

Getting Near to Baby Study Guide

Getting Near to Baby by Audrey Coulombis

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

Getting Near to Baby Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	4
About the Author.....	5
Plot Summary.....	6
Chapters 1 and 2.....	8
Chapters 3 and 4.....	10
Chapters 5 and 6.....	12
Chapters 7 and 8.....	14
Chapters 9 and 10.....	17
Chapters 11 and 12.....	19
Chapters 13 and 14.....	21
Chapters 15 and 16.....	23
Chapters 17 and 18.....	25
Chapters 19 and 20.....	27
Chapters 21, 22 and 23.....	28
Chapters 24 and 25.....	30
Characters.....	32
Objects/Places.....	35
Setting.....	37
Social Sensitivity.....	38
Literary Qualities.....	39
Themes.....	41
Themes/Characters.....	44
Style.....	50



Quotes.....53

Adaptations.....55

Topics for Discussion.....56

Essay Topics.....57

Ideas for Reports and Papers.....58

Copyright Information.....59



Overview

Getting Near to Baby is the story of thirteen-year-old Willa Jo Dean and seven-yearold Little Sister (Jo Ann), two girls grieving for their baby sister. After the baby's death, the girls' mother becomes deeply depressed, so Aunt Patty decides that it would be best for the two girls to come stay with her for a while. Although Aunt Patty does her best to offer the two sisters everything, the young girls miss their mother and baby sister and nothing seems to be able to comfort them.

One morning, Willa Jo and Little Sister climb up onto Aunt Patty's roof to watch the sun rise and do not come back down.

From their perch high above, Willa Jo and Little Sister begin a journey of inner exploration recalling and reliving the baby's death and its aftermath.

About the Author

Audrey Couloumbis's childhood was an exciting adventure. After her father left Illinois when she was two years old, her mother remarried. Since her father worked as an electrician for Dancing Water, Holiday on Ice, and Skating Vanities, among other such shows, she traveled alone from the age of three to destinations such as Paris, Brazil, Hawaii, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Switzerland, Detroit, and Houston twice a year to visit him, until finally moving to New York when she was fourteen years old.

Just as the young Couloumbis loved to go exploring with her bicycle, as an adult she loves driving down roads in her neighborhood, exploring and discovering new aspects of familiar places. Having lived in and visited so many different places as a young child, she likes to make wherever she lives feel like a different place every few months. She often moves the furniture around her house in order to achieve this, shifting around everything she can except for the kitchen and the bath, where rearrangement is not possible. She has even resorted to painting walls to create a different effect.

Getting Near to Baby is Couloumbis's first children's book, and the main idea of the novel was sparked by memories from her childhood. With grandmothers and relatives mainly from Louisiana and Virginia, Couloumbis felt the setting of the novel in the southern states was inevitable. She was a bit younger than Willa Jo when one of her aunts lost a child, and she remembers how the shock of death affected the whole family. Although her aunt's baby died of cystic fibrosis, at about the same time a small child in a neighboring family died of bacterial illness derived from drinking tainted water. From shock and despair, her aunt had climbed to the top of an old covered bridge and Couloumbis and her cousin climbed up too to keep her from possibly falling off and taking her life. Couloumbis also wrote about the nature of relationships she had with adults at that time. She says, in an interview for Preview on-line magazine: I was lucky to have the kind of family whose benign neglect fostered my independence and left me plenty of free time to find my own way in the world. Every now and then, though, I came up against an adult who had firm notions about who I should be, not unlike Aunt Patty.

Couloumbis thus gathered these memories and, with love and affection, created the realistic world of Willa Jo, Aunt Patty, and Little Sister.

Filled with sensitivity and emotion, Getting Near to Baby was destined to receive positive notice. In the year of its publication it received the John Newbery Medal 2000 Honor. Today Audrey Couloumbis lives in Queens, New York, and upstate New York with her husband.



Plot Summary

Getting Near to Baby is the story of Willa Jo Dean who faces tragedy and loss at the tender age of just thirteen. Willa Jo is forced to take on the role of protector of a younger sister who is so traumatized by events that she has lost the ability to speak. Willa Jo takes on the worries, adult in scope, over the emotional and mental stability of her mother whose grief and pain turn to denial and obsession.

The story begins with Willa Jo and her little sister, whose name is Jo Ann but is known merely as "Little Sister," sitting on the roof of their Aunt Patty's house. It is just before sunrise and the girls cling to each other as they wait for the burst of color that will soon appear over the horizon. A jogger spots the girls and alerts Aunt Patty that her nieces are on her roof. Aunt Patty is alarmed and appalled. She tells them to come down but they refuse. As the day dawns, other neighbors spot the girls on the roof much to the dismay of Aunt Patty who is all about appearances.

Aunt Patty has nothing but good intentions when she visits Noreen, her younger sister, three weeks before. She helps Noreen clean up her neglected house and makes some healthy meals for her neglected daughters. To take the burden of caring for two young daughters from her sister, Aunt Patty suggests she takes the girls with her for a long visit. At first Noreen is against it—she will miss her girls. But eventually, her domineering older sister convinces Noreen that it is for the best.

The girls have quite an adjustment ahead of them at Aunt Patty's. First thing on the agenda is getting decent clothes for the girls which Patty selects based on her own tastes. Then there are the house rules. No one can enter by the front door—Aunt Patty doesn't want her carpet soiled. In fact, she is so concerned with her carpet that there are plastic runners throughout the house where the girls are instructed to walk. Aunt Patty is quite a departure from their laid-back, artistic mother who has little concern for how things look. Aunt Patty also tries to steer the girls away from the Finger family across the street. But Willa Jo met Liz Finger, who is her own age, and likes her. When Aunt Patty decides who Willa Jo should be friends with, she introduces her to the snooty Cynthia, a friend of an important woman in town. The girl is mean and rude and it does not go well.

There are other incidents that give Aunt Patty a headache. The girls storm away from Bible school because Willa Jo stands up to a teacher who exposes them to danger. Little Sister knocks over the pickle tower in a grocery store and, because of her inability to speak, can't apologize to the store manager. Aunt Patty says that because of the girls' behavior, she'll never be able to hold her head up in town again.

The tragedy that strikes the family is the death of Baby, Willa Jo's and Little Sister's baby sister. Baby drinks contaminated water and after a brief illness, dies in Noreen's arms just as the sun rises. Noreen, an artist, becomes obsessed with drawing pictures of Baby in heaven with the angels. She makes a connection between the sunrise and her lost child that sticks with Willa Jo and Little Sister. It is during this time that Aunt



Patty steps in and rescues both her sister from too much responsibility and the girls from an unhealthy situation.

By the end of the story Aunt Patty and Uncle Hob join the girls on the roof. Aunt Patty realizes that a clean carpet and elite friends aren't important. She finds that loving her sister and her nieces far outranks such insignificant concerns. Willa Jo realizes that Aunt Patty only has their best interest at heart and that she truly loves them. Feeling better about everything, Little Sister finally talks again. The break helps Noreen get through her grief and makes her realize that she has two beautiful daughters who need her and whom she loves. At the story's conclusion, there is a bright and promising new sunrise in store for the entire family.



Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

Chapter 1: Early Morning

Aunt Patty tells Willa Jo that she is fed up with her. It makes Willa Jo's stomach hurt. The next morning Willa Jo is on the roof to watch the sunrise. She spots fifty-year-old Mrs. Garber jogging. It is very early, especially for a woman her age to be out running. She comes to the front door and knocks. In a bit Willa Jo hears a gasp from Aunt Patty and a bunch of whispering. But that all fades as Willa Jo concentrates on the beautiful oranges and reds of the sun that has burst up from the horizon. The neighborhood begins to wake up.

Aunt Patty calls to Willa Jo to come back down and bring Little Sister with her. Willa Jo looks down to see Aunt Patty standing on the lawn, looking up in panic, scared to death that one of the girls is going to fall. Aunt Patty tries to appeal to Little Sister but she is wasting her time. Little Sister only listens to Willa Jo.

Chapter 2: Birds of a Feather

Little Sister hasn't spoken since Baby died. Willa Jo tries to trick her into talking but hasn't had any luck. Little Sister has developed her own sign language so she can indicate "yes" and "no." Mrs. Biddle calls to them. She's nice and concerned and really has taken to Little Sister. Aunt Patty is embarrassed when Little Sister uses sign language in front of other people. She pushes her hands down or holds them so no one will notice. Aunt Patty tells Mrs. Biddle that Willa Jo is the "spawn of the devil."

Mrs. Biddle is shocked and tells Patty to take her comment back, that she can't mean it. Mrs. Garber had told Aunt Patty that the girls were getting ready to jump off the roof. Imagine that! They were just watching the sun. Aunt Patty tells Mrs. Biddle that the girls have only been there three weeks and she's already fed up with them. Aunt Patty gives up and stomps back inside.

Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

Chapter 1: Early Morning

Two sisters are staying with their Aunt Patty who is apparently upset with Willa Jo, the elder of the two girls. They are on the roof watching the sunrise. A neighbor who is jogging stops by and tells Aunt Patty that her nieces are on the roof. Aunt Patty is afraid they will fall. There evidently is a conflict going on between Aunt Patty and Willa Jo. It seems as though Willa Jo is rebelling against her aunt's authority.

Chapter 2: Birds of a Feather



Apparently, there has been a tragedy in the family. Willa Jo and Little Sister's younger sibling must have died and the girls were sent off to stay with Aunt Patty. How the baby died is not known at this point. It is not clear if it is permanent or temporary. But whatever the length of time, the arrangement probably isn't going to work since Willa Jo and Aunt Patty are at each other's throats. The grief the girls are going through is making the situation worse. The death caused Little Sister to become mute.



Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

Chapter 3: The Trouble with Aunt Patty

The first thing that Aunt Patty does when the girls arrive in Raleigh is to take them shopping for new clothes. She doesn't ask them once what they want to wear. She is buying the clothes and she is going to pick them out. When all is said and done, the girls look like smaller versions of Aunt Patty. Willa Jo really resents it when Aunt Patty asks Uncle Hob if the girls look like new pennies in their new duds. He agrees. He is sweet and had learned long ago to agree with Aunt Patty.

Willa Jo could hardly choke out the word, "Thanks." She knows she should show more enthusiasm but it is difficult under the circumstances. Aunt Patty doesn't know much about children because she never had any. While they are shopping they find the best chocolate store Willa Jo has ever seen. She stays outside to look at the lovely window display while Aunt Patty and Little Sister go inside. Aunt Patty comes back out and scolds her. She is always to stay right by her. She doesn't want to lose her. Aunt Patty buys a chocolate for each one of them and a nice tea set that is on display. After Willa Jo makes a sarcastic remark, Aunt Patty tells her she doesn't like that kind of talk but she realizes that Willa Jo has gotten it from her mother.

At the time, Willa Jo has no idea how long they'll be staying with Aunt Patty. It would be better if they could get along.

Chapter 4: Don't Do This, Don't Do That

Aunt Patty has a lot of rules. One of the first they learn is not to enter by the front door. They have to enter by going through the garage to the kitchen. She doesn't want to get her carpet dirty. And everyone has to walk on plastic runners that are placed on the carpets inside. Needless to say, Aunt Patty has no pets. The radio plays all the time in Aunt Patty's house. Eating is allowed only in the kitchen, the dining room is for show. No sitting on the bed once it is made up.

Willa Jo uses too much bath powder one day. Aunt Patty sees the dust hanging in the air. It probably really unnerves her but she is nice about it. She had told the girls they could use it but to just use a little. Aunt Patty has a collection of Hummel figurines that she keeps in a glass case. The collection is one of Aunt Patty's "untouchables." One day Little Sister can't help herself. She rearranges all the figures in the case which does not go unnoticed by Aunt Patty. She starts to put them back in their original places but changes her mind and leaves them the way Little Sister had arranged them.

One rainy day, Aunt Patty walks in the kitchen to quite a shock. Little Sister has brought in thirty or forty newts and put them in the kitchen sink. Aunt Patty shrieks and is horrified when Little Sister walks in with more newts, mud across her face and a slug



stuck to her leg. After the girls get rid of the newts, Aunt Patty scrubs the sink with Comet and washes the floor twice with Spic and Span.

Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

Chapter 3: The Trouble with Aunt Patty

Aunt Patty is a domineering person who dictates what kind of clothes the girls should wear. Aunt Patty is probably feeling under enormous stress since she never had children and she is suddenly taking care of two young girls. She probably means well but may be having as hard a time adjusting as the girls are. It doesn't seem like their stay with Aunt Patty is a permanent one. Aunt Patty and Willa Jo's mother are probably very different. Aunt Patty seems to blame Willa Jo's mother for the sarcasm that Willa Jo uses.

Chapter 4: Don't Do This, Don't Do That

There's a lot of rules in Aunt Patty's house. She wants nothing touched or dirtied which is asking a lot when there are kids around. Willa Jo seems like she's trying to comply with the rules but the younger sister is doing her own thing. Aunt Patty shows a measure of patience when she decides to leave her prize figurines that have been shifted around by Little Sister alone. The newts in her kitchen are quite a shock but again, Aunt Patty seems to take it well given her stringent attitude and her ultra-clean house rules.



Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

Chapter 5: A Tough Nut To Crack

Aunt Patty is outside again, looking up at the roof. She tells the girls she will have to call the Sheriff on them. Mrs. Biddle says the Sheriff will just call the Fire Department. Aunt Patty says that's who she'll call then. Willa Jo tells Aunt Patty she'll jump if she does. Aunt Patty tries another tactic. If the Fire Department finds them on the roof, they'll report it to the Sheriff and he'll arrest her. Aunt Patty goes inside calling for Hob.

Mrs. Biddle tries to reason with them. She tells the girls that Aunt Patty is doing her best. Those words bring tears to Willa Jo's eyes. Willa Jo is very homesick and misses her mother. When Mrs. Teasley comes by, Aunt Patty shouts to Willa Jo, asking if there are any broken tiles. Aunt Patty is trying to make Mrs. Teasley believe she sent the girls up there to look for broken tiles. Hob comes out and looks clueless. Finally, he tells Aunt Patty he wants a stack of the pancakes she had been making. They go inside.

Chapter 6: Forbidden Friends

Soon after they arrive, the girls are told not to play with the kids across the street. The Fingers family is staying in the vacation bungalows and Aunt Patty says they play in the dirt like mole rats. She says the oldest girl is thirteen and is not one bit better than she ought to be. Willa Jo remembers that Aunt Patty had said the same thing about her but she hadn't known what it meant. Aunt Patty's mother used to say she was contrary—maybe that's why she she died young. Willa Jo is worried about what Little Sister is thinking we she hears Aunt Patty talk about dying. It is one thing for Aunt Patty to pick out their clothes but it is quite another to pick out their friends.

One day when the girls are coming back from the ice cream shop, Elizabeth Fingers, whom everyone calls Liz, comes up behind them and says hello. She is tall and skinny and has straight, long black hair. Liz says she is only thirteen and already is five feet nine. Her brother is nineteen and is six foot seven. No one in the family is short. She asks if they are the girls who lost their baby sister. Willa Jo nods. Liz says she cried when she heard about it. Liz has heard that Patty has signed them up for Sunday School.

She says she feels bad for them because they must miss their mother. Willa Jo can't control the tears and sobs that suddenly emerge. Liz feels badly. She hadn't meant to make her cry. Soon Little Sister joins in the crying jag. Liz puts her long arms around both of them and joins in the crying with them.



Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

Chapter 5: A Tough Nut To Crack

Aunt Patty tries threats, pleading and possible arrest to try to get the girls down from the roof. They don't budge. Aunt Patty, always worried about appearances, pretends that she sent the girls on the roof to look for broken roof tiles. She's embarrassed by the incident. She's such a controlling person that it is difficult for her to be in a situation where she seems to have no control. Willa Jo's biggest problem is not as much Aunt Patty as it is that she misses her mother. The girls are worried about their mother.

When all else fails, Hob uses a little psychology on the girls. He tells Aunt Patty he wants a stack of the pancakes she is making. Will the girls be lured in by pancakes?

Chapter 6: Forbidden Friends

Aunt Patty looks down at the family staying across the street from them. She tells the girls not to play with them. But they soon meet up with Liz who is thirteen and Willa Jo's age. She is very friendly and open with them. She tells them she was sorry about their baby sister dying. When Liz mentions their mother, the waterworks begin. Liz shows herself to be a very kind and caring young girl. She has sympathy for the girls and is very moved by their tragic loss and the separation from their mother. It seems as though Aunt Patty has misjudged her.



Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

Chapter 7: After Baby Died

It had been tough when the baby died. The funeral had been costly and draining. Nothing had been normal. They didn't do dishes or laundry and didn't eat regular meals. Their mother, who paints pictures for greeting cards, had to keep working. At sunset or sunrise, she'd get the girls to sit outside on the porch with her to watch the sun. But Little Sister still wouldn't talk. One thing had been different, they all slept in the same bed. It had been less lonely that way.

Their mother, Noreen, had told them that Baby visited the angels and they liked her so much that they wanted her to stay. One day all three of them had taken a nap in the middle of the day and suddenly Aunt Patty is there, asking what is wrong with them. She tells them to get up and get dressed. No one resists. Patty is Noreen's older sister and she is used to her bossing her around. No one knows why Patty has suddenly appeared out of the blue without calling them first. She lives across the state so she'd come a long way without letting them know.

Aunt Patty is very concerned with Noreen's health. She is worn out looking and has lost a lot of weight. The kids look skinny, too. They are not eating right, she complains to Noreen. She warns her that Social Services would take the kids away if they see the state of their house. They clean the house and Aunt Patty makes a good meal for them. She stays the night and the next day Noreen starts to feel sick. Aunt Patty stays and fixes the shower drip, weeds outside, finds a second-hand car for Noreen and changes burned out light bulbs with new ones. Patty tells Noreen she wants nothing in return.

Aunt Patty gets everyone back on a schedule. The girls have to go to bed early but Willa Jo listens to Aunt Patty and Noreen talk. Noreen cries and blames herself for Baby's death. She should have gotten her to the doctor sooner. Aunt Patty tells her she had absolutely no guilt in her death and she wouldn't have done one thing different than she did. Noreen says nshe would have done everything different. Aunt Patty says she wants to take the kids back with her to give Noreen a break. Noreen is against the idea. She wants to keep her girls close to her.

Chapter 8: Seeing the Excavation

Willa Jo and Little Sister make sure to walk to the ice cream store the same time the next day so they'd run into Liz again. She works at the pharmacy, washing dishes for the fountain. Liz tells them she'd show them her excavation. The girls don't know what an "excavation" is but they follow her. They walk through the woods. Liz points out recently dug holes where her brothers bury and horde things. After about ten minutes they reach the rear of the Fingers' bungalows. Willa Jo notices the porches are all swept



clean. Liz points out the large hole in the ground that she had referred to as the excavation.

Liz steps down into the hole and the girls follow. It is steep on the way down and the hole is deep. There are some lawn chairs set up. It is a little hide-away that Liz and her brothers have dug out. Their uncle, Mike, had helped them shore up the walls so it wouldn't fall down on them. Their uncle also had taken a sledgehammer and broken up some big rocks they had encountered.

They heard trucks pulling in above. Liz said her little brothers liked to work with their uncles who were handymen and construction workers. Soon they were joined by the boys. Three boys burst in who all looked alike and were about seven or eight, Little Sister's age. They were followed by Robbie, who at three years old, was the youngest. They all started digging. Liz said that they carry the dirt out in little buckets. They were making a raised garden for their mother with the dirt so she wouldn't have to bend over. The idea of a tunnel intrigued Willa Jo whose father and grandfathers and great-grandfathers were all miners.

Willa Jo told Liz that the doctor said that Little Sister was dealing with grief by not talking. Liz said that Willa Jo took care of her so well that she didn't have to talk. They crawled back out of the cave just as Liz's mom emerged from one of the bungalows. She was tall and slender like Liz. She was friendly like Liz and she was pregnant. The two were very affectionate with each other which made Willa Jo miss her mom more than ever. The girls went home to find a frantic Aunt Patty. She had been so worried about where they were that she called the Sheriff. Willa Jo told her they had been with Liz Finger which didn't sit well with Aunt Patty. She reminded them they weren't supposed to associate with that family.

Noreen and the girls were miserable when they had to say goodbye. Aunt Patty assured her that it was a good idea and that Noreen would only have to take care of herself for a while. It was hard for Willa Jo to look back at her mother as they drove away. She looked so lost and alone.

Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

Chapter 7: After Baby Died

More is revealed about the time around the Baby's death and how the girls wind up with Aunt Patty. Noreen takes the two girls outside every day to watch the sunset and the sunrise which is what the girls are emulating when they go on the roof to watch the sunset. It is a way to feel a connection to their mother. It had been Patty who had reached out to her younger sister, Noreen, after Baby died. Noreen is dealing with a lot of guilt about the baby's death. Aunt Patty is very supportive and tries to comfort her sister. She tells her not to blame herself.

Aunt Patty has nothing but good intentions when she goes to Noreen's to help her clean up the house and cook some good meals for her sister and nieces. She genuinely feels



she is doing her sister a favor by taking the girls for a while. There are a lot of emotions when the girls leave their mother as they drive away with Aunt Patty. There is a brief mention that Noreen gets sick after they clean up the house. It may be a foreshadowing of a health problem for Noreen and more stress for the girls.

Chapter 8: Seeing the Excavation

Willa Jo is defying Aunt Patty's orders not to associate with Liz—in fact, she and Little Sister purposely try to run into her. Liz proudly shows them the big cave that she and her brothers are building. Perhaps Aunt Patty is psychic when she refers to the Finger kids as mole rats that dig in the dirt. Willa Jo misses her mother when she sees how close Liz and her mother are. The Fingers family is open and friendly and the girls like being with them which will probably cause more problems with Aunt Patty. This chapter has the first mention of Willa Jo's father. She comments that he was a miner. He wasn't with the family when the girls were with their mother after Baby died. The question lingers about his whereabouts. Perhaps he is away working. Willa Jo misses her mother but never mentions that she misses her father. If he's away a lot, the girls may be used to not being with him. Or, the possibility exists that he may have left home.



Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

Chapter 9: Two Peas in a Pod

The next day Liz comes over with Robbie. Willa Jo catches her before she gets to the front door. Aunt Patty opens the front door and just glares. They stay outside and play jacks for quite a while. When the older boys tramp over, Aunt Patty can't contain herself. She calls out and says it is time for the girls to come in.

The next day Aunt Patty is prepared. She sits out on the patio with a stack of magazines and her cigarettes. Issac comes over and gifts Little Sister with a June bug he has caught. Isaac is able to charm Aunt Patty. He calls her "ma'am" and thanks her for the lemonade. He picks a bouquet of tiny flowers and gives them to her. Willa Jo doesn't mind having Aunt Patty sit with them.

After the kids leave, Aunt Patty tells Willa Jo that she doesn't want her spending all her time with Liz. When Willa Jo responds that she likes her, Aunt Patty says she is old enough to decide who she likes. To change the subject, Aunt Patty calls Noreen. The girls are anxious to talk to her—of course. Little Sister just listens but her face is glowing when hearing her mother's voice. Willa Jo thinks her mother's voice sounds different, rough and weak.

Aunt Patty's face falls when Willa Jo asks when they could come home. She can't tell her mother they are happy at Aunt Patty's. Noreen is glad to hear they have made some friends to spend time with. She tells her daughters that she's been getting some extra work. Noreen wants to thank Aunt Patty who takes the phone again. Willa Jo knows how happy she and Little Sister would have been if their mother had told them that they were coming home right away. Aunt Patty is mortified when Willa Jo tells her that Liz's mom is having another baby, maybe twins.

Chapter 10: Mrs. Wainwright's Daughter

After the girls have been with Aunt Patty for about two weeks, she announces that Mrs. Wainwright is coming over with her daughter, Cynthia, who will play with the girls the next afternoon. The girls have no reaction which disappoints Aunt Patty. But they don't know who Cynthia is. The next day, the Wainwrights come and are allowed to enter the house through the front door. Cynthia has blond ringlets and is wearing a dress that ties in a big bow in the back.

As soon as Mrs. Wainwright and Aunt Patty step out onto the patio, Cynthia takes four of the six cookies on the platter and hides them in her skirt. Cynthia sticks her tongue out at Willa Jo and takes the fifth cookie. Cynthia says she'll give one of the cookies back if she can see their room. Willa Jo tells her she doesn't need a cookie because she lives there and can get them any time. Cynthia corrects her, reminding her that she is



just their temporarily and that their aunt could send her and her dumb sister to the Orphan's Home when she gets tired of them. Willa Jo tells her they aren't orphans and that her sister isn't dumb. She is yelling and Aunt Patty sticks her head in the door and tells her to apologize to Cynthia.

Willa suggests they play tag since they didn't bring any toys with them but Cynthia says it is too hot and she'd muss her dress. Cynthia takes a cushion from one of the patio chairs and plops it on the patio when they decide to play jacks. She eats her cookies and flicks off the crumbs from her dress. Cynthia says they could be friends if Willa Jo is nice to her. Her mother is the President of the Ladies' Social League which Patty wants to join. Cynthia calls out to her mother that she isn't having fun. The look on Mrs. Wainwright's face tells Willa Jo that she knows her daughter isn't being nice. Aunt Patty is upset over how the afternoon has gone.

Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

Chapter 9: Two Peas in a Pod

Aunt Patty seems to enjoy the Fingers kids more than she thought. Perhaps she enjoys getting attention from Isaac—which is more than she gets from Willa Jo and Little Sister. She does seem to mean well but she is suspicious of the Fingers family and is in a protective mode with her nieces. The girls are thrilled to talk to their mother. Willa Jo thinks her voice sounds rugged and weak which recalls the comment in a previous chapter that she had begun to feel sick. The girls loved talking to her but are disappointed that they have to stay at Aunt Patty's. As strident as Aunt Patty is, she has tender feelings and is hurt that the girls don't want to stay with her. Her attitude is a little self-centered since she should understand that it's natural for children to want to be with their mothers.

Chapter 10: Mrs. Wainwright's Daughter

Aunt Patty is trying to steer her nieces into play with a higher class of children than what she considers Liz Finger to be. She lines up a play date with the snooty, mean-spirited Cynthia who Willa Jo soon learns is a spoiled brat. Aunt Patty has an ulterior motive in inviting Cynthia over to play. She wants to join the women's club of which Mrs. Wainwright is president. The girls do not get along although Willa Jo does hold her tongue so that Aunt Patty won't be too disappointed. But the afternoon doesn't go well. Will Aunt Patty blame Willa Jo for ruining her chances to become a member of the women's club? Aunt Patty is so caught up in having such elite guests in her house that she is blind to how rude Cynthia is.



Chapters 11 and 12

Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

Chapter 11: Aunt Patty's Great Idea

Liz and Isaac come over the next day. Isaac shares his Twinkie with Little Sister. Aunt Patty comes out and comments that she thinks Liz would have been home helping her mother. She tells Liz that her nieces have lots of friends. Cynthia Wainwright had played with them the day before. Liz comments that it is nice of Aunt Patty to invite Cynthia over because no one else in town will play with her. Aunt Patty doesn't know what to say and quickly goes back inside. Isaac and Little Sister starts playing war and jungle. Isaac never asks Little Sister any questions, he just tells her things. That evening at dinner, Aunt Patty announces that they will be attending the Bible school day camp.

Chapter 12: A Day at Bible School

The first day at Bible School the other kids all know each other. They aren't unfriendly or mean—they just don't notice the girls. Aunt Patty waits a while after she leaves them off. She beams when all the girls hold hands and sing "What A Friend I Have in Jesus."

Miss Pettibone is one of the Bible school teachers. She gives Willa Jo and Little Sister name tags. She doesn't understand why Little Sister won't talk. The girls will be in different classes and she can't depend on Willa Jo to talk for her. Willa Jo assures Miss Pettibone that Little Sister will be fine. Little Sister's group, the Lambs, make flowers out of egg cartons. Willa Jo's group, the Sunbeams, play tag after Miss Pettibone chases a snake off the grass.

Miss Pettibone turns out to be kind of mean and sarcastic. She is unsympathetic to the girls who find ticks on themselves. And when Willa Jo speaks up with the knowledge that she has about ticks waiting in the grass for large animals, she says, "Aren't you the little nature student" (page 101) in a very sarcastic tone. Willa Jo takes Little Sister over to the concrete steps. She isn't about to let her get a tick. Miss Pettibone tries to get them to come back and eat under the tree with the others but Willa Jo politely refuses. Another girl, Linda, comes to eat with them just when Willa Jo is about to take Little Sister and walk home.

Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

Chapter 11: Aunt Patty's Great Idea

Isaac, who is seven, is the little boy who is able to charm Aunt Patty. He seems to be wise beyond his years. He is sensitive to Little Sister's non-talking state. He doesn't make fun of her and he doesn't put undue stress on her by asking her questions. He just kind of takes a gentle lead and guides her. Liz is a straightforward person who tells the



truth as she knows it. She straightens Aunt Patty out about how unpopular snooty Cynthia is.

Chapter 12: A Day at Bible School

Aunt Patty is trying desperately to find better friends for the girls than the Fingers. The girls seems to fit in at the Bible school but they encounter a cranky Bible school teacher who is annoyed by Little Sister's silence. When all the girls start getting ticks, Willa Jo shows her protective attitude toward her sister. She immediately takes her out of the grass so she won't get a tick. She doesn't want anything to scare Little Sister or, worse, make her sick. She couldn't bear to lose another little sister.



Chapters 13 and 14

Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

Chapter 13: The Way Things Sometimes Work Out

Soon all the girls sit on the steps with Willa Jo and Little Sister. Miss Pettibone is aggravated. Do they all want to get sunstroke? What they don't want to do is get ticks while sitting under the tree. Miss Pettibone threatens to call their mothers unless they get up and play kickball. The other girls suddenly blame Willa Jo for causing Miss Pettibone to be upset. The other girls go to play kickball. Willa Jo takes Little Sister's hand and starts to head to the drugstore where she can call Aunt Patty but Miss Pettibone stops her.

She tells Willa Jo they can't leave without her permission. Anger and frustration boil up in Willa Jo, tears are streaming down her face. She tells Miss Pettibone she is going to go call her aunt and she can't stop her. To make it look like it is her idea, Miss Pettibone walks in front of them to the drugstore. Little Sister is getting a blister so she and Willa Jo sit on a bench outside the drugstore. Miss Pettibone walks by a short while later, crying and blowing her nose. Two ladies are standing outside the drugstore, staring at Willa Jo. She doesn't look forward to facing Aunt Patty.

When Aunt Patty comes, she tells the girls she'll never be able to hold her head up in town again. Willa Jo tries to explain, but Aunt Patty cuts her off. She blames Willa Jo for having a smart mouth like her mother. Willa Jo is in the doghouse and needs to be quiet. At home, they find a tick on Little Sister's butt. Willa Jo doesn't have a tick and Patty comments that she is too ornery to have one.

Aunt Patty asks if Little Sister had drunk any of the bad water the day they went to the fair. Willa Jo tells her that she hadn't. She thinks to herself that only Baby had. She can't look at Aunt Patty because she can sense that she is tearing up. Aunt Patty is able to save face and Willa Jo is vindicated when they learn that Miss Pettibone has been terminated because of the ticks. Willa Jo and Little Sister are invited back to the Bible school but they don't want to return.

Chapter 14: The Piggly Wiggly Pickle

Things are going better until they go to the Piggly Wiggly one day. They run into a childhood friend of Patty's. Tressa is there with two of her boys. She has six in all - which is news to Aunt Patty. She introduces the girls to Tressa who tells Willa that she admires her for standing up to that Pettibone creature. Aunt Patty doesn't know what to say and neither does Willa Jo. Aunt Patty introduces Little Sister as JoAnn.

Aunt Patty tells Little Sister and Peter, one of Tressa's boys, to get them some donuts. Unfortunately, the two youngsters are drawn to a large stack of pickle jars and topple the pickle tower over. Some bottles are broken and others are rolling all around. Tressa



offers to pay for the damage but the manager refuses. It was an accident he tells them. Peter apologizes but of course Little Sister doesn't. Aunt Patty explains that her inability to speak is just temporary.

That evening when Little Sister falls asleep on the couch, Aunt Patty joins Willa Jo outside and grills her about Little Sister's talking problem. Willa Jo can only respond that she doesn't know why Little Sister doesn't talk. Aunt Patty suggests that they hold her upside down or pinch her until she talks. Willa Jo becomes angered and tells Aunt Patty it is a terrible idea. The conversation quickly changes to the time Aunt Patty had come to the house and made her mother cry. Aunt Patty starts crying and tells Willa Jo that she loves her sister and didn't mean to hurt her.

Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

Chapter 13: The Way Things Sometimes Work Out

Willa Jo gets blamed unfairly for causing the disruption at school. Miss Pettibone is a cranky young woman who wouldn't listen to anyone. In the end, the truth comes out and Willa Jo is vindicated but she doesn't seem to mind when she is blamed. She is a strong young girl who, like Liz, tells the truth and doesn't change her mind just to please someone else. Her frustration emerges again when she gets upset with Miss Pettibone. Her mind is not just on Miss Pettibone and the Bible school; she is thinking of Baby and her mother. Aunt Patty is showing her soft side. She is very upset when she thinks about Baby dying. It seems as though the Baby died from drinking some bad water.

Chapter 14: The Piggly Wiggly Pickle

The incident in the grocery store when Little Sister and Peter knock over the pickle jars brings to light Willa Jo's discomfort with Aunt Patty's shame over Little Sister's speaking problem. Aunt Patty makes the mistake of making it an issue that evening by suggesting they should try to scare Little Sister into talking. Willa Jo's nerves are already frayed from everything she's been through and Aunt Patty's suggestion puts her over the edge. She thinks it is a terrible idea and old anger surfaces. She blames Aunt Patty for making her mother feel worse about Baby's death. Aunt Patty is not a mean person and she does love her sister. It's just that she has such a different way of looking at things and expressing herself than Noreen does. Willa Jo is just thirteen and it's difficult for her to understand Patty's ways. Aunt and niece have a serious clash of personalities. The reader finally knows what Little Sister's real given name is.



Chapters 15 and 16

Chapters 15 and 16 Summary

Chapter 15: Second Thoughts

It is midmorning and the girls are still on the roof. It's getting hot and they are getting sunburned. The girls enjoy the view and pass time playing tic-tac-toe with the roof tiles. Willa Jo also helps Little Sister with her math. Aunt Patty comes out and goes back in every so often. Liz comes over and tells Willa Jo that her Aunt Patty is worried to death. She has called Liz's mother and asked her what to do. That really surprises Willa Jo. Liz has to leave to go buy some milk. As she walks away, she says she feels sorry for Aunt Patty.

A dream about Baby had woken Willa Jo. She had come out on the roof to see the sun. It is an exciting and liberating feeling. She hadn't made Little Sister come out. She had joined her on her own. Willa Jo is careful to hold on to Little Sister. She realizes the danger. She thinks about the dream again. She had had that dream before the morning Baby died.

Chapter 16: A Day at the Fair

Their family had been a family of five. Their father worked at the mine all day and Noreen painted cards. When they hadn't been at school, the girls would spend all their time around their mother. The only thing they had been forbidden to do was to shake the table while she was working. Then Baby had been born.

The mine had gone out of business and their father had been looking for work. He'd be gone for weeks at a time. The girls had missed him but Noreen missed him the most. Noreen had been unhappy during that time and had only had one other adult, a friend and neighbor, Milly, to talk to. Milly had made her laugh. Patty had come during this time. She had encouraged Noreen to move closer to her so she could help her. She'd pay for the move but Noreen had been "stubborn" as Patty put it and refused to move.

By winter, Willa Jo had been in school all day and Little Sister had started kindergarten. Milly would help Noreen out with Baby. Their father had stopped calling all together. The next school year, both girls had been in school all day and Baby had been toddling around, getting into everything. One day, Noreen and Milly had taken the girls to a carnival. Everyone had been giddy in the car in anticipation of the fun they would have.

They had gone on all the rides and had seen all the attractions—from a five-legged cat to the leg bone of a dinosaur. It had been hot and dusty. Baby had drank all her juice and water. They had been on their way to the car to get some water for Baby when a man had offered them some water. He had been cooking sausages at a food stand. He had used the water to cool down the coals. Noreen had filled Baby's bottle with some of the water and thanked the man.



On the way home, Baby had been fussing and getting feverish. Noreen had thought she was teething. But Baby had been fussing all night and Noreen couldn't calm her. Willa Jo had woken up once and had seen her mother pacing with Baby. That had been when Willa Jo had the dream about Baby—that she was lost at the carnival. When they found her, she was just pulling the flap of a tent open and stepping inside. Noreen had woken Willa Jo up early and had told her to run and get Milly. She had to take Baby to the doctor. Willa Jo remembers waking up earlier. She should have gotten up then and done something to help Baby.

Chapters 15 and 16 Analysis

Chapter 15: Second Thoughts

How long will the girls stay on the roof. It's mid-morning now and they are still there. Willa Jo is somewhat taken aback when Liz seems to take Aunt Patty's side. But Liz is a straight-shooter and it must be how she sees it. She thinks Willa Jo is wrong to be on the roof. A haunting dream is what had driven Willa Jo out to look at the sun—it is the only way she has of connecting with her mother and Baby.

Chapter 16: A Day at the Fair

The details of how Baby got sick are revealed in this chapter. Willa Jo is connecting a dream she had had before she had gone on the roof to a dream she had had the night before Baby died. She dreamed that they lost Baby at the carnival which symbolizes her death. It is also revealed that Willa Jo has guilt about the baby's death. She thinks that had she gotten up in the middle of the night she could have done something to save her baby sister. The sadness and anger that simmers just below Willa Jo's surface and at time boils over is due, in part, to the guilt she has about Baby's death. She is blaming herself as children often do in tragedies such as these. Although she has expressed anger and sadness, she has not expressed her pain from the guilt she feels for Baby's death.



Chapters 17 and 18

Chapters 17 and 18 Summary

Chapter 17: Until Milly Came

Willa Jo told Milly about Baby. She said she'd drive right down to the door. As Willa Jo ran back, the sun was beginning to rise. It was too beautiful to look at right then. When Willa Jo got back, Noreen was holding Baby who was calm and still. She told Willa Jo to tell Milly not to come. Baby was fine. All morning long, all Noreen did was hold the quiet baby and rock her and sing to her. Noreen didn't fix coffee or read the paper or watch TV. The girls could sense that something was wrong. Little Sister climbed on Willa Jo's lap and sucked her thumb, something she hadn't done in years.

Later the girls were outside when Milly came over. They all went inside. Noreen was crying. They all started crying. When the sun was coming up, Noreen had gone to the window to watch and pray that the angels spare Baby from more suffering. That's when she stopped breathing. The angels took her. Milly's head sunk into Noreen's lap. When she recovered, she told Noreen she had to call someone. Noreen understood.

Chapter 18: Seeing Baby Off to Heaven

At the hospital, the doctors asked what everyone ate and drank. That's when Noreen figured it had to be the water that made Baby sick. It was around that time that Little Sister stopped talking. The next few days were filled with neighbors and people stopping by with sympathy and casseroles. They looked at Baby one last time. She looked like she was asleep in her crib. Her name was on a plate on the crib—Joy Ellen Dean.

The morning after the funeral, Willa Jo found Noreen watching the sunrise. She said that Baby had made every sunrise more special in their eyes. Noreen said she could see Baby's face in the sunrise. Willa Jo told her mother that Little Sister wasn't speaking at all. Noreen was sure it would pass. When she resumed painting, Noreen drew a picture of angels holding the clouds of heaven open so Baby could enter in. The angels looked real and Baby looked happy. They hung the picture over Noreen's bed. Painting was all Noreen did. She didn't cook or do housework. Sometimes she'd paint into the wee hours of the night. She thought painting Baby with the angels would make them understand and be less afraid. It might help Little Sister start talking again. That night Willa Jo had another dream about Baby being lost. She had fallen asleep with Noreen and she immediately turned to look at the picture of Baby with the angels hanging over the bed.

Chapters 17 and 18 Analysis

Chapter 17: Until Milly Came



The girls had been there when Baby died. They had witnessed their dead sister lying in their mother's arms. That's when Little Sister started to regress. Noreen had prayed when the sun came up that Baby would get better. The sunrise has more significance now after understanding that the sun was rising exactly when the baby stopped breathing. Willa Jo is not only connecting with her mother at sunrise, she is reaching out to her baby sister who died at sunrise. But the new sun is a time of beginning so perhaps there is also hope for Willa Jo and her family associated with sunrise.

Chapter 18: Seeing Baby Off to Heaven

Noreen is using her painting as an escape. Painting pictures of Baby in heaven and happy takes her away from reality. She is working out her grief through her art. But it has become obsessive and unhealthy. It could lead to depression. Willa Jo doesn't understand but she is glad that her mother is focused on something that might help her deal with the tragedy. Willa Jo is still having the scary dream about Baby going into the tent. But she looks at the picture her mother painted of the angels parting the clouds and letting Baby into heaven. The family still has a lot of healing to do. Little Sister is still not talking.



Chapters 19 and 20

Chapters 19 and 20 Summary

Chapter 19: Aunt Patty's Arrival

Noreen and her daughters had watched the sunrise. She told them that she was sure Baby was in heaven with the angels. Still, all Noreen did was paint. Milly was worried about her, scolding her for letting herself go and getting so thin. Willa Jo was secretly happy that Aunt Patty showed up. She knew her mother needed help. When Aunt Patty suggested that she take the girls with her, in a secret place in her heart, Willa Jo wanted to go.

Chapter 20: Uncle Hob

Uncle Hob sticks his head outside the dormer window, asking the girls if they'd like some water and a cheese sandwich. He passes out a mason jar of ice cold water. He hands an umbrella to Little Sister. He is dressed in a shirt and tie but crawls out on the roof with a picnic basket. He puts up the big black umbrella to make some shade for them. Willa Jo asks why he's dressed up. He says he always dresses up for special occasions.

Uncle Hob tells the girls that Aunt Patty is lying down with a cold cloth on her forehead and isn't crying any more. Willa Jo had been surprised she was crying. Uncle Hob tells her that Aunt Patty's feelings were hurt. When it gets cloudy, Uncle Hob reaches in and gets his guitar and starts strumming.

Chapters 19 and 20 Analysis

Chapter 19: Aunt Patty's Arrival

Noreen's depression is wearing on Willa Jo. Aunt Patty senses that it would be healthier for the girls to get away from Noreen for a while as much as it would be a break for Noreen.

Chapter 20: Uncle Hob

Uncle Hob is reaching out to the girls. He tells Willa Jo that he is dressed in his Sunday best because it is a special occasion. Uncle Hob and Aunt Patty are worried about the girls. Aunt Patty is crying because her feelings had been hurt. Patty is usually worried about herself but she has a genuine love for the girls. Uncle Hob has a subtle and gentle manner of reaching out to the girls of which his wife is incapable.



Chapters 21, 22 and 23

Chapters 21, 22 and 23 Summary

Chapter 21: The Last Straw

Someday, Willa Jo will have to figure out why she and her sister keep sitting on the porch. The night before, Aunt Patty had been calling around trying to find playmates for the girls. Willa Jo had become very annoyed. She and Aunt Patty had soon gotten into a war of words. Aunt Patty had brought up all the things that either embarrassed her or insulted her. She had wailed that no one appreciated her, including Hob. She had mentioned the dead June bug she had to throw out which sent Little Sister running from the room. She had told Willa Jo there wasn't one cooperative bone in her body. She had been totally fed up with her. In that case, Willa Jo had said, she should send her home.

Chapter 22: Talking Things Over

Willa Jo doesn't want to complain about Aunt Patty to Uncle Hob. She tells him they'd like their tennis shoes back—the shoes they came there in. He tells her they are downstairs. As soon as they go in, he'll get them for them. Uncle Hob tells the girls about the summer he turned thirteen. He stayed with his grandpa because his grandma had died. The family thought he'd be company for the old man and that if he had Hob to take care of it would get his mind off his grief. But it didn't work that way. They were both depressed, sat around and sang funny songs and told sad stories. They ate junk, let their hair grow and didn't shower. His grandpa let him drink beer. Willa Jo said it must have been terrible. Hob said it wasn't terrible at all.

Chapter 23: Aunt Patty Stands Alone

Patty is calling for Hob. Finally, she comes out on the lawn. She is stunned when she looks up and sees Hob sitting on the roof with the girls. Unfortunately, for Patty, Mrs. Potts the neighborhood gossip, is heading up the walk. Hob waves and tells the girls to wave. Just to be silly, Hob gets up and bows at the waist toward Mrs. Potts. The two women on the lawn gasp. Even Little Sister lets out a little sound. Uncle Hob even dances around a little. Willa Jo is surprised to see a slight smile cross Aunt Patty's face. Aunt Patty announces that she's moving to Venezuela where no one will know her. She runs inside to answer the phone.

Chapters 21, 22 and 23 Analysis

Chapter 21: The Last Straw

Things are coming to a head. The conflicts between Willa Jo and Aunt Patty are becoming more overt. Patty is fed up with Willa Jo and probably the reverse is just as true. Willa Jo wants to go home. Perhaps it would be the best thing for everyone. Why is



Aunt Patty reluctant to send them home? Does she know something that she hasn't told the girls?

Chapter 22: Talking Things Over

Hob tells the girls about when he had gone through a period of grief. He had just done whatever felt good. In that way, he is telling the girls that if sitting on the roof comforts them in some way, that it's okay. He is still gently trying to coax them in but he's not pushy. He knows how to approach the girls in a much more effective way than Patty does. He has good instincts and would have been a good father.

Chapter 23: Aunt Patty Stands Alone

Aunt Patty is actually enjoying Hob when he acts silly on the roof. And Hob seems to be having a ball. He probably has been so restricted by Patty that he's enjoying the liberation of being on the roof, free and away from all of Patty's rules. Surprisingly, Patty seems to be enjoying it, too. Maybe Hob should have rebelled long ago. Who is calling on the phone? Could it be Noreen?



Chapters 24 and 25

Chapters 24 and 25 Summary

Chapter 24: Aunt Patty Sees the Light

Aunt Patty appears at the dormer window. She wants Hob to come in. She sounds funny to Willa Jo, almost scared. Noreen had just called and wants to see the girls. In a surprising move, Aunt Patty climbs out on the porch. It is hard for her to fit through the window but Hob and the girls help her squeeze through. Aunt Patty tells them she wants to be out there with them even if they are all crazy. They all are frightened when Little Sister reaches for the umbrella and almost slips. Aunt Patty starts to cry but Uncle Hob grabs Little Sister and holds her tight. She peeks out and smiles at Willa Jo.

Noreen misses the girls and wants them to come home. She had wanted to talk to the girls. Aunt Patty hadn't told her they were on the roof. She had said they were out playing with some kids. Their mother is driving over to get them. She started out early and she's very near. Uncle Hob says Noreen realizes she's got two beautiful daughters who need her. He recalls again when he stayed with his grandfather. He had learned to cry that summer which allowed him to be in touch with his emotions.

Willa Jo wants to tell Aunt Patty she's sorry but goes about it in a round-about way. She tells her she's sorry she won't get in that women's club. Aunt Patty says she doesn't care. She can get together with Tressa. She could even introduce Tressa to Mrs. Finger - they both have so many boys. Willa Jo tells Aunt Patty that she and Liz are a lot alike. They both say what they think. Aunt Patty says that Liz is not at all what she expected. Tears fill her eyes when she talks about what a sweet person Noreen is and can't believe that so many bad things have happened to her. Willa Jo gets overwhelmed with feeling for Aunt Patty and moves closer to her. Aunt Patty apologizes to the girls for all the wrong things she said and did and tells them that she loves them to distraction.

Aunt Patty asks them why they stayed on the roof. Little Sister responds that it had been to feel close to Baby. Everyone is stunned. She has gotten her voice back. She tells everyone her voice was lost in sadness. Aunt Patty tries to control her tears and says they were all lost in sadness. Willa Jo leans against Aunt Patty and wonders how they're going to get her down off the roof. Aunt Patty laughs and says they'll probably have to call the fire department.

Chapter 25: The End of the Long Wait

Noreen and Milly pull up in the driveway. They walk to the front door but don't look up at the roof. They knock on the door. Noreen says that they must be out looking for the kids. No one on the roof says a thing. A slight movement makes Milly look up. She gasps but doesn't say anything. Noreen and Milly walk back to the car. Noreen looks up then and sees them on the roof.



Willa Jo tells her mom not to worry — that they're coming down. Aunt Patty adds that they'll be down as soon as the sun sets. She tells Noreen that she wouldn't believe the great view from the roof.

Chapters 24 and 25 Analysis

Chapter 24: Aunt Patty Sees the Light

Patty joins the family on the roof. She wants to be with them. Her attitude has changed. She apologizes for being so critical to the children. She has realized what the most important things in life are. She has even warmed up to the Finger family. She will probably always be a perfectionist and fussy about things, but through the love she feels for her husband, sister and nieces, she has learned they are more important than what the neighbors think about them.

Noreen is evidently through the worst part of her grief. Perhaps it was good for her daughters to be away. Now she misses them and wants to be with them. She is focusing on her living daughters although she'll never forget Baby.

With everyone expressing their feelings, Little Sister finally speaks up. She is able to vocalize her feelings and tell everyone that she lost her voice in sadness. Little Sister is getting through the grieving process.

Chapter 25: The End of the Long Wait

Noreen has come to reunite with her daughters. Willa Jo, Little Sister, Aunt Patty and Uncle Hob all stay silent when Noreen is knocking on the door. When Noreen realizes that they are on the roof, Aunt Patty tells her the view is wonderful. The sun is getting ready to set and a new day will dawn for Willa Jo and her family tomorrow.



Characters

Willa Jo

Willa Jo is the thirteen-year-old protagonist of *Getting Near to Baby*. Willa Jo and Jo Ann, her seven-year-old sister who the family calls Little Sister, are staying with Aunt Patty while her mother is healing from the loss of her two-year-old who the family called Baby. Willa Jo is forced to be all things to all people. She has to be strong and brave for her fragile and grieving mother who is obsessed with painting pictures of her lost Baby. Willa Jo becomes Little Sister's "mother." Her number one priority is to shield Little Sister from any further hurt. She interprets for her sister who has been unable to speak since the passing of Baby. Willa Jo does not want to lose another little sister in any sense of the word.

Willa Jo and Little Sister are taken to their Aunt Patty's for an extended visit in order to give Noreen, their mother, some time and space to heal without the responsibility of two young children. Noreen is a gentle, laid-back person and is the polar opposite of her older sister, Patty, who believes in regimen, organization and stringent rules that keep her house perfect and her reputation stellar. Willa Jo has an independent streak and eventually clashes with her domineering aunt.

In the concluding episode of the story, Willa Jo takes a final stand against Aunt Patty and all her rules and superficial concerns for her reputation. Willa Jo and Little Sister sit on the roof of Aunt Patty's house to watch the sunrise and refuse to come down. To the girls, especially Willa Jo, the rising sun is their only connection to Baby and a way to feel close to their mother. Miraculously, Aunt Patty finally begins to see the light and helps to bring about a new and happy dawning for the family.

Aunt Patty

When Willa Jo's baby sister, called Baby by her family, dies suddenly, Aunt Patty travels to her sister's house to help. Noreen is devastated and suffering from unbearable grief. To help her younger sister, Patty offers to take her two nieces, Willa Jo and Little Sister, back with her for a temporary stay. Although Noreen at first is not keen on the idea, Patty convinces her that having time alone without the responsibility of two young girls will give her the space and time she needs for healing. Patty loves her sister and her nieces and is heartbroken by the loss of the youngest child.

Willa Jo and Little Sister are accustomed to their mother who is not particular about her house, is very laid back and has a minimum of rules for her children. The girls face a huge adjustment during the stay with Aunt Patty. She is domineering and bossy and has many rules for her nieces. She does not allow anyone in the front door because their shoes could dirty her rug. The girls have to go to bed practically before dark and they're not allowed to play with the dirty kids across the street.



Willa Jo has a stubborn and defiant streak and she is emotionally exhausted by the loss of her sister. She and Aunt Patty soon clash and Patty finds her thirteen-year-old niece formidable and unmovable. At the end, Aunt Patty realizes that her priorities had been out of whack. She recognizes that the love of her sister and nieces is much more precious than her belongings or the snooty townspeople she had been trying to impress.

Little Sister

Little Sister, aka Jo Ann, is the seven-year-old sister of Willa Jo. After Baby died, Little Sister temporarily lost her ability to speak. When she finally does speak, she tells everyone that her voice was "lost in sadness."

Noreen

Noreen is the mother of Willa Jo, Little Sister and Baby. She is grieving the loss of her youngest child when her older sister, Patty, volunteers to take her other two daughters so she can have time and space to recover.

Baby

Baby was Noreen's youngest daughter. Baby drank contaminated water at a carnival. She was sick through the night and at sunrise the next morning, she died in her mother's arms.

Uncle Hob

Uncle Hob is Aunt Patty's good-natured husband. When Willa Jo and Little Sister are on his roof and refuse to come down, he gets dressed up, brings them food and drink and joins them. He tells them he always gets dressed up for special occasions.

Liz Finger

Liz Finger is the oldest child of the Finger family who lives across the street from Aunt Patty who warns the girls not to play with them. But Liz is a friendly and straightforward person whom Willa Jo likes and with whom she becomes friends.

Isaac Finger

Isaac Finger is the little brother of Liz Finger. He is a precocious little boy who charms Aunt Patty by thanking her and calling her ma'am and by bringing her a bouquet of flowers. He is also understanding of Little Sister who isn't speaking.



Cynthia Wainwright

Cynthia is the snooty friend who Aunt Patty introduces to Willa Jo in hopes that they'll be friends. Cynthia takes all the cookies off the platter for herself and calls Willa Jo and Little Sister orphans and calls Little Sister dumb because she's not talking.

Milly

Milly is a close friend and neighbor of Noreen. Milly helps her with the kids and is by her side when Noreen loses her youngest child.



Objects/Places

Raleigh, North Carolina

Most of the story in *Getting Near to Baby* takes place in Raleigh, North Carolina. Willa Jo's and Little Sister's permanent home is across the state in a small town.

Aunt Patty's Roof

In a defiant move, Willa Jo climbs out on the roof to watch the sunrise. Little Sister wakes and follows her out there. They refuse to come down and Aunt Patty is appalled at their behavior.

Liz Finger's Excavation

Liz Finger, who is Willa Jo's age, shows the girls the huge cave that she and her brothers are digging in their backyard. They are building a tunnel but aren't sure where it will end up.

Vacation Bible School

Willa Jo and Little Sister attend Vacation Bible School at a local church. They only last one day and refuse to return because the cranky Bible school teacher made the kids sit in the grass where they were attacked by ticks.

Carnival

Noreen and Milly take Noreen's daughters to a local carnival near their home. The baby drinks contaminated water at the carnival that later makes her ill and takes her life.

Piggly Wiggly

One day when Aunt Patty takes the girls to the grocery store, Little Sister knocks over a tower of pickle jars. Aunt Patty is humiliated when Little Sister can't apologize.

Sunrise

Noreen associates the death of her daughter with the sunrise. The baby had died in her arms just as the sun had risen over the horizon.



Noreen's Artwork

After Baby dies, Noreen, who is an artist, becomes obsessed with painting pictures of Baby with the angels.

The Finger Family Bungalows

The Finger family lives in bungalows across the street from Aunt Patty. The bungalows in the past had been used as vacation rental homes.

Aunt Patty's Shopping Spree

When Willa Jo and Little Sister first arrive in Raleigh, Aunt Patty insists on taking them shopping. She doesn't let the girls pick out what they want to wear—she decides what they should wear.

Setting

The distinctive setting of *Getting Near to Baby* is vital to the development of the plot.

Although the general setting is Raleigh, North Carolina, the focused setting is that of a rooftop. The two heroines of the story start out sitting on the roof of their Aunt Patty's house and only climb down on the last page of the novel. The plot develops as young Willa Jo begins questioning, through flashbacks, the reasons which ultimately led her and Little Sister to sit on the roof from sunrise until sunset.

The roof is of further importance to the plot as Willa Jo is given the chance to come to terms with her grief and to see the situation from a distance. Given the distance that the height of the roof provides physically as well as metaphorically, Willa Jo is given the opportunity to see everything from above; thus, she and Little Sister overcome their grief and come to terms with the death of their baby sister.

Furthermore, both the rooftop and the act of climbing it are symbolic. The act of climbing up onto the rooftop is definitely, in the view of the girls, a manner in which they can get closer to heaven and ultimately to "Baby." The girls' descent, on the other hand, symbolizes an understanding and acceptance of the occurrence, as well as an understanding that one does not need to climb up onto the roof in order to get "near to baby"; Baby is always around them as long as she remains in their memory. Coming down from the rooftop also suggests acceptance and the ability to understand and explain what has occurred.

Also, the setting of *Getting Near to Baby* suggests a stage, with the roof as the central focus. Moreover, the adults who come and go below seem like actors entering the stage, saying their lines and then exiting again.

Especially some of the more caricature-like neighborly women seem to remind one of sidekicks who add comic relief to an otherwise serious plot.

The small southern town, along with its residents, idiosyncrasies, and gossip, creates the perfect microcosm in which the girls can develop in healthy ways. The town's character is brought to life through the distinctive regional accent the characters use: "Your momma would shoot me if she knew what all you were doing"; "Might's well set a spell" says Liz, pointing to a chair; "Aunt Patty never said word one"; "We don't have shade tree one on our property." The size and situation of the town also allows for the dramatic plot to develop side-by-side with subplots filled with humor, sadness, mystery, adventure, and surprise.

Social Sensitivity

Getting Near to Baby explores sibling and parental grief caused by a baby's death. The story may be powerful for students who have experienced death in their own families. It examines the different responses to loss of a loved one and how individuals eventually come to accept this event. This novel can be used both on its own and in conjunction with other novels for young adults in order to give a well-rounded description of the ways in which this issue is dealt with by adults, adolescents, and young children.

Literary Qualities

Getting Near to Baby takes place one day on the rooftop of a house while the main character relates events leading up to and following the death of Baby. The narrative is original and non-linear. Furthermore, this distinctive narrative is significant in bringing many of the characters' dimensions and facets to light. Although the novel takes place over the course of a single day, the reassured pace which is neither swift nor too slow allows time for the characters to become rounded and creates the ideal atmosphere of a summer day.

The story is told simply in short evocative sentences. This poetic brevity ultimately allows for questions and their answers to appear all at once. An example of this could be the following: "Aunt Willa is fed up with me." This is the first sentence of the novel, and simply by reading it the following presuppositions appear: the reader immediately wants to find out what has happened to bring about this feeling toward the hero and one knows that the narrator/hero has an Aunt.

Another clever technique is that the most important details are sometimes given slowly and at other times abruptly when they are least expected. For example, the fact that characters are on the roof is withheld until the second chapter. Characters are described as looking up or down, but nothing is clarified immediately. The same is also true with regards to Baby's death, which is withheld until the second chapter. Then the death is related to Little Sister's inability to speak. Otherwise, the author seems to dangle bits of details which do not give enough information until she finally decides to surprise the reader, as when she gives the reason for Baby's death. Suddenly, when the reader does not or no longer expects it, the climax of the novel occurs and a complete description of this is given. This suspense works in conjunction with foreshadowing. For example, Aunt Patty asks Willa Jo whether Little Sister drank any of that dirty water that day at the fair. Willa Jo says that the water was not dirty, but she is told it may not have looked dirty but it most certainly was "bad." "Nobody else drank it," the reader reads on, "Nobody but Baby."

Thus the reader does not know how and why Baby died. This detail foreshadows Baby's death. Another example of foreshadowing is evident in two sentences that Willa Jo utters shortly before she meets Liza Fingers: "She didn't seem to know that friends aren't something one person picks out for another, like flowers in a shop. Or that sometimes they are growing like weeds at the side of the road." It is as though a small tap of information trickles through the novel, reaching its climax in the last few chapters.

The descriptions are beautifully written, conveying as many sounds, colors, and aromas as possible in order to create a realistic and authentic atmosphere. The colors used to depict the sunrise and sunset in particular convey "Baby's new home" as magnificent and mysterious: "But the sky has broken pink and is stretching pale lavender fingers towards heaven."



The novel begins with the sunrise and ends with the sunset: the sunrise can symbolize birth and sunset death, as do various other smaller side-stories complete their cycles by the end of the novel. For example, the brown sandals Aunt Patty buys for both her nieces. Almost immediately described as very ugly, they are disliked by the children, who get blisters from them. They get in trouble with Miss Pettibone and Aunt Patty since their blisters prevent them from making a fast escape from Bible camp in order to call Aunt Patty and ask her to save them from irresponsible and disagreeable Miss Pettibone. Finally, on the roof of the house, Willa Jo tells Uncle Hob that they can no longer wear those shoes, for they have given them the most painful blisters, and they wish they could have their old shoes back. Another example of this is the June bug story or even that of the slugs in Aunt Patty's garden which are commented on throughout the novel. The June bug story naturally is more significant than that of the slugs, however comparisons can be easily made.

In terms of the more stylistic techniques that are used in *Getting Near to Baby*, similes are abundant yet exquisite: "many of the girls were quiet and looking at me and Little Sister like we were butterflies stuck to boards with pins"; "My heart feels like there is a string tied around it, with something heavy hanging from the string"; "The roof feels like it has been sprinkled with coarse salt"; and "this roof might roll over like a big dog and heave us into the air like fleas."



Themes

Dealing with Loss

In *Getting Near to Baby*, the author demonstrates through the story's characters the various ways in which people deal with tragic loss. When two-year-old Joy Ellen Dean—called merely Baby by her family—dies unexpectedly from drinking contaminated water, her close family members all have different ways in which they deal with the tragedy that has cruelly been inflicted upon them. Noreen, the young mother, is holding Baby when she dies. She is watching the sunrise at the time and associates the dawning day with her daughter's death. Noreen is an artist and after the death of her child, she becomes obsessed with painting pictures of Baby happy and smiling with the angels or depicting the angels holding back the clouds at sunrise so that Baby can enter heaven.

Baby's seven-year-old sister, Jo Ann—called Little Sister by her family—literally stops speaking. She stays mute for weeks following the loss of Baby. When she finally speaks, she announces that her voice "was lost in sadness." Her Aunt Patty, with tears streaming down her face, adds that they were all lost in sadness.

Thirteen-year-old Willa Jo is required to be the adult and take on more responsibility and worry than her age warrants. She interprets for Little Sister and is nearly obsessed with keeping her from harm or hurt feelings—she doesn't want to lose another sister. Willa Jo also has to be brave and strong for her fragile mother. Although they are separated, it is Willa Jo who worries about her mother and tries to feel close to her and Baby by watching the sunrise. She also has to maintain a respectful attitude with her demanding aunt although she's not always successful in this goal.

Aunt Patty, who at first seems like an unpleasant and domineering person, is really a powder puff. She is so torn up by the loss of her young niece that she overplays her protective and nurturing hand when dealing with her other nieces and anguished sister. Aunt Patty, in her own way, is attempting to insulate all of them from further hurt. She just does it with a heavy, though well-meaning, hand.

Guilt

Often when there is a death in a family, especially an unexpected death or that of a young person, many of those who are left behind are filled with guilt. When two-year-old Baby dies suddenly from drinking contaminated water, anguish and pain are the spoils and so is guilt. Noreen, the baby's young mother, is a caring and loving parent whose first concern has always been her three daughters. That she allows her daughter to drink the water that kills her—in fact, she poured the water in the baby's bottle—is a reality that could only haunt and possibly even destroy Noreen. Of course, she hadn't known that the water was bad but when a loving mother gives a child the agent that



ends her life, it would be impossible for her not to feel responsibility and devastating guilt.

The night that the baby died, Willa Jo had woken up several times during the night and had seen her mother pacing back and forth while holding the crying baby. Willa Jo had been so tired that even though she wanted to get up, she had fallen back to sleep before she could finish her thoughts. Weeks later, Willa Jo is still suffering from those memories. Had she only gotten up, she tells herself repeatedly, perhaps she could have done something to help Baby and save her life. Having that guilt is a heavy burden for a young girl to shoulder.

The bossy and domineering Aunt Patty represses her guilt for not rescuing her younger sister and her family sooner. Noreen is a single mother with three children. Her husband had abandoned his family and they had had no contact with him. Patty tries to convince Noreen to move closer to her so she can help her more. But Noreen decides to stay where she is. Though Patty hides her guilt behind her fastidious concern for things and appearances, she has to regret that she hadn't insisted that Noreen move. Had they moved, Baby wouldn't have drunk that poison water that night.

Priorities

Sometimes it takes a tragedy to make people realize the things that are important in life, the things that can't be changed and the things that are meaningless. Such a lesson is certainly the case in *Getting Near to Baby*. As the story begins, Willa Jo and Little Sister are two sisters who are visiting their Aunt Patty on an extended visit. There is the hint that a tragedy had brought them there but exactly what has happened is not made clear until further into the story.

Willa Jo and Little Sister are accustomed to their mother, Noreen, who is laid back and has little concern about the appearance of the house. When they arrive at Aunt Patty's house, they are confronted with Aunt Patty's rules and regulations that range from the cleanliness of the house, to what they wear, to who they can play with. Aunt Patty is worried about her carpet getting dirty, so she doesn't allow anyone in the front door—they must go through the garage where they can clean their feet.

Aunt Patty is also very concerned with image. When Little Sister knocks a large stack of pickles over in the grocery store, Aunt Patty is embarrassed when the little girl can't apologize—she'd lost her voice temporarily in grief from the loss of her baby sister. When the girls are on the roof, Aunt Patty pretends to curious neighbors that she asked them to go on the roof to find broken tiles. She is too embarrassed to say that she honestly didn't know. She allows the snooty daughter of a socially prominent woman to be rude to her nieces because she wants to be admitted into an elite women's club. Patty's sister, Noreen, the young woman who lost her baby to illness, is so distraught over the tragedy that she becomes obsessed with painting oils of Baby in heaven with the angels and neglects her other children.



At the conclusion of the story, both women realize what the important things in their lives are. Patty realizes that loving her nieces, which she does, is more important than a clean house and uppity friends. Noreen misses her daughters and recognizes that they need her. She'll never forget the child she lost, but she will focus on and have the joy of loving and caring for the children she has.



Themes/Characters

Audrey Coulumbis's novel is a caring portrait of sibling relationships which focuses on the theme of infant death and family grief. These two themes are encircled by a variety of lesser ones which, together, create the story that is *Getting Near to Baby*.

The characters of the novel are both old and young; however, they all come across as authentic. The protagonists, Willa Jo and Aunt Patty, followed closely by Little Sister and Mother (or Noreen) and then by Uncle Hob(art). Surrounding them in turn is a complete cast of neighbors, best friends, new friends, teachers, and, naturally, hovering ethereally around the main characters, is Baby. In addition to the housewives, the characters are ordinary people with respectable jobs such as coal miners, house and roof builders, and painters. They include the characters necessary to create a whole community, such as the gossip, the polite neighborly older lady, the snotty society dame and her venomous daughter, the kind Uncle Hob, and the large family with the fun-filled children, among others.

According to Michael Cart in his review of *Getting Near to Baby* in *Booklist* (1999), "the characters are credible, yet perhaps too adult.

They are, however, engaging and multidimensional."

Perhaps seeming a bit too mature, young Willa Jo is forced to grow up faster than normal, especially since she is the eldest sister and feels obligated to be more responsible and protective of her younger sister because they have been uprooted from their home and their mother. Willa Jo is dynamic and headstrong yet reflective. She is outspoken and does not hesitate to speak her mind when she feels that she must defend her family and her actions. Because she is very similar to her Aunt, she proves to be a true match for the well-meaning but insufferably bossy woman. Even Mother points this out in the following dialogue: "Just remember, two peas in a pod can rub each other wrong."

"Who are the two peas?" I said.

"Why you and Aunt Patty, of course," Mom said with a shaky laugh. "I guess it's because you're both big sisters, you like to be the boss. Neither one of you likes to be the one bossed."

In one instance, Aunt Patty unfairly calls the young girl "the spawn of the devil."

Willa Jo is a loving, caring, protective girl trying to come to terms with death in a remarkably mature manner. It is perhaps this too that confuses Aunt Patty, who cannot believe that a child can be so insensitive; though, Willa Jo deals with the situation in a more difficult way than her mother.



Strong-minded Aunt Patty is difficult to oppose. In her marriage, she seems to overshadow Uncle Hob. Even Mother says that, although Uncle Hob's name is "Hobart," it was Aunt Patty who "baptized" him as Hob very early on in their relationship, and Uncle Hob never seemed to have put up any resistance to it. Along with her "bossy" character, Aunt Patty has many rules which she abides by and expects others, including children and her husband, to abide by as well. For example, she has plastic runners over all of her carpets and does not allow people to enter her house through the front door. Like Willa Jo, she too is the eldest sister and is outspoken and overprotective.

In some cases, Aunt Patty does not realize the strength of her words and that she may be disrespectful and rude, even though she is obsessed with other people's opinion of her and what they may be saying about her and her family. This obsession goes as far as, for example, not allowing the young girls to eat peanut butter sandwiches because people will think that she cannot afford better. The truth is Aunt Patty lacks self-confidence and keeps trying to please others.

According to Mother, Aunt Patty is difficult because she has never had children to soften her and make her more accepting and calm.

Aunt Patty realizes that it is difficult when one has not had children of one's own and blushes to admit this: "'Women who don't have children... 'Aunt Patty started, then stopped, turning a pretty shade of pink. She cleared her throat and began again. 'Women who have not been with children don't know what a child goes through.'" However, it takes a long time for Aunt Patty to agree that this is her problem as well. Deep down, Aunt Patty is not evil or cruel. She is simply not used to children and does not know how to react to them.

She is caring, however, both to her sister and to the two young girls. When Little Sister receives a June bug as a pet, because she knows that these insects do not live long and that Little Sister will be distraught, Aunt Patty cares about Little Sister so much that she keeps switching the June bugs so that she will not see the insect die and then connect it to Baby's death. Although difficult and stern, she is actually caring and conscientious and merely requires attention and appreciation. The problem is that sometimes people just do not want to be helped; they want to be left on their own so that they can take care of things in their own way and time, so help (in any format), even when carried out with good intentions, can be completely unwanted and unappreciated.

Mother (or Noreen) is gentle and sensitive but not as strong as either Willa Jo or Aunt Patty. She is guilt-stricken about her baby daughter dying in her arms and that she died because she gave her daughter tainted water. Her shock is so acute she cannot give up her baby while its body is still warm in her arms. After the funeral, she tries to overcome her grief by believing that her baby has gone to heaven and is in the company of angels. She begins painting pictures of Baby in heaven with angels. At one point she even paints Baby with wings.



It is she who shows her children the sunset and sunrise and tells them that their Baby sister lives in the sky among the colors. It takes her a long time to begin to concentrate on the living and not on the dead.

Willa Jo compares her mother to Aunt Patty. Her subjective comparisons stem from her desire to return to her mother and to her own home rather than remain in a strange house and live under Aunt Patty's strict rules. Little Sister is a sweet child, but the reader does not get the chance to find out very much about her. Little Sister copes with her grief by not speaking. She listens, and she is clever enough to make up a sign language of her own with which she communicates with her older sister. She loves her sister, looks up to her, and follows her everywhere. This is why she ends up on the roof with Willa Jo.

Uncle Hob (Hobart), Aunt Patty's husband, although a minor character, is a strength both in Aunt Patty's household and in the novel itself. He supplies balance and is ultimately the only person who can discuss the situation calmly enough to persuade the young girls to climb down from the roof. He listens and thinks logically in order to understand the reasons for another person's actions. He may not always have the answer, but just allowing the other to speak may be enough. Willa Jo describes Uncle Hob in the following way: There's something about Uncle Hob, a soft look in his eyes—maybe it's the glasses, but I don't think so—that makes it easy for a person to pour their heart out to him. I don't mean he always has the answer, unless it's mathematical, of course.

Uncle Hob genuinely understands what the two girls are going through and can identify with their situation because he had a similar experience when he was younger.

He tells about when his grandmother died and he went to stay with his grandfather, and thus he confirms for the girls that people should be allowed to grieve in their own way. Uncle Hob is quietly stronger than Aunt Patty. A simple gesture such as putting his arm around her shoulders is all that is necessary to calm and pacify her. He is the only person who can make Aunt Patty climb up onto the roof, even though she is afraid of heights, and finally make her see reason. Their relationship is beautiful.

Several secondary characters add color, mystery, humor, and diversity to a novel which is set in the space of one day in a small southern town. They include the Fingers family, the neighborly curious ladies, Noreen's best friend Milly, the horribly spoiled Cynthia Wainwright, and Miss Pettibone. The Fingers family lend mystery to the novel, while Mrs. Potts, Mrs. Garber, and the other neighborly ladies create a sense of town atmosphere where well-meant curiosity and gossip thrives.

The themes are naturally developed in conjunction with the characters and setting.

The two main themes concern relationships and death. Sibling and adult relationships are examined. The sibling relationships between Aunt Patty and Noreen and Little Sister and Willa Jo are alike in some ways and different in others. The struggle to understand what being an older sister really means, and accepting the sibling role along with all its



responsibilities, are emphasized and developed. Little Sister and Willa Jo's relationship is very strong, loving, and affectionate. This is described in the following passage: I looked myself over, then checked Little Sister very carefully. She is the only sister I have left and I'm not letting her go to some tick bite. But even when we didn't have a tick between us, I could see Little Sister was getting that wide-eyed look she got the day Baby died. I couldn't bear to see her look that way. I wouldn't stand by helpless to do anything about it.

Indeed, Willa Jo looks out for Little Sister at all times, taking care that she does not do anything dangerous when on the roof, taking her out of the garden during Bible camp and up onto the stairs so that no ticks will bite her, talking for her in order to avoid confusion or curious glances when Little Sister does not talk, and accepting that the young girl doesn't want to speak even though she may not agree with this response to Baby's death. At the end of the novel, however, Little Sister helps clarify Willa Jo's words and ultimately her thoughts.

The reason why Willa Jo finally stayed on the roof is given on one of the final pages of the novel: "I. . . I wanted to see the sun rise.

I wanted to see the sun rise, and I just stayed." Whereupon Little Sister elaborates: "We were getting near to Baby."

Although it seems tense, the relationship between Aunt Patty and Noreen is also strong and loving. But they are extremely different in character, they deal with situations in different ways, thus there are often conflicts: "Oh Patty," Mom said, beginning to cry again. "You would have done everything different." Noreen is much more complacent and Patty dynamic and overpowering. When Aunt Patty immediately came to her sister's house the day Baby died, she came to help her in the only manner that she knew how. At the end of the novel, Aunt Patty, with the help of Willa Jo, understands her errors, although it is obvious that everything she did, she did out of love: "I never meant to hurt your momma," Aunt Patty said. "I love her. She is my own sister, like Little Sister is yours. I didn't say the right things, though," Aunt Patty said as if the words hurt her throat.

"You're right about that." Willa Jo replied. "I don't know the right things to say to someone who is in such pain, even if she is my sister."

The Fingers children provide another view of sibling relationships. When Willa Jo and Little Sister go along with Liza Fingers to explore the excavation site, Willa Jo describes how cooperatively the children work together as a team: "They had been doing this together for a long time and it showed."

Another important relationship, between Willa Jo and the childless Aunt Patty, is explored. This relationship has two dimensions: that of the childless adult and the child and that of two dynamic elder sisters.

This is especially important, for the relationship changes drastically when the adult has had a child. The ways in which adults communicate with children and also the ways in



which children communicate with each other are also developed and addressed, particularly in the relationship between Willa Jo and Aunt Patty. Though the relationship is filled with tension, there is genuine love between aunt and niece. They speak unkind words but without hostility.

It is more from fear of who will be in control. An example of this is the following quotation: "I don't think you're Mom's sister at all. I think you're Miss Pettibone's sister." Willa Jo was nearly as angry with Aunt Patty as she had been with Miss Pettibone. "But it was a confused kind of anger, mixed up with all kinds of other feelings that made my heart ache." Neither hates the other. The problem is that neither one is used to dealing with someone so much like herself.

The other important theme of the novel is that of death and coming to terms with and understanding it. The adults and the parents deal with death in similar ways.

Ways of expressing grief are shown. The way in which death is experienced differently by Willa Jo, Little Sister, and Noreen highlights the differences in their personalities. Little Sister deals with death through silence and Noreen through depression and art. Willa Jo seems to be much stronger than her own mother, however the strength of grief is equally potent in her as it is in her mother. The two young girls stay at their aunt's house, which clearly helps them come to terms with their sister's death. *Getting Near to Baby* is ultimately a psychological, in-depth yet careful exploration of feelings surrounding death, grief, and loss as well as the slow healing process which is achieved in reaching the source of these feelings.

The theme of death is slowly integrated into the plot. The death is explicit for the first time at the beginning of the second chapter. Even then, however, the reader is not given specific information about the death until far into the novel, though hints and comments about the theme are constant and found in the most unexpected places. For example, the June bug is said not to have a long life-span and which, for Little Sister's sake, has its life prolonged by the switch method. Aunt Patty sits behind the front door while the children play with the Fingers children and "listens for signs of life," and when Willa Jo wants to say "over my dead body" but then decides against it.

In addition, there is a subtle discussion of death between the various characters. In many ways subtle advice is given on accepting and coming to terms with death.

Yet it is difficult to do anything for someone in order to ease their pain, and it is important to understand that grief is ultimately a personal issue and that, although one needs support, love, and understanding, there is nothing that anyone can do to make the feelings of grief go away. The pace is up to the individual. For Little Sister and Mother, they get over grief by themselves and at their own pace.

The theme of heaven (directly linked to the theme of death and Baby's new abode) is a main theme in the plot and one also directly linked to the title and the girls climbing onto the roof in order to see the sunrise, which has been pointed out to them as heaven, and thus get near to Baby.



In order to be able to accept death and the idea that they have not lost Baby, Mother tells her daughters that Baby wanted to see some angels about a very important matter but, because the angels loved her so much, "they couldn't bear to send her back."

Mother tells them that they will all see Baby again someday, although not until they were very old, because they all still need each other here: "Baby had the angels and we had each other." As the sun was rising when Baby died, it was as if Baby left with the first rays of the sun and thus a link was made in Mother's, and even Willa Jo's, mind with heaven and the sunrise and setting. Mother even describes the sunrise as "the opening of the gates of heaven." Willa Jo links heaven with the rising and setting sun: "I don't think I'll ever get down off this roof. I'll stay here till kingdom comes." This can be read in two different ways: either she will never climb down or she will only climb down once she sees heaven through the sunrise. The links between heaven, angels, and Baby are manifold. Baby's voice is further compared to that of an angel's and, in order to complete the bond, the only word that Baby utters in the novel is her version of heaven: "hen." Furthermore, this word is uttered on the day before Baby's death, just as Milly (Mother's best friend) is excited to get on the Ferris wheel which is so tall that they will be able to reach out and touch heaven. As Milly says this, Baby reaches up and touches the ceiling of the car, as if preparing herself for her voyage to heaven.

Upon Baby's death, there is a rather confusing scene as Willa Jo is sent to Milly's to call her urgently to the house just as the sun is rising. Willa Jo bangs on Milly's door but is ultimately stopped as Mother calls and tells her that it is not necessary for her to come. All this time, "a burning orange blotch is pushed aside by a hot pink glare that hurt my eyes." And suddenly the sun seems huge and too close and she does not want to look at it. Later, it is as if she saw death coming close but did want to see it. Similar thoughts crossed Mother's mind: she sees the sunrise as the gateway to heaven. She asks the angels to look down on Baby and spare her suffering. Mother says: "When the sun came up, just as the sun came up over the ridge, Baby stopped breathing.

They took her, Milly. It hit me all at once, what I was asking and how it must have sounded. I should have held on to her real tight, so they would know. I must not have been holding her tight enough." The scene is sensitively and realistically handled; the emotions and actions linked directly to loss and death are respected and not forced or overly sentimental.



Style

Point of View

Getting Near to Baby, by Audrey Couloubis, is written in the first person narrative. The narrator of the story is thirteen-year-old Willa Jo Dean who tells of the challenges and obstacles she encounters when staying with a demanding aunt while at the same time dealing with the grief of the tragic loss of Baby, her two-year-old baby sister. Willa Jo, whose father left the family, takes on more responsibility than her age should allow. She musters the strength to help her fragile mother on whom life has inflicted great anguish and suffering.

By Willa Jo narrating the story, the reader is privy to the frustrations that she experiences while staying with Aunt Patty who is fastidious about her house and is determined to further an unrealistic image of the perfect family that she is bent on displaying. With each bossy comment and controlling maneuver from Aunt Patty, the growing frustration, pain and anger are expressed in the words of an adolescent. In Willa Jo's interpretation of very somber and adult situations, the reader is able to see into the heart and mind of a troubled child. Writing her story from the young girl's perspective, the author is able to effectively represent the disparity between what is real and what is imagined and the hurt that words can inflict on a young, emotionally fraught person. The reader can also glean that while Aunt Patty has annoying characteristics and warped priorities, she loves her sister and her nieces and underneath the veneer of plastic carpet runners and perfect landscaping her intentions are to support and be there for them.

Setting

The story of Getting Near to Baby, takes place in North Carolina. Willa Jo and Little Sister are visiting with their Aunt Patty and Uncle Hob who live in Raleigh, NC. They live with their mother, Noreen, in a small town across the state. Patty and Hob recently built the current custom home in which they live. The girls are used to their laid-back mother who is not concerned with housekeeping. They have quite an adjustment when they stay with Aunt Patty who doesn't let anyone in the front door so her carpet stays clean and makes everyone walk on plastic runners in the interior of the house so that the floors stay clean.

While in Raleigh, the girls walk to the ice cream shop in town and play with the Finger kids across the street. The Finger family has one girl and five boys who live in a bungalow that had formerly been used as a vacation home. One day, Liz Finger invites the girls to see their "excavation." Liz and her brothers are digging a huge tunnel in their backyard. They are not sure where it's heading, but they are having fun digging it. Willa Jo and Little Sister have a brief stint at the local church's Vacation Bible School where the children are attacked by ticks when they sit in the grass under a shade tree.



One of the most important settings in the story is the roof of Aunt Patty's house. Frustrated with Aunt Patty's rules and domineering personality, Willa Jo and Little Sister are found on the roof one morning where they are waiting for the sunrise. Aunt Patty is appalled and embarrassed by their behavior. But Willa Jo takes a defiant stand and refuses to come down.

Language and Meaning

The story of *Getting Near to Baby* is narrated by the thirteen-year-old protagonist, Willa Jo. Therefore, the perspective and the language used is that of an adolescent. The fear that Willa Jo has after her baby sister dies is obvious in the over-protective attitude she develops for her seven-year-old sister. Her worries are revealed to the reader in her thoughts—she is not about to lose another sister.

Willa Jo is understanding and completely sympathetic to Little Sister who is unable to speak following Baby's death. Willa Jo will do everything in her power to keep any physical harm or further emotional damage—including skepticism about her loss of speech—from touching her. If anyone makes any reference to death—even that of a bug—Little Sister runs from the room. Since Little Sister stopped talking, she has created hand signals so that Willa Jo can interpret what she's saying. Until Little Sister works through her grief and is able to speak again, her only means of communication is through her big sister.

Aunt Patty and Willa Jo have a difficult time understanding each other. In her heavy-handed way, Patty is trying to protect her young nieces. She is heartbroken over her baby niece's death and is devoted to her fragile sister and her grief-stricken young nieces. But she had no children and finds it difficult to use language and tone that is supportive and provides guidance rather than coming across as bossy and domineering.

Structure

Getting Near to Baby is separated into twenty-three small to medium sized chapters. The longest chapter is eighteen pages long and the shortest one is two pages in length. The story begins when Willa Jo and Little Sister are sitting on Aunt Patty's roof. Although Aunt Patty pleads with them to come down, they refuse. The reader doesn't know why the girls are on the roof at this point. The only hint is that Aunt Patty told Willa Jo she was fed up with her the night before. But that comment, while biting, does not seem to warrant the girls' strange behavior.

The structure of the book includes a generous use of flashback sequences. After the first several chapters are devoted to the girls on the roof and the neighbors discussing how to get them down, the book flashes back to three weeks prior when the girls first arrived for their extended visit with their aunt. There is foreshadowing and hints that indicate a tragedy had brought the girls to the aunt's home. Exactly what happened is not made clear until much deeper into the book.

The structure of the book creates intrigue and interest for the reader who is eager to find out what happened to the girls and her mother, why the girls went on the roof and how the sunrise is connected to their story.



Quotes

"A thin rim of orange-red, so deep and strong my heart almost breaks with the fierceness of that color. Moment by moment, there is more of it to see—so hot and bright, I cannot look but at the edges." (Chapter 1, page 3)

"No eating in any room but the kitchen. The dining room was for show. And the rule was no butts on the bed once the bed was made up." (Chapter 4, page 18)

"That sad feeling I have hardens into a mad feeling and I don't think I'll ever get down off this roof. I'll stay here till kingdom comes." (Chapter 5, page 28)

"Mom told us a story of Baby wanting to see some angels about some terribly important matter. She told how the angels let Baby come to them, but then they loved her so much they couldn't bear to send her back." (Chapter 7, page 43)

"You're not old enough to decide what you like." (Chapter 9, page 71)

"I was struck by the beauty of the napes of their necks as they bent over the ants. As sweet a curve as you could ever want to see. It made me miss Baby something fierce." (Chapter 10, page 92)

"I walked Little Sister over to the other side of the yard where, if nothing else, we wouldn't be able to hear Aunt Patty tell us how to be." (Chapter 12, page 95)

"When I looked away, I could see seven burning suns coming up all around me. But I kept needing to look back. It was like my eyes were hungry for the sight of that brilliant light." (Chapter 15, page 132)

"I wasn't unhappy. Just uncertain, in some way. Hoping that it could be true, and yet afraid that I would never find my way, all the way, to this belief." (Chapter 19, page 164)

"Don't be mad, Hob. I couldn't stand being all alone in there. I wanted to be with the three of you, even if we are all crazy as bedbugs." (Chapter 24, page 195)

"I might never have learned to cry. Which means I might never have known really what it is to pray or to laugh right down deep into my belly or to tell your aunt Patty how much I love her." (Chapter 24, page 201)

"'I tried.' Little Sister says. 'I did. But my voice was lost in sadness.'" (Chapter 24, page 209)



Adaptations

Three books for adolescents focus on sibling relationships and also the subject of death. *The Two Princesses of Bamarre* (2001), by the Newberry Honor-winning author Gail Carson Levine, is a fairy tale about two teenage sisters, Addie and Meryl. Addie admires her older sister, whose intent is to free their kingdom of such fantastical creatures as dragons, specters, ogres, and gryphons while she herself fears even the smallest of creatures. However, when Meryl is stricken by the dreaded "Gray Death" (from which their mother died when the girls were very young), Addie must gather up all of her courage and set off on a quest to find the cure for the disease and save her beloved sister.

Gregory Maguire's *Oasis* (1998) tells the story of thirteen-year-old Hand, who must come to terms with his grief over his father's sudden death; his anger toward his mother, Clare, for having deserted them; and the resentment he feels for his sister, Vida, for having hastily forgiven her. As the novel develops, the young boy learns to accept and ultimately forgive both Clare and himself. Poems about death by Emily Dickinson are exquisitely incorporated into the storyline through Hand's uncle, who is dying of AIDS. *Oasis* is delicately shaded with emotion and sensitivity to issues and themes such as death, guilt, desertion, and forgiveness.

Finally, *Girlhearts* (2001) by Newberry Honor-winning novelist Norma Fox Mazer explores the aftermath of the death of fourteen-year-old Sarabeth Silver's mother. The loss of her mother brings about immense changes. With the constant support of her friends, Sarabeth embarks on a journey to trace her roots and ultimately finds healing.

Gentle humor is expertly molded with the intense psychological drama of the main theme of the novel, and *Girlhearts* ultimate strength lies in the intimate recognition, authentic depth and understanding portrayal of adolescents' responses to such situations and the manner in which they finally overcome them.



Topics for Discussion

Why do the personalities of Willa Jo and Aunt Patty clash? What rules does Aunt Patty have that seem unnecessary to Willa Jo? In what ways does she try to control their lives?

Why is Willa Jo so protective of Little Sister? What are some examples? How does her overprotective attitude help her little sister? How might it have delayed her recovery?

Why do the girls only miss their mother? What happened to their father? Why don't they seem concerned about him?

Why is there so much focus on sunrise in the story? What connection does Willa Jo make when she watches the sunrise? What do the sunset and sunrise symbolize?

How does Aunt Patty really feel about her sister and her nieces? What are some examples of Aunt Patty's love and concern for her nieces?

How is Uncle Hob a steadying influence in the story? How does he make the girls feel comfortable about their grief? What shows his capacity for compassion and understanding?

Why is Noreen obsessed with painting after Baby died? Why is it unhealthy for the girls to be around Noreen during the period just following Baby's death? Why is Willa Jo almost relieved when Aunt Patty comes and takes them away?



Essay Topics

1. What is so important about the sunrise and the sunset for Willa Jo and Little Sister?
2. How would *Getting Near to Baby* have been narrated differently if it had been Willa Jo instead of Little Sister who could not speak?
3. Compare the relationship between Willa Jo and Little Sister and that of Aunt Patty and Mother (Noreen). What are the differences and similarities between these relationships?
4. Describe Uncle Hob's character. What is the importance of his role in *Getting Near to Baby*?
5. Define the term foreshadowing and give an example of it in *Getting Near to Baby*.

Describe how and why it is used in the novel and how it ultimately aids in the development of the plot.

6. Choose one of the following characters: Miss Pettibone, Cynthia Wainwright, Liza Fingers, Mrs. Potts, or Milly, and discuss their importance in terms of the development of the plot and other characters in *Getting Near to Baby*.
7. Noreen explains that Willa Jo and Aunt Patty clash because they are "two peas in a pod." Describe the differences and similarities between these characters.



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Aunt Patty is very afraid of what people may be saying about her and her family; however, she also listens to and believes gossip and neighborhood chat.

Discuss both the negative and positive effects that gossip may have.

2. Find out the ways in which water can become tainted and how contaminated water can be avoided.

3. Little Sister has created her own sign language in order to communicate with Willa Jo and those around her. What is the history of the official sign language used by hearing-impaired people. How is sign language taught and ultimately used?

4. Willa Jo and Little Sister attend Bible Camp one day. Describe a memorable or funny experience that you had at a summer camp when you were younger.

5. Willa Jo and Little Sister have been raised by Noreen all by herself. Discuss the positive and negative aspects of a one-parent family.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

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