contains the beginning of the novel. In it, the reader learns of Kira's history and her predicament in the wake of her mother's death. Here, Kira is still very much a girl, unsure of herself and her future. Kira stands firm against Vandara and her mob, earning an official hearing before the Council of Guardians. Once Kira successfully survives the hearing and earns her new position, the story enters the second stage.

As Kira moves into the Edifice to begin her duties as the keeper of the Singer's robe, the story enters the main conflict. Here, the reader follows Kira through her transformation from a frightened girl into a strong, determined woman. The events that comprise this

section provide Kira with many clues to her own past and the future of her village, as well as her part in its creation.

The final phase of the novel reveals the truth of Christopher's disappearance, the nature of the Singer's captivity and Jamison's sinister role in the major events in Kira's life. It provides her with the information she uses to decide her future, and by extension, the future of her people. Her decision to remain in the village at the end of the novel and work toward a better society implies that this stage is ending, and a new one is beginning.



Quotes

(The indicated page numbers are from the Houghton Mifflin 2000 printing)

"Take pride in your pain. You are stronger than those who have none." - Katrina to Kira, explaining a benefit of Kira's handicap. Chapter 3, p. 22

"You will fail. Then they will kill you." - Vandara to Kira, following Kira's trial. Chapter 5, p. 49

"It is clear that exceptions can be made, so we may set aside the assertion that it is the way. It need not *always* be the way." - Jamison, during his speech defending Kira at the trial. Chapter 4, p. 33

"She's hard, that Vandara. She killed her own tyke, they say. Made him eat the oleander, they say. Sat with him and held his head till he et it, though he didn't want to." - Matt to Kira, addressing Vandara's reputation. Chapter 4, p. 39

"...There is no room for this useless girl. She can't marry. No one wants a cripple..." - Vandara, during her arguments against Kira in the trial. Chapter 4, p. 43

"She broke her arm real bad. Can't be fixed. Can't be made straight. No more good for weaving. Her hubby tried real hard to straighten up the arm 'cause he needs her. For the tykes and such. But she'll probably go to the Field." - One of the weavers to Kira, explaining that one of the others was injured and would likely be killed. Chapter 5, p. 54

"This is the entire story of our world. We must keep it intact. *More* than intact. The future will be told here. Our world depends on the telling." - Jamison to Kira, explaining the importance of the Singer's robe. Chapter 7, p. 74

"Something happens when I work with the threads. They seem to know things on their own, and my fingers simply follow." - Kira to Annabella, explaining her skill with threads. Chapter 8, p. 83

"She's very old. It's dangerous for her to speak that way. Her mind is beginning to wander." - Jamison to Kira, responding to Annabella's assertion that there are no beasts in the woods. Chapter 13, p. 128

"I heared that them songs was full of knowledges. She be only a small tyke, you know? But when she singed, she had knowledges of things that wasn't even happened yet!" - Marlena to Kira, speaking of the child Jo's singing abilities. Chapter 14, p. 132

"They be making me remember everythings. Me old songs, they just be there natural. But now they be stuffing new things into me and this poor head hurts horrid." - Jo to Kira and Thomas, about being forced to learn the Song of Ruin. Chapter 16, p.150

"Burn, scourged world,



"Furious furnace,

"Inferno impure...

"Ravaged all,

"Bogo tabal

"Timore toron

"Totoo now gone..." - Passages from the Ruin Song. Chapter 18, p. 170-171

"Your defender. Jamison? Yes, he tried to find a place for me before. Jamison is the one who tried to kill me." - Christopher to Kira, upon hearing Kira's tale of being brought to the Edifice. Chapter 22, p. 208

"Thomas? You and I? We're the ones who will fill in the blank places. Maybe we can make it different." - Kira to Thomas, referring to their upcoming task of decorating the staff and robe with scenes of the future. Chapter 17, p. 159



Topics for Discussion

1. What kinds of catastrophes, natural or man-made, could have brought about the destruction of an entire civilization, sending it back to a primitive state, like that of Gathering Blue?
2. Why might Kira's village remain in ruin, never regaining the glory and sophistication it once seemed to enjoy?
3. In what ways is the funeral ceremony at the beginning of the story alike or different than those we know?
4. When did you begin to suspect that Kira's mom did not die of a disease.

When did you begin to suspect that her father is not killed by beasts? What clues are there?

5. How does the Way, the law that governs life in the village, seem similar and different from the laws that govern our lives?
6. How do the Guardians maintain control over the people in the village?
7. The Edifice is the only structure to survive the Ruin. What do you think it is before the ruin? How might it be significant that this building is the only one to survive? What clues are given that reveal its previous role?
8. How are Kira, Thomas, and Jo different from all others in the village?
9. Why have Kira, Thomas, and Jo been taken to live in the Edifice? Why are they not given to another family like other children who have been orphaned?
10. How is life in the Edifice different from life in the village? Why do you suppose this is true?
11. How is Arabella different from the other adults in the story? What forbidden truth did she reveal to Kira?
12. Why does the Gathering seem like a religious ceremony of some kind? What are the similarities and differences?

What do you suppose is the purpose of the Gathering?

13. Why do you think the Singer is in chains? What might that symbolize?
14. Besides gathering plants that can be used to make blue dye, what symbolic meaning might be attached to the title, Gathering Blue? What is it that Kira is really seeking to add to the fabric of life in the village?



15. Why do you think Kira decides to remain in the village rather than leave to live with her father in the much nicer place where he has come to live?



Essay Topics

Discuss the significance of the Singer's robe and the Singer's staff. What do they represent?

Given the emphasis on remembering the history present in the Ruin Song, discuss the practice of forbidding women from learning to read.

Discuss the parallels between Matt's relationship with Kira and his relationship with his dog, Branch.

Identify the similarities between Kira's society and modern American society, and discuss elements that are present in both.

Consider Kira's decision to remain in her village at the end of the story. Explain why she will succeed or fail in her efforts to change her society.

Discuss the similarities between the Guardians and the American government. Are these systems just? Why or why not?

Discuss how modern society treats the handicapped versus how they are treated in Kira's village.

Considering that Kira has access to a key to Jo's cell, discuss the morality of Kira's decision to stay in the village in relation to Jo, who barring social upheaval, will become the new Singer.

Do you think Christopher should have made a more determined effort to return to his wife and daughter once his memory returned? Why or why not?

Why do you think the Guardians would perpetuate the myth of dangerous beasts in the forest?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Describe a scenario leading to a manmade catastrophe that could result in the kind of destruction found in *Gathering Blue*. Is war the only possible cause?

Could the ruin have been brought about in an ecological disaster of some kind?

How about some form of accident?

2. What natural catastrophes could cause such complete and wide-spread destruction and ruin? Write a story about surviving such a catastrophe and what life might be like in the aftermath.

3. Compare *Gathering Blue* to other books or stories you may have read that present an unflattering, pessimistic view of the future. What do they have in common? What do you think is their purpose?

4. What role does color have in our lives?

Do certain colors have special meaning to us, symbolize certain things? Do some colors affect the way we think and feel?

5. How are gifted children treated in our society? Are gifted children sometimes taken from their parents so that their talents may be nurtured and "harvested" in ways similar to that in *Gathering Blue*?

6. We cherish and celebrate our freedom.

Were the people of the village free? Do you think they thought they were free?

What makes a person free? Are there different kinds and degrees of freedom?

7. What kind of people do you consider handicapped? How do our laws protect the handicapped? Are handicapped people still discriminated against in any way? How do handicapped people compensate for their handicap?

8. What is creativity? Can creativity be taught, nurtured, or cultivated? Is it a gift? Are creative people born with some special quality that allows them to create new ideas and new ways of seeing and understanding the world?

9. Can art really change the world, make it better? How?

Further Study

"Lois Lowry." In *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*, vol. 32. Detroit: Gale Research, 2000, pp. 79-87. A recent, useful, rather complete biographical essay.

"Lowry, Lois." In *Contemporary Authors*, vol. 70. Detroit: Gale Research, 1999, pp. 311-315. Recent, useful resource.

"Lowry, Lois." In *Contemporary Authors*, vol. 13. Detroit: Gale Research, 1984, pp. 333-336. A bit dated, but includes an interesting interview with Lowry.

Lowry, Lois. *Looking Back: A Book of Memories*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998. Unusual autobiography crafted around pictures from Lowry's past.



Related Titles

In 1995, Lowry published the Newbery Medal winning novel, *The Giver*, which represented a rather significant departure from her previous writing. *The Giver* is a science fiction novel about life in a highly structured, future society where all the physical and emotional challenges in life have systematically been eliminated. The safety and security of the people are ensured by regimented ignorance enforced by a form of government reminiscent of George Orwell's 1984. No one has to make difficult choices or to even be aware there are such choices.

The plot centers around Jonas, who has been chosen to be the successor to the Giver, the one member of the society who still knows and remembers all the pain, the wonder, and the triumph of life before. As the apprentice to the Giver, Jonas learns many truths that no one else knows about life in his society. He must then decide what to do with this knowledge.

With *Gathering Blue*, Lowry continues the dystopic theme set by *The Giver*, painting a much different, but equally disturbing future. As in Steven Vincent Benet's short story, "By the Waters of Babylon," something terrible has gone wrong, throwing a once sophisticated culture back to a near primitive state. The past is so distant and alien that extraordinary measures must be taken to preserve the history and traditions of the people in the hopes that they will once again rise to greatness. Like Jonas in *The Giver*, the young protagonist of *Gathering Blue* is chosen to be the agent of that social memory and must find ways to overcome isolation and the loss of a loved one.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996