

# **The Girl Who Fell From the Sky Study Guide**

**The Girl Who Fell From the Sky by Heidi W. Durrow**

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# Plot Summary

NOTE: All citations in this Study Guide refer to the Kindle version of *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, published by Algonquin Books; Reprint edition (January 11, 2011).

*The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* follows protagonist Rachel Morse as she tries to put her tragic past behind her by bottling up her feelings. When she goes to live with her grandmother, Rachel pretends to be a new girl whose mother did not kill herself and her siblings. She remembers her father's promise that he would come and get her.

As the years pass and her father does not come, Rachel gets more and more bogged down by the way she is judged based on the color of her skin as well as the other pressures of becoming a young adult. When the grief and stress of Rachel's life come to a head, Brick, a boy who had seen what happened to her family, is there to tell her more of her family's story. With Brick's help, Rachel begins to feel as if she is a complete person—one with both a past and a future.

When Rachel was eleven years old her mother, Nella, killed herself by jumping from the roof of their nine-story apartment building in Chicago. Nella pushed her son, Robbie, to his death and held her baby daughter Ariel in her arms as she jumped. Rachel pulled away from Nella's push but jumped from the roof when she saw her brother reaching out for her. Rachel was the only one who survived the fall.

Rachel goes to live with her Grandma in Portland after the tragedy. It is in Portland that Rachel first thinks of herself as a black person. Race had never been an issue for her before because she lived with her parents — a black man and a Danish woman — on an Air Force base overseas. Rachel also struggles to find common ground between her old-fashioned grandmother and herself. Rachel dreams of learning and college while her grandmother thinks the best Rachel can do is to get a good husband and a job as a secretary. Their relationship deteriorates further when Rachel's aunt Loretta dies. Rachel's grandmother buries her grief by drinking.

Meanwhile, Brick, a boy who had seen Robbie fall from the roof meets Rachel at a Salvation Army center where Rachel is working for the summer. As a child, Brick had visited Rachel in her hospital room and had gotten to know her father. Rachel's father told Brick about Charles, Rachel's older brother. Rachel had never known about Charles or how he died. Rachel's father asked Brick to tell Rachel the story and explain to her why he could not come back for her.

The story is told through the points of view of a variety of narrators including Rachel, Brick, Roger, Nella, and Laronne. The stories they tell weave together to form a complete picture of Nella and Roger and their lives together. Themes addressed in the novel include the prejudice faced by black and biracial individuals as well as the different ways people handle grief in their lives.



# Part 1, pgs. 2-16

## Summary

In the fall of 1982, Rachel's grandmother takes her from the hospital to live with her at her house in Portland, Oregon. Rachel still feels like her grandmother is a stranger to her and is polite for that reason. She knows only her grandmother likes to garden, has soft hands, and smells like lavender.

Grandma talks to Rachel during the ride home on the bus. Rachel cannot understand her because her Grandma talks into her bad ear. They arrive at the house where Rachel's Pop and Aunt Loretta grew up. Rachel's Grandma comments that they need to do something better with her hair. She does not mention anything about Rachel's mother or what she had done with Rachel's hair. Rachel knows it is because she no longer has a mother. In her narration, Rachel tells the reader that she wants to be beautiful like her Aunt Loretta who smiles all of the time. When Loretta was younger she was the Rose Festival princess.

On her second day at her grandmother's house Rachel wishes she could go back to the time her family lived in Germany. At breakfast when Grandma kids Loretta about getting a "lizard" or husband, Rachel laughs for the first time.

At school, Rachel has a black teacher for the first time. She notices that she and another girl are different from both the blacks and the whites. As the days pass, Rachel's Grandma thinks she is adjusting well. She does not know that there is a girl named Tamika Washington who bullies Rachel because she has light skin. In order to deal with her pain, Rachel imagines she has a bottle inside herself where she puts everything that hurts her feelings.

When Aunt Loretta fixes Rachel's hair for her school pictures, Rachel tries to incorporate her mother, whom she called Mor, into the conversation. Loretta avoids talking about the girl's mother.

Even going to the store is different in Rachel's new life. While on base her family went to the commissary. With her Grandma, Rachel walks with her to the Wonder Bread factory store to buy old bread. She liked life with her parents. She remembers that her father never wanted to move to the United States and wonders why.

## Analysis

The novel opens with a chapter related from the first-person point of view of Rachel Morse, a girl who has recently lost her family and has gone to live with her grandmother and aunt. Rachel is about eleven, so her grasp of what is happening comes from the point of view of a preteen. There is a mention that she has had some sort of accident. Rachel describes how she cannot hear what her grandmother is saying to her during



the bus ride because she “speaks into my bad ear — it is the only lasting injury from the accident” (4). These clues serve to draw the reader in and elicit curiosity as to the events that have led to Rachel’s new living arrangements.

Speech and language become an important aspect in the novel right away as Rachel not only mentally corrects her Grandma’s speech but also because Rachel thinks about the way blacks and whites talk about things differently. Rachel was raised by her black father, who was a tech sergeant in the United States Air Force, and her mother, who was Danish. Rachel has memories of living on Air Force bases overseas until she, her mother, her sister, and her brother moved to Chicago. Because she had grown up in such a drastically different atmosphere, she notes the differences between the speech patterns of her family, her grandmother, and her peers at school. For instance, the kids at school tell her that white kids are not supposed to call the small towel they wash with a washrag. While that was not the word for that item with her parents, it is with her grandmother. Rachel also notices that the black people talk about different things like nappy hair, their “kitchen” (the area where hair tends to get naps), and their ashy knees. When her grandmother speaks in a grammatically incorrect way, Rachel indicates that her grandmother “can’t lose Texas” (3-4) as if she believes her grandmother’s speech patterns exist only in that part of the country.

Although she does not quite know what to do with the information she has received, Rachel does know she does not fit in with the black kids or the white kids. “I learn that black people don’t have blue eyes. I learn that I am black. I have blue eyes. I put all these new facts into the new girl” (10). Grandma blames Rachel’s blue eyes on her great-grandfather, whom Grandma claims had blue eyes. Because Rachel had a mother who was white, the reader wonders if Rachel got her eye color from her mother and why her Grandma does not speak about her mother. It is almost as if Rachel’s grandmother is embarrassed to admit that Rachel is biracial.

The lack of openness and discussion about her mother are among the main things that bother Rachel in her new life. Rachel notices there are no pictures of her mother displayed in the house. She is not encouraged to talk about her mother even though she wants to do so. Rachel does not appear to blame her mother for the tragedy or what happened to her siblings. It is very clear that Rachel’s grandmother does blame Nella for the deaths of Robbie and Ariel.

An important metaphorical object in this opening section of the novel is the blue glass bottle that Rachel imagines that she has inside her. She puts all of the feelings that she believes do not fit with her new life into that bottle.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is it significant that Rachel refers to herself as “the new-girl?” Why do you think she gives herself this designation?



## Discussion Question 2

Rachel mentions that her father had never wanted to be stationed in the United States. Why do you think that was?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the differences between blacks and whites as presented so far in the novel.

## Vocabulary

transitive, patent, clutch, fare, mantel



## Part I, pgs. 17-36

### Summary

Jamie, a boy who lived in the same apartment building in Chicago where Rachel and her family had lived, is the focus of this section of the book. The chapter is not narrated by Jamie but it is told from the viewpoint of a third-person narrator with an emphasis on Jamie's perspective. Jamie saw Robbie when Robbie fell off the roof. He thought Robbie was a bird and went downstairs to see if he could identify what kind of bird he was.

Jamie had memorized questions from a Peterson Field Guide that he had stolen from the library to help him identify birds. When he reached the courtyard, he saw there was no bird, but instead a mother, girl, boy and a baby lying there. The girl had landed on her brother's body. Jamie stayed and watched until the policemen came and began sifting through the trash in the courtyard.

The next section is narrated by a third-person narrator focusing on the point of view of Laronne, Nella's employer. Laronne had pretended to be related to Nella in order to get inside the apartment after the tragedy. Nella had been a good employee but she had not shown up for work on Tuesday. Laronne had noticed the young immigrant had been distracted because she had no money for her children to visit an amusement park before they went back to school even though Nella had promised the trip. Laronne had loaned Nella fifty dollars for the kids to have a day of fun.

Nella had smiled and thanked Laronne for the money. She said in broken English that her husband, Roger, had told her it would be hard in America.

Laronne criticized white women for being a breed that only wanted love when she learned from Nella that she had left her husband for a contractor whom she had met at an AA meeting. Two weeks after she had met Nella, Laronne found her crying in the bathroom. She was worried she had made a terrible mistake.

On the day that Nella had missed work, a man with bright orange hair had come to the library to bring her flowers. When Laronne told the man she could not help him and threatened to call security, he walked out angrily. Laronne could not believe Nella had left her husband for a man like that.

In Nella's apartment, Laronne could see the courtyard through the window. She could see people looking up and tracing the paths the family must have taken when they fell. Inside a drawer, Laronne found a note clipped together with fifty dollars. The note was from Rachel thanking Laronne for the money for the amusement park. Laronne pulled a coffee can from the trash and cut a hole in the top before putting the fifty dollars in the can. She decided the money she collected in the can would be for Rachel, the only one to survive the fall.



Rachel narrates the next chapter. Loretta, her aunt, has begun playing tennis with a man named Drew. Rachel likes Drew because he makes Loretta happy.

In class, Anthony Miller bumps the back of Rachel's chair. She tries to make him believe he is not bothering her but surprises herself when her voice gets shaky with crying. The only time she really cries is when she has had a bad dream, usually about Robbie. When Aunt Loretta comes to check on Rachel when she screams in the night, Loretta tells Rachel she is safe with them. Rachel thinks that she is really waiting for her father to come back for her.

Rachel thinks about the differences between her Grandma and Aunt Loretta. She thinks Aunt Loretta has class because she wants to learn things and she talks properly. Her Grandma does not seem to be able to read and seems resentful of Rachel because Rachel is so different from her. Loretta protects Rachel from Grandma's comments until Grandma reminds Loretta that she was also like Rachel when she ran off with Nathan, Loretta's ex-husband. Loretta does not argue with her mother; she just tells her that she is right.

## Analysis

The different voices of the narrators included in this novel are important because they each have a different aspect of the story to tell that will help the reader piece together exactly what happened. Jamie, the neighbor who saw Robbie fall and thought he was a bird, is an important character in the novel. He was the first one who saw what happened to Rachel and her family. He describes it through the eyes of a child.

The author adds more detail to what life was like for Nella and her children before the accident through Laronne's narrative. Nella had left her husband for a white man whom she had met at an AA meeting. Laronne believed Nella was moved by the promise of a new love when her old love had gotten stale. Nella was barely making ends meet in her new apartment in Chicago. As she told Laronne, "Roger always said it would be hard. America was not what I thought it was" (23). It appears as though Nella is already regretting her decision to move to America with her new boyfriend and children.

Meanwhile, as Rachel and her Grandma get to know one another more and more, there is a divide felt between them. Rachel dedicates herself to school and reads books for fun while her grandmother never found any use for books. Rachel wonders if her grandmother even knows how to read. When she finds herself thinking bad thoughts about her grandmother, Rachel thinks of her grandmother as a little girl in order to stop these thoughts.

The author explores imagery of birds and flying in the description of Rachel and her family's fall from the roof of the apartment building. First, Jamie mistook the falling Robbie for a bird. The author employs several metaphors and similes to illustrate this imagery. When he saw Robbie in the courtyard, his arm is described as being "folded like a wing beneath him" (20). The boy lay "as if he had fallen from a large, comfortable





nest” (20). In the family’s apartment, the people on the ground appeared to Laronne to be tracing “flight patterns of a family that fell from the sky” (25).

Durrow also uses a good deal of simile and metaphor as she develops her characters. For instance she uses simile to say Rachel’s body was a “bloody, helpless pillow” (19). A metaphor is used when Loretta is described as being “right now in her eyes it’s as if all she is is a flame” (36), when Grandma angers Loretta with something she says. Rachel also describes how her Grandma’s voice “makes the sounds go capital” (27) when she wants to get her point across. When the teacher hits her ruler on the desk of the boy behind Rachel, Rachel feels it “pulse red” in her bad ear.

Differences between blacks and whites are highlighted along with Rachel’s feeling that she does not fit in; this feeling intensifies as Rachel begins to sense that some of the girls in her class believe she is dangerous. For instance, Rachel has heard the girls in her class talk about Rachel’s friend Tracy, who is white. When they speak of Tracy as a white girl Rachel gets the feeling that they believe white is a “dangerous thing to be” (28). Even more confusing to Rachel is the fact that her Grandma encouraged both Rachel’s father and Loretta to know what Rachel calls “white things” (28), such as playing the piano instead of the harmonica.

Rachel also touches on the differences between generations as she points out how different she and her Grandma, and even her Grandma and Loretta are. Rachel suspects there is a story behind her grandmother’s belief that things might have been different for her if she had been allowed to go to private school as a child in Texas. As it is, she is badly educated. Loretta, on the other hand, is educated and has a good job but is criticized by her mother because Loretta has made mistakes, particularly in her love life. Rachel also realizes that Grandma’s hopes for Loretta end with a job, a house, and children. Rachel has the feeling that Loretta wants more for herself. Rachel knows that she wants more for herself.

## Discussion Question 1

Is Rachel more like her Grandma or Aunt Loretta? Discuss your answer and give details.

## Discussion Question 2

How do activities like golf and playing the piano become classified as “white” or “black”? What is even meant by these designations?

## Discussion Question 3

How does the author use the different narrators to tell the story? How does one person’s story compliment the others?

## Vocabulary

topography, cordoned, detector, silhouettes, listless



## Part I, pgs. 37-50

### Summary

This section begins with narration from the point of view of Jamie. Jamie visited the shire set up for the family in the apartment courtyard. He listened to the things that he people said about the family when the people with the television cameras interviewed them. Between looking between the couch cushions and emptying the change out of his mother's wallet, Jamie put \$5.83 in the collection can for the family. He wondered how he could ever have thought that the boy was a bird.

Back in the apartment, Jamie was surprised when his mother called him to her on the couch. He thought it was because she had not had a boyfriend to the apartment in several days that she needed affection. He took the love she offered. Jamie was about to tell her what he had seen when a man called from the bedroom. It was then that Jamie saw the track marks on his mother's arm. He could not believe he had seen wrong again.

When Jamie went back downstairs, there was a man with orange hair in the stairway. He was rocking back and forth. A reporter near the shrine asked Jamie about the family. He told her that he saw a man on the roof push them. He told the lady reporter that his name was Brick. The next day he stole a copy of the paper from a newsstand. He liked seeing his new name in print.

The narrative next switches to follow Laronne's perspective. Laronne knew the people who read the papers still wanted to know the story of what had happened to Nella. They, and Laronne, wanted to know when Nella had "turned so dangerous" (46). Laronne tells the reporters that Nella was a mother who loved her children and was loved by her children. Laronne suggested they needed to ask where Nella's boyfriend had been that day and if he had been on the roof with the family.

### Analysis

The story continues to develop as both Jamie, who will now be known as Brick, and Laronne have suggested that perhaps Nella and her family were pushed from the roof. Laronne could not believe that Nella would have hurt her children willingly. She wanted to understand what might have happened.

The man with the orange hair becomes a person of interest for both Laronne and Brick. Brick saw the man with the orange hair in the stairwell before he went outside where the reporter talked to him. It was perhaps because that man was the last thing he had seen that he suggested that there had been a man who had pushed Nella and her family.

Laronne, on the other hand, was already biased against Nella's boyfriend. She saw how unhappy Nella was and believed it was the boyfriend's fault. She knew the boyfriend did



not have a job and had thought until she saw him for the first time that he was a black man.

Also significant to remember is Nella's comment to Laronne that she would do anything to see that her children were protected. Nella and Laronne had been talking about children when Laronne said: "You realize you'd do anything for them. Anything for them to be okay" (47). Nella's answer "Yes ... I will" (47), indicates that she plans (in the future) to do what she has to do to take care of her children.

The author begins to explore the themes of identity and perception through the character of Jamie in this section of the novel. Jamie had indicated in the previous section that he did not like having his father's name. He wanted a name that had "a different history" (18). When Jamie chose a name for himself he picked the name Brick because he thought of it as a strong name. He wanted to be a boy who would be able to properly interpret what he sees. Because he had thought Robbie was a bird when he saw the boy falling, Brick was frustrated with his inability to properly interpret what he saw. Later, when he was greeted by his mother in a loving fashion for the first time in weeks, Brick thought things might be changing. He was disappointed when he heard a man calling his mother from the bedroom. It was at this point that he noticed the needle marks on his mother's arm and realized that nothing had changed. Brick believed he could take charge of himself and his circumstances with a new name.

## Discussion Question 1

What does it mean that Brick and Laronne both suggested that there was a man who was responsible for what happened to Nella and her children?

## Discussion Question 2

Why did Brick believe his life would be better simply if he learned to listen? What mistakes did he think he had made before by not listening?

## Discussion Question 3

Why did Laronne think that Nella would not have hurt her children?

## Vocabulary

acquire, secrete, portrait, scraggily, shrine



## Part I, pgs. 51-66

### Summary

Rachel again appears as the narrator in this chapter. She learns that Anthony Miller, a boy in her class, is part Indian when he recognizes the Ojibway as his mother's tribe. The other children laugh at Anthony but he does not seem to care. He laughs along with them. Rachel is Anthony's girlfriend in secret. He kisses her and makes her feel like a princess.

Rachel also details in this section a visit by Aunt Loretta's friend Helen. Rachel notices a difference in the way Loretta treats Helen—almost as if she is entertaining a queen. She hears Loretta say she divorced Nathan because he was messing around, both with women and men. When Rachel reenters the room, she mentions in conversation that her mother was from Denmark. The conversation turns, and Helen comments that she figured a white woman would get Roger because he was so attractive. Rachel notices Loretta seems sad after the visit but tells Rachel nothing is wrong.

Rachel includes in her narration a hodgepodge of ways she both tried to fit into her new lifestyle while still remembering her roots. She used her scissors to cut her hair because she did not want it to be nappy any more. While they were in church during the Christmas holidays, Rachel sang the Danish translations of the songs because she did not want to forget the words her mother had taught her. She continued to try to come to terms with the emphasis placed on race in her new environment. Even though the New Miss America was said to be black, Rachel thought she did not look black. She has also come to accept that white people do not think black women are pretty. Also significant to Rachel during her first Christmas at her grandmother's is that the Christmas tree is decorated with angels that all have blue eyes and blonde hair. That night when she dreams, Rachel sees Mor, Robbie, and Ariel dressed as angels. They sing and dance around the tree together. Rachel also begins to realize that the things she learns in Black History in school are related to her and her life.

The next chapter is narrated from the point of view of Brick. Brick went to visit Rachel in the hospital after her accident. There was a man in a military uniform in her room. The man told Brick he had been playing for his daughter and pulled out his harmonica. He showed Brick how to play the instrument. Brick was surprised when the girl's eyes opened when he played the first note. Her father comforted Brick by telling him it was okay. Then the father began crying.

The next day the man taught Brick a song on the harmonica. During this visit the man was drinking from a flask in his uniform. The next day the man asked if Brick and Rachel were friends. He asked Brick if he had ever been in love. "It's a bitch. What you'll do. What you'll need" (66), the man told Brick.



## Analysis

Rachel is beginning to grow up in this section of the novel. There is a boy in her class that meets with her to kiss her. The first time they kiss Rachel believes Anthony “makes me a princess” (52). The next times she compares the feeling she gets with Anthony to the light feeling she had when “Mor would hold me in her arms as we swam” (57-58). Notice that Rachel compares this happy feeling to a time in her life with her mother. It is significant that this connection be made because Rachel did feel happy with her mother and misses her.

The reader will recall in a previous section when Rachel indicated that she was waiting for her father to come get her and take her home. According to the sections narrated from Brick’s point of view, Rachel’s father was there for her after she was first hurt. The mystery surrounding Roger and why he abandoned his daughter deepens when it is considered that no one has apparently told Rachel that her father did visit her in the hospital.

Note also the way that Rachel’s father falls apart as he spends time with his daughter. The first time he cries, his pain is real. It is probably his first day there with Rachel because Brick describes his uniform as looking neat. In the days that follow, the uniform becomes dirty and smelly. Rachel’s father is also drinking what can only be assumed to be alcohol from a flask.

An important symbol in this section is the harmonica that Rachel’s father teaches Brick how to play. It was noted in an earlier section that Roger had wanted to play the harmonica even though it was associated with black people. The harmonica will appear again in the course of the novel.

Rachel is a girl who is very observant of the world around her. She talks about her “middle layers” that she tries to keep hidden from others. When she notices Loretta’s sadness after talking to her old friend Helen, Rachel wonders if her aunt does not have “middle layers” of hurt that she tries to keep hidden as well.

As Rachel matures, she continues to make new inferences about the differences between white people and black people. One important thing that happens is that a black woman is crowned Miss America. Rachel comments, however “She doesn’t look black to me” (58). She describes the woman as having light skin and blue eyes. Although she admits that there are some exceptions, Rachel believes that black women are not as pretty as white women.

During the Christmas holiday an irony that strikes Rachel is that all of the angels with which her grandmother decorates her tree are white with blonde hair and blue eyes. When Rachel commented that the angels did not look like they did, her Grandma’s only response was “Angels ain’t people” (60).

Rachel continues to struggle with the way her grandmother talks. When she overhears Grandma talking about how Rachel’s developing breasts make her look “too growed up”



(53), Rachel knows that her grandmother means “grown up, I say inside, but there are special rules for how she says things since she’s from down South. I want to correct her but don’t” (53). Rachel accepts the way her grandmother speaks because she believes that is how people from the south speak. She also notes that certain characteristics in people give away the fact they have black heritage. Anthony Miller, for instance tells his classmates that he has Indian in his blood. Rachel can tell from his nose and lips that he is also black. As she says: “a broad nose and thick lips, and those are the black things in a person” (52).

## Discussion Question 1

What do you think Rachel’s father meant when he said to Brick of love: “It’s a bitch. What you’ll do. What you’ll need” (66)?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss Loretta’s visit with her friend Helen. Why do you think Loretta seems sad after the visit?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss Rachel’s idea that black women are not pretty. Do you think this is true? Why is it significant to Rachel that the black woman who won Miss America is a light-skinned black?

## Vocabulary

bejeweled, chalices, accusation, valuable, gallery



## Part I, pgs. 67-82

### Summary

Rachel narrates the first chapter in this section. On race day before the end of school Rachel wins the race. Instead of being accepted and congratulated by Carmen LaGuardia, the class president, when she puts the medal around her neck, Carmen makes fun of Rachel.

The next section is told from Roger's point of view. Roger describes how he and Nella first met in a joint when Roger was stationed at Ramstein Air Force Base. When he learned that Nella was from Denmark, he commented that was from where the Hans Christian Anderson fairy tales had come. Nella told him she was there only to learn English and planned to go back to Denmark and go to school. They made love that night.

Rachel narrates the next section. Drew and Aunt Loretta take her to see the Multnomah Falls. A comment is made about how Grandma would not come to see the falls. Aunt Loretta cries and Rachel thinks she hears her say "I want to be that girl again" (76). Later over hot chocolate they laugh about the woman who had complimented Rachel on her blue eyes and then looked at Loretta and Drew as if they had stolen her.

After the day at the falls, Loretta begins painting again. Grandma criticizes her and says that she will not be able to get a husband if she has paint under her nails. While Loretta paints a portrait of Rachel, they talk about Rachel's father. Loretta tells Rachel she did not really notice if Roger seemed more interested in light-skinned girls than dark-skinned ones. Rachel asks if her father will ever come to get her. Loretta takes the opportunity to tell Rachel that he did visit her in the hospital right after the accident. She tries to explain to Rachel that they do not know if he will come back or when he will come back.

### Analysis

In this section there is evidence that Rachel is beginning to grow much closer to her Aunt Loretta than to her Grandma. She begins going to Loretta for advice about the way that the other black girls treat her. "Black girls don't seem to like me. Maybe there is something dangerous about me" (68), Rachel thinks to herself near the end of her first year in school. When she asks her aunt, Loretta says there is nothing dangerous about Rachel and that the other children are just jealous because she is a good student.

Meanwhile, Rachel has fantasies of being accepted by the other students in her school. She imagines after she wins the school race that Carmen LaGuardia, the girl who is light-skinned like Rachel, will admire her. Instead Carmen only makes fun of her. Rachel had hoped the two could connect because they look like each other. Rachel also describes the feeling of being lonely even when a person is with people like her. She





uses an example of her father who felt lonely because there was no one who could cut his hair, which consisted of tight curls, correctly. “He never told us he was black. He never told us that we were” (80), Rachel remembers of her father. To him, they were people and not colors.

Loretta’s regrets about the way her life has turned out become apparent in this section as well. Instead of getting lost in mourning the part of her life that is behind her, Loretta begins bettering herself in the present. She begins painting and making things. Rachel senses about Loretta that she “wishes she had thought about the long run, had studied more, gotten a better job and a husband different than Uncle Nathan” (68). Because she sees how Loretta’s mistakes have affected her life, Rachel tells herself that she will try her best to prepare for what she calls the “long run” (68). She gets an image of herself running out of the town in which she lives and escaping to a different place.

In the section narrated from Roger’s point of view, the reader gains some information about how Roger and Nella met. Nella had been visiting near the Air Force base where Roger was stationed to learn English. She planned on going back home to go to school. Roger was impressed that she was from Denmark. The author makes a literary allusion here with Roger’s comment that Denmark was the place where Hans Christian Anderson had lived. The author introduces their new relationship with a hopeful tone as Roger thinks of the fairy tales and the way “wishes came true” (74) in those stories. The idea of wishes coming true will resurface in the novel.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the significance of the Hans Christian Anderson fairy tales that Roger mentions to Nella.

## Discussion Question 2

What does Loretta do to help to better herself? How does her mother react to these changes in her daughter?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the way Rachel thought the white woman who looked at Loretta, Drew and Rachel strangely should have recognized they were a family even though they looked different. How is her belief related to the fact that her father never told Rachel that they were black?

## Vocabulary

quizzically, seduced, underestimate, hypnotized, elusive, extinction



## Part I, pgs. 83-102

### Summary

The first chapter in this section is narrated from Brick's point of view. He tells how he went to the hospital the next day and played the song again with only two notes wrong. Rachel's father told him that he was a mapmaker in the armed forces. They played together as if they were bombing an enemy. When they finished, the man suggested they play hide and seek. The man grabbed Brick around the waist and called him Charles. He promised that he did try to find Charles and begins to cry again asking the boy if he knew he had tried to find him. Even though he did not know what the man was talking about, Brick replied "I know" (85).

The following day the Pigeon Man accosted Brick in the courtyard of the apartments. He asked what the boy had told the police. The Pigeon Man said the police had let all his birds go and had smashed his cages. It was the first time that Brick thought about the possible backlash from the story he had created.

The next chapter switches to focus on Roger's point of view. When Brick came to the hospital room it was just after he had his encounter with the Pigeon Man. Brick told Roger he did not see a man on the roof. He showed Roger the newspaper article but Roger shoved it back angrily and said he did not want to read it. He said he did not care who did it, only that his girl got better and that he was able to protect her from everything, including himself.

It was only a short time after Nella and Roger were married that their first son, Charles, was born. The boy was physically perfect but was weak and sick. Roger was soon frustrated with him and began beating the boy when his nose bled.

He remembered a party where he had gotten drunk and danced with Nella's sister. When Roger kissed Nella's sister, Nella called her sister a whore. Roger hit Nella. Nella and her sister left together. At home Roger asked his son if he thought Nella would come back to him. Roger and Charles fell asleep on the couch together. The narrator indicates that Roger was still holding a burning cigarette. He woke because the house was on fire. He could not find Charles. As he told the story, he screamed "no" just as he had that night when the house was destroyed by flames.

In Rachel's hospital room, the nurse who heard Roger's scream told Roger he needed to leave. Roger gave Brick his harmonica before he left. He asked Brick to tell Rachel the story because he knew she would want to know.

In the next chapter narrated by Rachel, she indicates that her grandmother wanted her in the church choir because she thought it would keep Rachel off the streets; however, Rachel does not feel like herself in the clothes she wears to church. Another reason that



Rachel is uncomfortable in church is because she cannot sing the way her Grandma and the other members of the choir can sing.

Rachel is at church when Loretta trips on the tennis court and cuts her face on a piece of glass. Grandma will not let Rachel go to the hospital but Drew sneaks her in for a visit. Loretta does have a scar but Grandma has told Rachel that the medicine the doctors gave Loretta have made her even sicker. Rachel has to put on a special gown, booties and mask to go in Loretta's room. Rachel is glad that Loretta is asleep because she cries and is unable to smile like she wanted to. It is on the same day that Rachel goes to visit her aunt that Loretta dies.

## Analysis

Rachel suffers more losses, first when her Aunt Loretta moves in with Drew, and then when she dies after having a reaction to medicine she was given following an accident. Loretta had been the adult to which Rachel most closely connected. Rachel is now alone with her grandmother.

Meanwhile, her grandmother makes Rachel begin going to church and singing in the choir because there has been more trouble in their neighborhood. Rachel has heard that gangs are moving in. Shootings are becoming common.

Brick's importance in the novel becomes clear with Roger telling Brick the story about Charles. He made Brick promise to tell Rachel the story because he thought it would help her to understand what happened to her family. Even though Roger was still drinking, it is obvious he regretted the things he had done while he was drunk in the past. He was not interested in finding out who hurt his family or if there was even someone else up on the roof with them. "Maybe you did it. Maybe I did it. Maybe I was the man" (90), Roger said to Brick when Brick showed him the newspaper article. Brick was too young to understand that Roger did not mean he was physically responsible for pushing his family from the roof but instead committed the crime through what he did or did not do.

Brick did begin thinking more about the lie he told the reporter and the way it might affect other people's lives when the Pigeon Man found him and was angry because the police had abused him and let his pigeons go because of what Brick had said. It is at this point that Brick realized the story he made up could hurt people whom he had never intended to hurt.

## Discussion Question 1

How is the story of Charles related to Rachel's story? Why has she never been told about Charles before?



## Discussion Question 2

How is Rachel's life affected by her aunt's death?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Roger got so angry with Brick when Brick handed him the newspaper article about Rachel's accident?

## Vocabulary

classified, consulted, audibly, jostling, interludes, pickaninny, undefinable



## Part I, pgs. 103-122

### Summary

The first chapter in this section is told from Laronne's point of view. She cleaned the apartment and packed up Nella's and her children's things in boxes. As she was cleaning, she found some journals in Nella's handwriting. There were 29 journals, with the first one dated with the entry of Nella's first sober day.

Laronne heard a child practicing a harmonica. When she located him she asked if he knew Nella and her family. He said he did not and ran for his apartment. Before he closed his door, Nella asked his name. She recognized him as the boy who had talked to the reporter about a man being up on the roof. He was hesitant to answer her questions so she wrote down her address and phone number, and offered to make him food.

Laronne went to visit Rachel in the hospital and took her two boxes of her things. The nurses said Rachel's grandmother was coming to get her and fly her home as soon as she was strong enough. She mentioned the father was there but he had left. The nurse encouraged Laronne to drop by when the girl's grandmother came. Laronne did not think she had anything to tell the grandmother. She hoped Nella's journals would supply her with more answers than questions. Before she left, Laronne put the newspaper article about the fall in one of Rachel's boxes. She hoped it would give the girl back her mother.

The next section is a journal entry written by Nella. Nella writes that her children are unhappy because she will not let them go play in the park while she is at work. She does not think it is safe. She has forgotten Charles's birthday but still misses him. She thinks Robbie is like Charles because he has the same bad dreams Charlie once did. She writes also that coming to America was a mistake and that she believes Doug is drinking again.

In the next chapter, Rachel narrates that Drew still visits occasionally even though Loretta is gone. When she cooks for Drew, Grandma teaches Rachel how to cook so she can prepare meals for her husband someday. Since Loretta died Grandma has stopped gardening. She also does not watch Rachel as closely as she once did. On this particular visit, Drew has brought his fifteen-year-old daughter with him. Rachel notices right away that she and Lakeisha are two very different people. Her grandmother, however, likes Lakeisha.

After dinner Drew gives Rachel a present. There are two books. One is the book *Black Skin, White Masks*, a gift from Drew. The second is a book that Drew said he found in Loretta's things, a book of fairy tales by Hans Christian Anderson. She sees her father's name written in his handwriting in the book.



In Rachel's room, Lakeisha asks Rachel what her mother looked like. Rachel has many things she wants to say about her mother but only comments that her mother was light-skinned. Rachel is relieved when her grandmother finally calls the girls back to the table. While they are eating cobbler, Drew points out a bottle of sherry and tells Grandma that she needs to be careful with it.

When Drew talks about how he misses Loretta, Grandma says it has just been too much for her. She misses Loretta and Charles. When she mentions Charles, Rachel asks her if she means Robbie. Grandma says she knows what she is talking about and she misses Charles, Robbie, and the baby.

The subject changes and Lakeisha offers to sing her church solo for Grandma. Rachel notices how Grandma likes the way Lakeisha sings the gospel. They connect over the song. Although Rachel is considered to be black, she cannot make the gospel sound like Lakeisha makes it sound.

After Lakeisha and Drew go home, Rachel examines the fairy tale book Drew had given her. On the title page there is a note from Mor to Pop. It is dated the year that Rachel was born.

## Analysis

The stark contrasts between Lakeisha and Rachel and the way Rachel's grandmother warms to Lakeisha help to illustrate the differences between Rachel and her Grandma. Rachel sees right away that she and Lakeisha are nothing alike. Lakeisha is not studious, a trait Rachel considers her best but one her grandmother does not appreciate. Lakeisha is also loud, a characteristic that Rachel does not like.

Rachel also sees in Lakeisha things that her grandmother does not like but seems willing to overlook in Lakeisha. Because Lakeisha is polite, Grandma comes to the conclusion that she is a good girl. When Lakeisha sings for Grandma, and Grandma connects with her, she has decided for sure that Lakeisha is an ideal girl. Lakeisha sings in a way that Rachel cannot. She recognizes that even though Lakeisha wears her hair in braids, a style her grandmother despises, that Grandma sees her reflection in Lakeisha. Rachel senses that her grandmother sees none of herself in Rachel.

Notice also the emphasis on being bad. For instance, when Lakeisha sees the red lipstick Rachel stole from her aunt's room Lakeisha says of Rachel, "Ooo, you nasty. Your Grandma let you wear this?" (115). Grandma also has taken up the bad habit of drinking. Drew tells her "Miss Doris, you bad. You bad" (118), when he sees how she has been spending more time drinking sherry.

The books that appear in this section, specifically the book of fairy tales by Hans Christian Anderson, are significant objects. When Rachel finally gets a chance to study the book she sees that it was a gift from her mother to her father in the year that she was born. Drew gives it to Rachel because he says that it was found among Loretta's things. The real story behind this book will come out later.



Laronne is the only character thus far who seems interested in helping Rachel to remember the good things about her mother. She is the one who questioned the accident and wanted to find out for sure what happened. While cleaning Nella's apartment, Laronne found journals that she hoped will answer some questions about what happened to the woman. She left the newspaper article about the accident in a box of Rachel's things. She saw it as her way of giving "a mother back to her girl" (108). Remember the article not only includes Brick's comment that there was a man who pushed the family off the roof but also all of the acquaintances who said positive things about Nella.

As much as Rachel wants to talk about her mother and not forget her, it is interesting that when Lakeisha asks about her, Rachel does not really say much. In fact, all she has to say to Lakeisha about her mother was that she was light-skinned. It is almost as if Rachel does not trust Lakeisha with her memories of her mother and worries what Lakeisha might have to say about Rachel's mother being white.

The author continues to employ similes and metaphors as a means to illustrate characters, settings, and action throughout this section of the novel. The description of the way that Laronne cleaned Nella's apartment includes both of these literary techniques. "She cleaned as if it were her religion. When she was done, she was a white clean scent" (104). This simile emphasizes how methodical and thorough Laronne was about the process of cleaning. A metaphor calls Laronne "a white clean scent" after she finished cleaning.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss Rachel's impression of Lakeisha. Does she relate to her? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

When Drew gives Rachel the book *Black Skin, White Masks*, he mentions that Lakeisha had begun reading the book. What does his comment about Lakeisha and the book seem to say about Lakeisha and his relationship with her?

## Discussion Question 3

Laronne hoped that by giving Rachel the newspaper article about their accident she was somehow giving Rachel back her mother. What do you think Laronne means by this?

## Vocabulary

haphazardly, discern, vigil, fidgeted, bassinet



## Part I, pgs. 123-140

### Summary

In a journal entry, Nella writes how confused she was when a woman asked her if her children's father was black. Nella had never thought about that before. She had felt the same way when she told Roger she was pregnant. He had said they could not get married because she was white and he was black. She notes the woman who asked about Roger's race was rude and that she did not have to answer her. Nella wondered if it was because of race that Roger had not wanted to come to America.

In the next section narrated by Rachel, Lakeisha and Rachel watch the Starlight Holiday Parade until Lakeisha says she is bored and hungry. They find Drew and he says they will eat with the people who live at the shelter. Lakeisha says she does not want to eat with the bums but her father tells her to have some manners.

Rachel's grandmother makes Rachel stay home with Lakeisha while she and Drew go to visit Loretta's grave. Lakeisha begins looking through Grandma's things, looking for birth control or sex toys, like she found at her mother's house. In the basement, Rachel sees a box with her name on it. Inside are the things she had on the day of the accident. She also sees the newspaper article. When her grandmother gets home Rachel wants to ask her about the article but her grandmother empties a bottle of "contribution," a name for the sherry Miss Verle brings her, and is in bed by eight.

Rachel remembers her mother taking them to the roof and telling them about things from her childhood. On the last day on the roof, Nella had decided that she could no longer watch her children want the things she could not give them.

Rachel wonders if it would have made a difference if she had told someone there was a man on the roof that day.

In a journal entry by Nella, Nella calls herself stupid because she has realized that Doug has been drinking again. He is tired of her children. She is tired of working all the time and taking care of the children. Doug had said he would help but has not done so. She asks herself again if she made a mistake coming to America.

In the next section, narrated from the point of view of Brick, Brick thought that Laronne's son was a hero because of his scar. Brick thought he himself was a coward because he was too scared to go back to the hospital and too scared even to go home after a police officer had paid them a visit. The officer had wanted to know what Brick knew about the accident. Brick's mother, who was high on drugs, told them Brick was not at home. He was there, but he was hiding under the bed. Since that night Brick had been staying at Laronne's apartment.

One night the police knocked on Laronne's door. Brick went to the bathroom but heard the officers asking Laronne if she knew anything about the accident. She said they





should talk to Brick, and got him from the bathroom. After having talked to Roger in the hospital, Brick had realized he was no longer sure who was to blame. When the police began asking questions, however, Brick found himself describing the man with the orange hair he had seen in the stairwell. Laronne said the boy's description sounded like the boyfriend.

In the next chapter of this section the narration comes from Laronne's point of view. She went to the hospital to find Rachel's grandmother there. When Laronne asked if she wanted her to bring Nella's things the grandmother told her to throw them away. She said the title of mother "don't describe what that woman was" (140).

## Analysis

The theme of racial prejudice is explored in Nella's journal entry in the beginning of this section. Nella writes of becoming more and more confused and angered by the emphasis placed on race in America. Where she lived in Europe there was not as much emphasis placed on race or the mixing of races. She thought of Roger as being funny and handsome. She never thought of him as only being a product of his race. She feels animosity from people who ask if the father of her children is black. She wonders if this hostility between races is part of the reason why Roger did not want to return to the United States after they were married.

Nella also seems frustrated with her new boyfriend Doug who promised he would help but instead takes back up drinking with his friends once they reach America. He leaves her alone to earn a living and take care of the children. In a memory of her mother, Rachel remembers how her mother liked math. Rachel believes that her mother had boiled her existence, and the existence of her children down to a math problem: "she had calculated the difference between what we couldn't have and her ability to watch us want. The difference between her pain and ours, she decided, measured nine stories high" (130).

The author develops suspense through foreshadowing in this section when Rachel recalls: "That day there was a man" (130). This memory by Rachel backs up Brick's claim that there was a man on the roof even though Brick believed he had made up the story. She does not include who the man was or what role he played in the accident. She does not even indicate if the man was physically on the roof with them. She just indicates that there was one. Because Rachel believes if she had told anyone about the man her mother would not have been completely to blame, it is clear that Rachel believes this man held some pivotal role in what happened to her family.

Meanwhile, Brick has away from home to try to find Rachel and repeat to her the story that her father told Brick to tell her. He tried to run away from the police by going to Laronne's house. Even though he told Rachel's father he had lied about the man he saw on the roof, Brick was unable to bring himself to tell the police the truth. He made up a description of the man on the roof based on the memory he had of Nella's



boyfriend. This description strengthened Laronne's belief that it was Doug who was somehow responsible physically for the death of Nella and her children.

Notice also in this section that while Rachel's grandmother is so charmed by Lakeisha, Drew wishes his daughter were more like Rachel. Lakeisha is spoiled and complains when her father makes the girls eat with the men who live in the rehabilitation center where he works. She insists on calling the men "bums" (126) and holds her nose while standing in line to get food.

## Discussion Question 1

What does it mean when Rachel remembers that there was a man on the day of the accident? How does the wording shape the meaning of her statement?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Doris have such a bad attitude toward Nella? Why is she not willing to even recognize Nella as Rachel's mother?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss Drew's attitude toward his daughter. What do you sense about their relationship?

## Vocabulary

kiosk, conceited, transfixed, heroic, flicks



## Part I, pgs. 141-157

### Summary

It is from Brick's point of view that the first chapter in this section is narrated. Two nights after his encounter with the police at Laronne's, Brick was on a bus headed to Kansas City. He planned to go to the girl who had survived the accident and tell her the story her father had told him to tell her.

He was sleeping in an old boxing gym when he had a nightmare that made him cry out. A woman and man who were sleeping there as well were awakened by his scream. The man threatened to make Brick pay them rent for the space but when they learned he could play the harmonica they decided he could help them make money. They called him a "monkey" and refer to him as "it" (144). They gave Brick a pill to help him sleep. The woman, who called herself Lisa, cuddled him until he went to sleep.

In the next section Rachel narrates that Grandma looks mad all the time and has let her garden die. She sits on her porch at night and talks about pride after she has drunk Miss Verle's sherry. Her comments are directed to the men on the streets who sell drugs.

Rachel has begun actively researching her black heritage. The library has four shelves of black literature books. Rachel has also read the book that Drew gave her but does not like the way black people are referred to as "men of color" and "negros" (148). She does not even agree with Jesse Jackson's insistence on calling blacks African-Americans since so many of these blacks have never even been to Africa.

Rachel's grandmother encourages her to study typing so she can get a job as a secretary. Rachel wants more to her life than being a secretary and a wife. She recognizes that her grandmother's dreams for her are based on her growing up years living in Texas. She thinks about how much her grandmother and her mother are alike. She wondered what dreams Mor had for herself.

Rachel and her grandmother are more at odds now that her grandmother believes that Rachel is talking back, wearing shirts too tight and showing too much interest in boys. Rachel sees her actions differently. She has been dating a basketball player named John Bailey. He believed she was the prettiest girl in the Jack and Jill. When she goes to John's house after school, she tells her grandmother she has been at the library. Her grandmother warns her not to "do what your mama did" (150). Rachel accuses her grandmother of knowing only about the parts of her mother that were bad. When Grandma tells Rachel her mother was crazy, Rachel yells at her that she is lying and that the newspaper article proves that her mother was not all at fault.



Rachel goes back in time and remembers how her mother had not seemed right for about a week. Mor and Doug had a fight and Mor was missing a tooth because of that fight.

Back with her grandmother, Rachel tells her that she did not know what happened. She adds there was a man there.

The next section is narrated from Laronne's point of view. She visited the roof of the apartment after she had read many of Nella's journals. In the last two journals Nella's voice had become a plea. She spoke of doing things to hurt her children and being angry with herself for saying them.

Laronne remembers how upset Nella had been when Nella had referred to her children as "jigaboos" (154), and Laronne had told her what the reference meant. Laronne remembered how hurt she had been the first time she had been called that derogatory word as well as a "nigger" (155). Nella was devastated, hoping that her children did not know what the word meant.

## Analysis

Hurtful terms for blacks and those who are biracial are brought to the reader's attention in the stories of Brick, Nella, Rachel, and Laronne. In Brick's story it is the junkies who called Brick by derogatory names. The man referred to Brick as an "it" (144), indicating he is not even worthy of a gender, much less a name. They both called Brick a "monkey" (144) as if he were an animal instead of a person. Their actions were also derogatory toward Brick. They planned to use him as a sort of circus animal who could help earn them money to feed their drug habit.

Nella got a crash course in derogatory terms when she referred to her children as "jigaboos" (154), because Doug called them that and she thought it was cute. It was Laronne who told Nella that the word means the same thing as calling her children "niggers" (154). Nella was devastated by her new knowledge and afraid she was hurting her children. Laronne remembered how upset Nella was that day as she read Laronne's journal entry. Nella voiced the desire to protect her children but her lack of knowledge about the English language and the derogatory words it contains worried her.

Nella's daughter struggles with the perceptions others have of her because she is biracial. Significant is this quote: "the other black girls in school think I want to be white. They call me an Oreo. I don't want to be white. Sometimes I want to go back to being what I was. I want to be nothing" (148). In this quote an "Oreo" is a slur used to reference a person who is biracial. It is ironic that the girls accuse Rachel of wanting to be white while in reality, Rachel wants to go back to her past where skin color was not of such importance.

Also challenging for Rachel are the different goals she and her grandmother have for Rachel's future. They butt heads when it comes to what they think of as their dreams for her. Rachel knows her grandmother's dreams for her are based on her childhood in



Texas when a secretarial job and a husband were the best that a black woman could hope for. Rachel does not like the picture that her grandmother paints of her future. “The way Grandma paints her dream for me, there’s a low sky” (149). As Rachel considers what dreams her mother might have had for herself she imagines her mother wanting love and a family. She notes that as time went by, the sky on her mother’s dreams became low. Rachel does not know that her mother had intended to go back to school when she returned to Denmark. Instead she got pregnant with Charles and had to marry Roger.

Conflict emerges in the narrative when Grandma makes her first comment about Rachel’s mother. The statement deeply hurts Rachel because it is derogatory. Rachel is angry because her grandmother believes that the bad in Rachel—her sexual desires—have come from her mother. Rachel feels belittled because her grandmother makes her feel bad for wanting to have a relationship with a boy and be shown affection by the opposite sex.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why did Brick run away from Chicago? What did he hope to be able to do once he reached his destination?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What causes the changes in the relationship between Rachel and her grandmother?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Discuss words and their ability to wound. How is this particularly true for children?

## **Vocabulary**

covered, preempting, authority, invisibility, paralyzed



## Part I, pgs. 158-174

### Summary

In this section, a journal entry by Nella comprises the first chapter. Nella expresses how upset she is because she has called her children by a derogatory word. She wants to ask Doug if he knew what the word meant but he has not come home from work yet. Because her children are half black and half her, she wants them to be seen as people, not as a color.

In the next section narrated by Rachel, Grandma complains because a window on the porch was broken. She says she no longer feels safe in her home. Rachel even has noticed the changes in her neighborhood. Stores are closing and neighbors are taking precautions to protect themselves. Her old friend Tracy had always told Rachel she lived in the ghetto. Rachel did not believe her at the time, but has decided she might be right.

Doris had been planning to go to a church conference but is not sure if she should leave Rachel alone. Drew offers to stay with Rachel. She likes the way he reads newspapers at breakfast and talks about the things going on in the world. One night Drew goes out to a concert. When he learns that Rachel has never heard Etta James, he takes her with him even though the singer will be performing in a nightclub.

Afterward, Rachel tells Drew that she enjoyed the concert. He tells her that he wishes Lakeisha could appreciate the things that Rachel did. That night before she goes to bed, Rachel tells Drew about the blue bottle inside herself. She feels good about herself when he says her reasoning makes sense to him.

Rachel cooks dinner to celebrate the day of her grandmother's return. Rachel also hopes her grandmother will be proud that Rachel has received her third report card in a row on which she has earned straight As. Her Grandma is more worried about the sorry looking casserole Rachel has made instead of the report card. Grandma goes into the kitchen to cook a real meal.

John Bailey breaks up with Rachel. He has learned she is not in the Jack and Jill club, and accuses her of lying even though she technically just let him think what he wanted to. He also says he will not date her any longer if she does not have sex with him. She goes to Drew to talk. She tries to explain how bad she is even though she goes to Sunday school and tries to be good. She wants to tell him how much she likes him and wants to be close to him. She assumes she has not chosen the right way when Drew pulls away from her kiss and tells her she is like a daughter to him.

Tamika continues to bully Rachel in school. Rachel gets tired of listening to her. She punches the girl and tells her to "fuck off" (169). Anthony Miller begins talking to Rachel again after this. He calls her Ali. He begins visiting her at her grandmother's house. One



day she invites him inside and he asks to go to Rachel's room. They begin kissing and then taking off their clothes. He begs her to let him know what sex feels like. He does not force her and she does not fight him. Anthony is thrusting into her when her grandmother opens the door. She says nothing to Anthony, only calls Rachel a "hussy" (172). After she leaves, Anthony gets dressed. He thanks Rachel before he leaves but does not kiss her.

Rachel promises herself she will not bring another boy home. She will obey curfew and will work on making herself something in a person of which her grandmother will be proud. She writes down a story about her experience with Anthony that she wants to be the correct story. She indicates that if there is no one else to tell another story, the one that is told is the one that is true. She believes it is the case for the man on the roof as well. He had been tending his pigeons and let the family do their thing while he did his.

## Analysis

This section of chapters wraps up Part I. This part ends with the idea that "if there's no one else to tell another side — the only story that can be told is the story that becomes true" (174). This becomes true of the story that Rachel tells herself about her sexual encounter with Anthony. She notes that it is also true of what she knows of the story of her accident. The ending of this part of novel indicates there is another story to be told, one that Rachel needs to know in order to understand what happened to tear her family apart.

The power that words have to hurt continues to be thematically explored as Nella writes in her journal about the pain she feels when she learns she has been calling her children by a derogatory term. After what happened to Charles, she wants to protect her children. Living in America, however, Nella is in a new atmosphere and does not even know when she is saying things that might hurt the children.

The changing atmosphere in Rachel's neighborhood becomes a point of focus in this section as well. Her grandmother talks about how the neighborhood was home to nothing but the best of black people when she had first moved there. Since that time gang members and drug dealers have taken over. The stores have closed and the neighbors have had to take precautions to protect themselves. Rachel's grandmother is angry when her house is targeted and a rock thrown through her window. Rachel wonders if her friend, Tracy, was not right when she said they lived in the ghetto.

The character of Drew also takes some prominence in the section. Believing that he is helping Rachel and Doris, Drew offers to stay with Rachel so that Doris can go to a church conference. Rachel has never been around a man who has paid attention to her and talked to her before. She misunderstands his actions and believes they can have a relationship. She tries to kiss him when he comforts her after she breaks up with her boyfriend. He tells her that she is "like a daughter" (169) to him.



From this point, things seem to go downhill for Rachel as her conflicts surmount. She is still being bullied at school and a girl starts a rumor that Rachel has slept with half the basketball team. Anthony Miller, the boy who used to kiss Rachel, comes to her asking her to show him what sex feels like. Rachel both feels she is giving herself to Anthony and that he is taking what he wants. Her first sexual experience is interrupted by her grandmother walking in on them and calling her a hussy. Notice that Rachel's grandmother does not scold Anthony in any way; she places all of the blame on Rachel. In Grandma's mind, the fault always lay with the female; the male is never at fault. In this single encounter, the author thus explores the themes of coming of age, sexuality, and gender expectations.

The story that Rachel makes up about her first sexual experience is the first direct reference that the author makes to the power of one person's side of a story. When Rachel refers to her story about Anthony she tells herself that it is the story that can be true, especially since there is no one else to tell another side to the story. This idea that the story that is known is the one that is true ties into the only story that Rachel knows about her family. The quote at the end of Part I indicates there is another side of Rachel's story that she needs to know. It also foreshadows that things will fall into line to allow Rachel to be told the other side of her family's story.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is Rachel's grandmother so dismissive of Rachel's good grades? Why does she not praise her granddaughter more for the things she does right?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the differences in the story that Rachel tells herself about her sexual encounter with Anthony and what actually happened during that encounter.

## Discussion Question 3

What does it mean to Drew that Rachel enjoyed the Etta James concert? At what point do you think Rachel begins to get the wrong idea about Drew's intentions?

## Vocabulary

ghetto, formality, injustice, apartheid, incorruptible, encore, serenity, reverberate, perpetuating, curfew





## Part II, pgs. 177-192

### Summary

In the opening of Part II, Rachel has put a birdfeeder in the backyard even though her grandmother does not like it. She sees how her grandmother spends more time drinking than anything else. She comes to believe that traits in one member of her family, like alcoholism, will eventually show up in another. She notices the difference between her father's alcohol use and her grandmother's.

One day, Rachel's grandmother calls her into her bedroom. She wants Rachel to help her look through her coin collection and see if there is anything of worth. One of the coins in the bag is a nickel from the year that Rachel's father was born. They see it is worth five hundred dollars. As they sort the coins, Grandma tells Rachel that Drew has gotten her a summer job at the Salvation Army center. She has told Drew about Rachel's trouble with boys. They discover Grandma's collection is worth \$2,507. She gives Rachel the coin from the year of her father's birth. Rachel shares with her grandmother her fear that she will not always be able to remember her father.

Rachel asks her Grandma why her father never came back. She senses by her answer that her grandmother knows more than what she is telling. She does not respond when Rachel tells her that her father told her that he was coming to get Rachel, Robbie, and Ariel and take them back home. When Rachel keeps asking her grandmother questions, her grandmother finally tells her that her father had just come too late that day.

In the next section, which is also narrated by Rachel, she wears her best clothes to her first day on the job at the Salvation Army center hoping to impress Drew. She meets Jesse, a boy who also works at the center. Jesse says his mother is from Norway as well. Drew tells Rachel that she and Jesse can decide how to split up the work that needs to be done. He also tells her that Lakeisha will be coming for a visit that summer.

One of the things that Rachel notices about Jesse right away is that he is not like a typical white boy. She notes that he knows things about black people that only black people generally know including what it means for a black girl's hair to go back.

When they walk to the recreation room Rachel hears a man playing a sad, yet hopeful song on the piano, Jesse greets the piano player. Rachel and the piano man learn that they both came from Chicago. The piano player kisses her hand and tells her that his name is Brick.

### Analysis

After a long journey, Brick and Rachel have finally come into contact with one another. The reader knows what is happening but wonders if Brick recognizes Rachel. It is



through the author's different perspectives and narratives that she is able to develop tension through dramatic irony in their meeting.

Up to this point in the story Rachel has only mentioned two types of people: blacks and whites. When she meets Jesse she is surprised by how much knowledge he has about black people. He does not act like a typical white. She describes his voice as being "not at all white-guy sounding" (186). She notes he is more comfortable around Brick than she is. He and Brick greet each other "with a pat each other on the shoulder the way that black men would with closed fists" (189).

There is foreshadowing in this section of trouble brewing. Drew mentions that Lakeisha will be coming to visit as if he expects news of Lakeisha's visit to be good news to Rachel. In the past, Rachel and Lakeisha have gotten along only on the surface because they are such different people. The reader must wonder if Lakeisha's visit will really be as good a thing as Drew believes that it will be.

Grief is also a significant theme that is explored as Rachel talks about the changes that have taken place in her grandmother since Loretta's death. She drinks almost constantly and has stopped gardening. She tells Rachel there is no sense in working in the garden since "There's nothing left to save" (177). Rachel, however, sees hope in the seedling wildflowers that grow in the spots where her grandmother's garden was located. Remember in a prior section where Rachel described to Drew how she believed that even with all of the sad and angry feelings that she put into the blue glass bottle inside her that something green and good could still grow there. The green, growing — both in the bottle and the garden — represents the hope that Rachel believes is present in her life. Her grandmother has let the hardships of life get her down and believes there is no longer any hope.

Despite her grief, Grandma does give Rachel some insight into her father. She tells him that if he wanted to come for her, he would. She also tells Rachel that her father did come the day of the incident in which Rachel's family was killed; he was just too late. It is assumed she means that Roger came to Chicago not only because he learned his daughter had been hurt but because he intended to take his children with him, as he had promised Rachel.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss Rachel's ideas about alcoholism and heredity.

## Discussion Question 2

Why is it significant that Rachel and Brick finally meet each other in this section of the novel?



## Discussion Question 3

What does Rachel mean when she notices that Jesse does not act like a typical white boy? Why does this strike her so strongly?

## Vocabulary

vermin, syllables, maudlin, impress, surrogate, intonation, nonchalant



## Part II, pgs. 193-210

### Summary

The first chapter in this section is told from the point of view of Brick. Brick lived in a small rented room five blocks from the Salvation Army center. When he got too old to be passed off as a child and could no longer earn money for Paul and Lisa they abandoned him at a diner. A waitress there kept him for a few weeks. When she called child services he moved on to help out an old army veteran. The man was blind and could not tell that Brick was black by his voice. Brick helped the man until he grew tired of his comments about “spooks” (195).

Brick then lived for a while with a woman who taught him how to play the piano. When her children found out Brick was staying with their mother they accused him of being a con artist and called the police. His life went on that way, helping people out in exchange for food and a place to stay. When he got bigger people began to take him as a gang member or drug dealer and stopped allowing him to work for them.

Brick began drinking at that point. He wandered from town to town using different names and doing different odd jobs. He would play the piano at bars. Women loved not only his music but also his build. He had finally made his way to Portland, trying to go through detox by himself. Drew had found him at the bus station and invited him to the Salvation Army Center. Because he knew he was too young for rehabilitation, Brick lied about his age and completed a 90 day program. After he finished, he was employed as a janitor at that center.

Brick was out of breath since he had met Rachel and realized who she was. Although he felt he should have known sooner, it was not until she squeezed his hand when he kissed her hand that he knew for sure.

In the next chapter narrated by Rachel, she indicates her life is changing now that she has met Jesse. He has gotten her turned on to reading books on a variety of topics, like capitalism, that she had never thought about reading before. Sometimes Brick goes to lunch with them. They talk about what is happening in the world. She does not see Brick or Jesse in terms of their skin colors.

Rachel does tease Jesse about being Norwegian. He invites her for dinner. His mother makes a traditional Scandinavian food. The table is decorated somewhat like Rachel's mother would have decorated for a special occasion.

Jesse walks Rachel to the door after he drives her home. Her grandmother calls them inside. She is watching a sex video on television. She looks at Jesse and asks him if he understands what is happening on the television and if their mothers know what they are doing. Rachel notices an empty bottle of sherry next to her grandmother's chair. When Jesse asks, she tells him that Miss Verle gave him the tape of a daytime show



but when that show had gone off, the sex part had come up. After Jesse leaves, Grandma credits him as being a boy with manners.

Drew and Rachel take Lakeisha to a restaurant for a welcome back dinner. When Drew and Rachel talk about current events, Lakeisha accuses them of only talking about boring things. When they begin talking about Brick and the way he is turning his life around, Lakeisha perks up because she thinks Brick is good looking.

Later when Lakeisha and Rachel are alone Lakeisha taunts Rachel because she thinks Rachel likes Jesse, whom Lakeisha refers to as “the white boy” (208). Lakeisha tells Rachel she cannot understand why Rachel is not interested in Brick.

## Analysis

The author continues to explore the theme of race and racial prejudice in this section of the novel, particularly through Brick’s character. Until the point that he comes to be at the Salvation Army center, Brick has lived a life haunted by his skin color. While Lisa and Paul were using him in their panhandling scheme, no one ever said anything about the strange combination of a black boy with two white junkies. No one tried to rescue him from a position in which he really did not want to be. After Lisa and Paul abandoned Brick, his skin color made people suspicious of him. The woman who taught Brick to play piano, for instance, was happy with their routine until her children found out about the black man living with their mother. They called the police and accused him of being a con artist. He worked for a while for a blind man who could not tell by Brick’s voice that he was black. The man talked constantly in a derogatory way about blacks.

When he got older and bigger, people assumed because of the color of his skin that Brick was up to no good. He was suspected of being a drug dealer and gang member. Despite the hard life he had and the stereotypes with which he was labeled, Brick retained the desire to help himself. When Rachel meets him she notes how he acts in a way different from any black man she has met before. He makes her think “there’s a different way to be black” (202).

Trouble brews as Lakeisha sets her sights on Brick even though Rachel reminds her that he classifies as a bum. Lakeisha asks Rachel to mention to Brick that Lakeisha likes him. Meanwhile, Lakeisha picks up on the friendship between Rachel and Jesse and taunts Rachel for liking “a white boy” (210).

Rachel mentioned in an earlier section that she thought it was because of heredity that her father was an alcoholic and that her grandmother was becoming an alcoholic. In this section she seems concerned that she stay away from this hereditary trait. When she is offered wine at dinner with Jesse and his parents, she takes only a sip because “I don’t want heredity to start working on me” (204-205).

Notice also the personification used in this section of the novel. The apartment in which Brick lives is described as being a living thing that is “not used to his frame” (193). This indication implies that Brick is so big and tall that his rented rooms do not fully



compensate for his size. It is not that the rooms are too small, but that he is too big. This metaphor can be extended to illustrate Brick's position not just in his apartment, but also in his life.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Do you suspect Lakeisha will be trouble for Rachel? Why or why not?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Is Brick's story of his years of roaming that led him to Portland reasonable? How was he affected by his skin color during those years?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why is Lakeisha so fixated on the friendship between Rachel and Jesse?

## **Vocabulary**

prediction, rebuke, veracity, ejaculated, menacing, legacy, affirmative



## Part II, pgs. 211-234

### Summary

The first chapter in this section is narrated from Brick's point of view. He noticed whenever he asked Rachel about Chicago she would shut off so he knew he needed to be careful about the way he approached telling Rachel the story. He thought he might be able to tell her on the day that Drew sent him to take a box of papers to Rachel's grandmother. He saw a picture of her father and mentioned he could see the resemblance. She replied that she really did not know her father that well. Brick recognized Rachel's sadness when he asked about a picture of Aunt Loretta. Brick decided to slow down because he felt his questioning might be upsetting Rachel by introducing too much of the sadness of the past at one time.

They went to the backyard when Brick asked to see the bird feeder. Rachel mentioned that Lakeisha liked him and suggested the four of them could do something together. Rachel shared with him that she liked big words and then guessed that he liked music best. He pulled her father's harmonica from his pocket and played the song her father had taught him. When Brick told Rachel he did not know the title of the song, Rachel made up a name for it. She called it "Flight."

Brick opened up and told Rachel he was really only seventeen. While he had many experiences since he had left home when he was eleven, he felt he had missed out on some childhood experiences like visiting amusement parks. They decided to go the following Saturday and visit Oak Parks, a nearby amusement park.

The next chapter is a journal entry by Nella. Nella writes that she is upset because Doug allowed her children to go to the park alone. She believes the trip to the park is not safe. It is not until her children are back in her arms that she is relieved.

In the next chapter narrated by Rachel, the pizza place where Jesse, Rachel, Brick, and Lakeisha try to eat is busy and too crowded with white people. Brick accidentally knocks into one of the white boys and the boy feels threatened. It is only because Jesse speaks up for Brick that the white boy backs off. They decide to get their pizzas to go and take them to the park.

At Laurelhurst Park, Jesse pulls out beer he bought with a fake ID. Brick discourages the drinking but Lakeisha takes a beer and hands one to Rachel. When they hear the ducks on the pond, Jesse decides he wants to feed the leftover pizza crusts to the ducks. The birds do not come when they first throw in the crusts so Jesse wades in after them. Suddenly he is surrounded by the birds and asks to be brought more.

Brick invites Rachel to go with him and hoists her onto his back when she tells him she does not want to get wet. Brick calls to the swans. Rachel is surprised when they



answer him back. The birds leave when all the crusts are gone. Because the boys are wet and cold, they all get into Jesse's car.

Jesse pulls a baggie of drugs from his glove box and asks if anyone has a lighter. Brick asks how often Jesse does drugs. Jesse says only occasionally and Rachel backs him up, saying the drug use is no big deal. She gets another beer. Brick announces he is leaving and Lakeisha, who has already said she did not want to get into trouble, goes with him. Brick asks Rachel to go along but she says she will stay with Jesse. Rachel refuses the drugs but continues to drink beer.

Later Jesse and Rachel lay on the ground on a blanket after making love. He suggests that they run away and go on a trip together. He suggests she would fit in with the people in South America perfectly. Even though Rachel had never thought that Jesse might really like her, he kisses her. He tells her that he did not go on the date with her looking for sex.

Jesse hears sirens and orders Rachel to run. She does the best she can as she pulls on her clothes. They race to the fountain. He dunks his head in the water and tells her to do the same, saying it will clear her head. She does so without thinking. The sirens are gone but Rachel hears honking and the sound of people's voices calling "nigger" and "nigger lover" (233). Later in the car, Rachel feels as if her bad ear is drowning. She is surprised how black she looks and feels next to Jesse who admits to her that he had never had sex with a black girl before.

## Analysis

Rachel's coming of age continues in this section as she becomes closer to Jesse. Because she likes Jesse, Rachel makes bad decisions on the night she goes on a double date with him, Brick, and Lakeisha. She is drunk and believes that instead of using her common sense, "the part that wants to be pleasing takes the lead; it's the part of me that wants to be part of something even if it's just Jesse's crazy scheme" (233). Rachel winds up drunk. She has sex with Jesse and has the unfortunate incident of being called "nigger" (233) for the first time. The experience deeply disturbs Rachel even before she has begun to sober up. When she later lies with Jesse, she feels blacker than she ever has in her life. Jesse is inconsiderate in telling Rachel that he had never had sex with a black girl before—as if the experience were noteworthy because of her skin color.

As Rachel seems to be spinning toward self-destruction, Brick struggles with how to tell her the story of her family and Charles. He hopes to have a chance to talk to her when he delivers papers to her grandmother but realizes how easily Rachel is made sad by memories of the past when he talks to her about pictures of her relatives.

Later as they sit by the bird feeder that Rachel has installed in her backyard, Brick opens up to Rachel and tells her his real age. He also plays the harmonica for her. When he plays the song that her father once played for Rachel in the hospital, she





decides the tune should have the title “Flight.” Note that Rachel is at this point unaware that Brick learned that song from her father. The idea of calling the song “Flight” ties in with the imagery of birds, flight, and falling that recur throughout the novel. It is while discussing the birds in Rachel’s backyard that she and Brick are able to open up to each other. They also connect when they waded out together to feed the ducks on the lake and Rachel hears Brick call to the swan. She is impressed when the swan answers back.

Another idea that ties this portion of the novel together with the beginning is that Rachel and Brick plan an outing to an amusement park. Just before Nella killed herself and two of her children, her boss had loaned her money to take her children to an amusement park. Because Laronne found that money in a drawer attached to a thank you note from Rachel, it is obvious the family never made that trip. Although he does not know it, Brick is finally giving Rachel an opportunity that she never had as a child. He is fulfilling a promise to her that her mother made.

The theme of stories and the truth in them is also again developed in this section. Notice the way Brick feels when he thinks about what he plans to do for Rachel. “Brick felt lucky. He was going to tell her a story. It was a story that would help her make sense of things that maybe didn’t make sense, of those Chicago memories. The water was running very cold. He was still smiling. He was a shiny coin in fountain water. He was going to make wishes come true” (212). Notice the metaphor near the end of the quote “he was a shiny coin in fountain water” (212). This is a reference to the coins people throw in fountains and make wishes upon. Brick sees himself as Rachel’s shiny coin that can make her wishes come true. He believes her wish is to know more about what provoked the tragedy that ended her mother’s life and to know why her father never returned for her. Brick’s idea that he can make wishes come true for Rachel echoes the promise that Nella wrote to Roger the year that Rachel was born—that all their stories would have wishes that came true.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Rachel go along with Jesse during the night of their date even though she knows what he is doing is not right?

## Discussion Question 2

How does the author build Rachel’s story toward a point of climax based on her own emotions and insecurities?

## Discussion Question 3

In what ways does the author tie this part of the story back to the beginning of Rachel’s story, when she was still living with her mother in Chicago?

## Vocabulary

resemblance, effeminate, ornithologist, boulevards, mulatto, wanderlust



## Part II, pgs. 235-250

### Summary

The first chapter in this section is narrated by Rachel. She arrives home to find both her Grandma and Drew waiting for her. Drew tells her that Brick had called because he was worried. Rachel tries to walk away but Drew calls her back telling her that she is not doing herself any good by doing what she was doing that night. It is when Grandma advises Rachel not to “act like trash like your mama” (237) that the imaginary blue bottle inside Rachel explodes. She tells her grandmother that she cannot be like her grandmother and be special all at the same time. She adds that she is special because she is the daughter of her mother. Her grandmother challenges Rachel to tell her what a wonderful person her mother was.

Rachel is briefly lost in a memory as she remembers that day on the roof. Her mother had pushed Robbie off and Robbie had reached for Rachel. Rachel screamed and stepped away when her mother reached for her. Mor let go and stepped off the edge, holding the baby. Rachel jumped after Robbie hoping to be able to grab his hand and comfort him.

Coming back from her memory, Rachel tells her grandmother “I wasn’t supposed to have a future” (238). For this reason, Rachel believes her life is hers to do with as she pleases.

The next chapter is narrated from the point of view of Laronne. Six years after the incident, Doug had come looking for Nella’s grave. He admitted he knew how much he had hurt Nella. Laronne showed him the newspaper article and Doug swore he had nothing to do with what happened to Nella. He admitted he had convinced her to move to Chicago and bring the kids with her but once they got there he had fallen back into the routine of drinking and drugs when he got back with his old friends. He had been angry when he realized Ariel was not his baby. He admitted he did not realize how hard he had hit Nella during their argument until he saw that he had knocked out a tooth.

In a journal entry by Nella, Nella describes her side of the fight between her and Doug. She had told him that day that Ariel was Roger’s baby. He had yelled at the children and called them “niggers” (243) because they were watching the television with the volume very loud. Nella began screaming and could not stop. She did not realize how hard Doug had hit her even when she noticed her tooth was loose. It was at that point that she realized Roger was right, that people would only see the color of her children’s skin. She felt she was breaking her promise to protect her children, just like she had done with Charles.

In the next chapter narrated by Rachel, she takes a shower and brushes her teeth but can’t get rid of the sour taste in her mouth. Her grandmother calls at the door asking if



she is okay. Although she feels nausea creeping up on her, Rachel replies she is okay. She falls asleep on the bathroom floor.

In Nella's next journal entry she criticizes herself for not taking Charles with her the night of the fire. She makes a promise that from that point forward, her children will go with her.

Brick arrived at Rachel's house to take her to the amusement park in the next section narrated from his point of view. Even though she looked disappointed he was alone, she agreed to go with him.

## Analysis

Rachel reaches a breaking point when her Grandma calls her mother trash. This breaking in Rachel is turned into a visual image when the author describes the imaginary blue bottle inside Rachel where she has stored all her feelings of anger and sadness shattering. The use of the word "shatter" (233) indicates how violently the emotions break free from the place in which Rachel has been trying to corral them for so long.

Rachel and her grandmother cannot see eye to eye because they each have a different opinion of Rachel's mother. Although Rachel knows that her mother killed her family, she also knows that her mother loved her. She has memories of her mother's last days and remembers the desperation she saw in her mother. Rachel's Grandma sees Nella only as a woman who killed her grandchildren. She does not understand how desperate her daughter-in-law had been to protect her children or what had led to Nella's decision.

The conflicts in this section continue to escalate as Rachel is caught in the middle of the discord between her mother and her grandmother. She is the daughter of Nella and has the blue eyes to prove it. Even though her grandmother makes up stories about some relative who had blue eyes, Rachel knows it is only her attempt to hide the fact that Rachel is biracial. Rachel believes that it is because she is her mother's daughter that she is special. Because she is her mother's daughter, she can never be special in the way her Grandma wants her to be.

Notice Rachel's comment that she was not supposed to have a future. It is for this reason that she believes that her life is hers to throw away if she wishes.

Also symbolic in this section is the earache that Rachel develops after Rachel dips her head in the fountain when Jesse asked her to. She had felt the water in her ear that night and the pressure built in her bad ear just as the emotional pressure has been building in her all of her life. The fact that it is the ear injured in the fall makes the ache even more significant.



## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the significance of Rachel's statement that because she was not supposed to live, she can throw her life away. Do you think she really believes this?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is it that the discord between Rachel and Grandma about Nella is what causes the blue bottle in Rachel to shatter? What does it mean that the bottle has held up for so long?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is Rachel disappointed when Jesse does not come with Brick when he arrives to take her to the amusement park?

## Vocabulary

mocha, illuminated, literally, surveyed, surrendered



## Part II, pgs. 251-266

### Summary

Rachel narrates in this section, describing how she takes \$1,500 from her grandmother's coin money. She is ready to leave. In the drawer where the money is hidden, Rachel sees a stack of letters. They are all from her father to her Grandma. She reads the top letter. In this letter, Roger asks his mother not to mention it to Rachel if she sees him at Loretta's graveside service. He also requests that Grandma give Rachel the book that Nella gave him the year Rachel was born. In the closing of the letter he claims that he is best being away. Rachel does not want to read any of the other letters. Outside she drags Brick behind her in her hurry to get away from the house.

The next section is narrated from Brick's point of view. Although Rachel looks sick, she claims she wants to ride the Haunted Kingdom ride. While they wait in line he tells her that he hopes he had not caused her trouble by telling Drew what had happened with Jesse. Rachel shares with Brick she will not be going back to her grandmother's house. He asks what he can do to help and she requests only that he not tell anyone.

They ride the Ferris wheel next. When the ride begins, Rachel complains she feels dizzy. He is surprised she admitted to him that she feels bad. She takes his hand when he offers it. When the ride starts in high gear she begins pulling at her ear and tells Brick she needs to get off. He tries to calm her, telling her it will be over soon. She insists she needs to stand so Brick pushes the safety bar until it releases. Rachel thanks him for allowing her to stand. She stumbles just before their carriage reaches the unloading area. Brick stops her from falling. He sees the sadness in her face as he holds her in his arms and tells her that he knew she had survived.

In the next chapter Rachel tells Brick the story of that day on the roof. Her mother had told them there were things from which she could not protect them because she was not even aware they existed. She had hoped to protect them by taking them out of the world.

Rachel also narrates the next chapter. Brick tells her that he saw Robbie fall. He also tells her the story of Charles, the brother she did not know she had. When Brick asks, Rachel tells him that she loved her mother despite what she did. She thought that her mother loved her as well.

Rachel narrates another chapter as she and Brick sit next to the fountain in Laurelhurst Park. Brick is returning home to Chicago. Rachel gives him the nickel from the year her father was born. She tells him that she hopes that he finds his mother as he flips the coin into the air again and again. He tells her that coins, like the one she gave him, are good for wishes. He throws the nickel into the lake. They watch as a swan, startled by



the coin, flies away. Rachel will not tell Brick that she had wishes Robbie really had been a bird so the whole family could fly away.

## Analysis

Brick brings hope to Rachel when he brings her a new story of her family—a story she had not heard before. Rachel had heard her grandmother mention Charles, but never knew how Charles fit into her story. Once she knows what happened to Charles she is better able to understand why her mother was so desperate to protect the children she had left. Brick's story is also the first mention of her family she has heard in a long time. Her grandmother's attempt at covering up the past was not ideal. Rachel feels complete when she does hear some reasons behind the strange decisions made by her parents. "Not fire or secrets or silence could keep a family from being remembered" (261-262), Rachel thinks when she finally hears the story Brick has to tell.

A good deal of symbolism ties the novel's conclusion back to its beginning. It is as if the circumstances of Rachel's childhood are being recreated to make Brick's story even timelier. It has already been discussed how Rachel's mother had been planning to take her children to an amusement park just before she chose instead to take her own life. Brick arranges to take Rachel to an amusement park which is a fulfillment of a childhood dream for them both.

As they spend the day at the park, Brick can tell that Rachel does not feel well. The ear that was hurt in her fall has bothered her since she dipped her head in a dirty water fountain at Jesse's suggestion. She is probably suffering an infection in that ear, as the author indicates she looks feverish. On the Ferris wheel, the pressure in Rachel's ear becomes unbearable. She feels she needs to stand up and Brick allows her to do so but she loses her balance and almost falls from the carriage. Brick stops this fall. Although there was no one willing to stop Rachel's fall the day her mother took her to the roof, Brick has arrived to keep Rachel from falling again. It is at this climax of the narrative that Brick tells Rachel he knows about her fall from the roof and her survival.

The idea of making a wish as Brick throws the nickel into the water ties the story of Brick and Rachel in with that of her mother and father. The inscription in the book the Nella gave Roger in the year of Rachel's birth indicated they could make wishes come true. In the same way, Brick believes a wish on a coin thrown into water can make wishes come true.

Also symbolic is the swan that flies from the surface of the lake when Brick throws the coin. As a child, Brick had thought Robbie was a bird. He was disappointed and angry with himself when he saw the mangled bodies of the family lying in the courtyard. The symbol of the swan taking flight off the surface of the lake is a symbol of hope. As Rachel watches the swan take flight, she wishes Robbie had really been a bird who could have flown and kept her entire family from falling.



Rachel also learns the history of the book of Hans Christian Anderson fairy tales that Drew told her was among her aunt's things when she died. The book had been a gift from Rachel's mother to her father the year that Rachel was born. Roger had actually passed along the book to Rachel's grandmother about the time that Loretta died. Rachel reads a letter to her grandmother from her father requesting that she not point him out to Rachel if she saw him among the people gathered for Loretta's funeral. Even though he has had no contact with his daughter, Roger has been in contact with her grandmother throughout the years. The fairy tale book was a gift from her father, not from Drew.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What do you see in the future for Brick and Rachel? Will they be able to rise above the struggles their parents faced?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is the tone of the end of the novel? How does the author create this tone?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Several questions are left unanswered at the end of this novel. Why do you think the author chooses to not tie up all of the loose ends for the reader?

## **Vocabulary**

arcade, cavernous, lurched, absentmindedly, unlimited





# Characters

## Rachel Morse

Rachel Morse is the central character in this novel and the first-person narrator of many of the chapters. She is the daughter of Nella and Roger Morse. Because her mother is Danish and her father black, Rachel is light-skinned with blue eyes.

When Rachel was eleven years old, her mother took Rachel, along with her brother and sister to the roof of the apartment building in which they lived. Nella threw herself and her children from the roof. Rachel was the only survivor.

The novel follows Rachel as she turns from a preteen into a young adult. She struggles with unanswered questions about her family and her childhood. She is also plagued with the American way of classifying people by the color of their skin. Making classification worse is the fact that Rachel does not fit perfectly into either category.

Rachel also sees a bigger picture of her future than her grandmother, who grew up in the Deep South in Texas, had. Rachel's grandmother believes Rachel should aim for a job as a secretary and a good husband. Rachel does not want to get married or have children and believes there is something better for her in life than secretary work. She loves learning and wants to go to college.

Rachel is smart and studious. Because her grandmother had very little schooling, Rachel's interest in school is unimportant to her grandmother. Her grandmother's worst fear is that Rachel will grow up like Nella or Loretta, Rachel's aunt. Both of these women married young and their relationships fell apart. Nella, additionally, was pregnant when she and Roger got married.

When Rachel's grandmother walks in on Rachel having sex with Anthony, Grandma calls her a hussy. She shares her concern about Rachel with Drew who gets Rachel a summer job at the Salvation Army where he works. It is while she is working there that she not only meets Brick, but also Jesse. Brick is the boy who visited Rachel in the hospital after her accident and has a story for her that her father wanted Brick to tell Rachel.

Jesse seems at first to be a good influence on Rachel as he encourages her to read new types of books and talks to her about what is happening in the world. During a double date with Lakeisha and Brick, Rachel drinks with Jesse. She also defends his drug use. After Brick and Lakeisha have left them alone, Rachel has sex with Jesse. They are spotted by some white kids who call Rachel a "nigger" (233) and Jesse a "nigger lover" (233).

When Rachel arrives at home, her Grandma tells her not to act like trash, like her mother. The imaginary bottle in which Rachel had been storing all of her angry and sad feelings breaks. She yells at her grandmother that she cannot be the person her



grandmother wants her to be. She is Nella's daughter and that is what makes her special.

Rachel had already decided to run away from home when Brick finally tells her the story that her father had shared with him. The story makes Rachel feel as if she is a complete person with a past as well as a future. She better understands her mother's desire to protect her since she learns that Nella had a son whom she felt she had not protected closely enough.

## **Roger Morse aka Pop**

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After they had been married for a short time, Roger kissed Nella's sister during a party where he had gotten very drunk. He hit Nella when she accused her sister of being a whore. Nella went home with her sister that night while Roger was at home alone with Charles. He went to sleep on the couch, still holding a burning cigarette. When he woke, the house was on fire and he could not find Charles. The boy died in the fire.

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Nella left her husband, Roger, in favor of Doug. Doug encouraged her to take the children and move to America even though Roger had always told her that she would not be happy in America. As she spent more time in America, Nella came to wonder if it was because of the racist atmosphere that Roger did not want to go back there.

Nella was deeply disturbed when she discovered that she had been calling her children a derogatory word for a black person without even knowing what it meant. She had heard Doug referring to the children by that word and believed it was cute. When Laronne told Nella what the word means, Nella believed that Doug would not have called the children by that name if he had known what it meant.

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Nella and Roger had gotten back together and had promised each other they would start a new family which they would protect with their lives. After Nella saw how many different ways there are for her children to be hurt in America she believed the best thing she could do was take them from the world.

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It is during a trip to an amusement park that Brick finally finds the opportunity to tell Rachel the story her father had told him. After Brick tells Rachel the story, he decides to go back to Chicago to try to reconnect with his mother.

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Doug returned years later when he was in the AA program again. He met with Laronne to tell her that he was trying to make up for his misdeeds. He admitted to Laronne that he did not treat Nella as he should have but denied that he had any active role in her death.



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When Grandma walks in on the two unexpectedly, Andrew thanks Rachel and leaves without kissing her.

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Doug had originally thought Ariel was his baby but after she was born and her skin began to darken as she got older, he realized she belonged to Roger.

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Carmen LaGuardia is a light-skinned black girl like Rachel. Even though Rachel had thought they could be friends because they looked alike, Carmen is always mean to Rachel.





## Greg

Greg is the son of Laronne. For the short time that Brick stayed with Laronne, Greg became like a big brother to him.

## Rachel Morse

Rachel Morse is the central character in this novel. She is the daughter of Nella and Roger Morse. Because her mother is Danish and her father black, Rachel is light-skinned with blue eyes.

When Rachel was eleven years old, her mother took Rachel, along with her brother and sister to the roof of the apartment building in which they lived. Nella threw herself and her children from the roof. Rachel was the only survivor.

The novel follows Rachel as she turns from a preteen into a young adult. She struggles with unanswered questions about her family and her childhood. She is also plagued with the American way of classifying people by the color of their skin. Making classification worse is that Rachel does not fit perfectly into either category.

Rachel also sees a bigger picture of her future than her grandmother, who grew up in the Deep South in Texas, had. Rachel's grandmother believes Rachel should aim for a job as a secretary and a good husband. Rachel does not want to get married or have children and believes there is something better for her in life than secretary work. She loves learning and wants to go to college.

Rachel is smart and studious. Because her grandmother had very little schooling, Rachel's interest in school is not important to her grandmother. Her grandmother's worst fear is that Rachel will grow up like Nella or Loretta, Rachel's aunt. Both these women married young and their relationships fell apart. Nella, additionally, was pregnant when she and Roger got married.

When Rachel's grandmother walks in on Rachel having sex with Anthony, Grandma calls her a hussy. She shares her concern about Rachel with Drew who gets Rachel a summer job at the Salvation Army where he works. It is while she is working there that she not only meets Brick, but also Jesse. Brick is the boy who visited Rachel in the hospital after her accident and has a story for her that her father wanted Brick to tell Rachel.

Jesse seems at first to be a good influence on Rachel as he encourages her to read new types of books and talks to her about what is happening in the world. During a double date with Lakeisha and Brick, Rachel drinks with Jesse. She also defends his drug use. After Brick and Lakeisha have left them alone, Rachel has sex with Jesse. They are spotted by some white kids who call Rachel a "nigger" (233) and Jesse a "nigger lover" (233).



When Rachel arrives at home, her Grandma tells her not to act like trash, like her mother. The imaginary bottle in which Rachel had been storing all of her angry and sad feelings broke. She yelled at her grandmother that she could not be the person she wanted her to be. She was Nella's daughter and that was what made her special.

Rachel had decided to run away from home when Brick finally told her the story that her father had shared with him. The story makes Rachel feel as if she is a complete person with a past as well as a future. She better understands her mother's desire to protect her since she learns that Nella had a son whom she felt she had not protected closely enough.

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After the rooftop incident, Roger spent several days by Rachel's bedside. He began drinking and finally became so disruptive that the nurses asked him to leave. Before that time, Roger became friends with Brick, the boy who had seen the carnage after Rachel and her family fell from the roof.

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# Symbols and Symbolism

## Peterson Field Guide

The copy of the Peterson Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern and Central North America is a symbol of Brick's young desire to know and identify birds. He quickly became frustrated with himself when he saw Robbie fall from the roof of his apartment building and believed it was a bird. Brick left the book on the shrine set up for the family in the apartment courtyard as a type of offering.

## Shrine

The shrine set up in the apartment courtyard for Nella and her children is a symbol of the neighborhood's attempt to pay homage to the young immigrant mother and her children. Brick was particularly drawn to this shrine as he tried to understand how he could have been so mistaken in what he thought he saw when Robbie fell from the roof.

## Blue Bottle

The blue glass bottle that Rachel imagines inside her is a symbolic way for her to bottle her grief and anger in an attempt to keep it from affecting her day-to-day life. When Rachel's grandmother indicates that Rachel's mother was trash, Rachel can contain herself no longer. The bottle bursts, symbolically letting all of those feelings of anger and sadness out.

## Harmonica

Brick's harmonica represents the time that Brick spent with Rachel's father. Roger taught Brick how to play the harmonica and then gave the boy the musical instrument as a gift. Brick later plays Roger's song on that harmonica for Rachel.

## Black Skin, White Masks

This book, a gift from Drew, represents one opinion of racism and the way it affects blacks. The necessity for Rachel to read this book is stressed by several different characters. Drew, who gives the book to Rachel, indicates she needs to read it. Later, Jesse tells her that he cannot believe she has not read the book all the way through.



## Hans Christian Anderson's Fairy Tales

This book of fairy tales by Hans Christian Anderson represents hope. The stories carry with them the idea that wishes can come true. It was with the idea that their wishes of a better future could come true that Nella gave this book to Roger the year Rachel was born, after they had lost their first child to a house fire.

## Newspaper Story

The newspaper story is symbolic of the few details that the police could pull together from the incident in which Nella, Robbie, and Ariel died. Although the article represents one version of the story, it does not tell the whole story. Laronne tucked this article into the box of Rachel's things because she believed she was giving Rachel back her mother through the nice things people said about her. Brick is also quoted in the article stating that he saw a man on the roof when Rachel and her family fell. His lie prompted suspicion, at least for Laronne, that the family was killed.

## Bottle of Contribution

The bottles of contribution, which are actually sherry from Miss Verle, represent the way that Rachel's grandmother deals with her grief after the death of Loretta.

## Rachel's Left Ear

Rachel's loss of hearing in her left ear represents her only lasting injury from her fall. When Rachel's emotions climax after her argument with her grandmother about her mother near the end of the novel, Rachel also develops an ear infection in her bad ear. The pain in her ear seems to mimic Rachel's emotional pain.

## 1937 Nickel

The nickel from 1937 is an object that symbolizes Rachel's father because it was minted in the year he was born. When Rachel finds this coin in her Grandma's collection, Grandma gives it to Rachel. Rachel later gives the coin to Brick, who says they should make a wish on it and throws it into the lake at Laurelhurst Park.



## Settings

### **The Roof of the Apartment Building**

Nella took her children to the roof of their apartment building several times before she went up there with the idea of pushing her children off and then jumping off herself.

### **The Apartment Building Courtyard**

It was in the courtyard of the apartment building in which he lived that Brick learned that what he had seen fall past his window was not a bird. He saw the three children and mother lying on the concrete, where they had fallen from the roof. It was also in this courtyard that a shrine had been set up for Nella and her children.

### **4725 Northeast Cleveland Avenue**

This address in Portland, Oregon is where Rachel's grandmother lives. Rachel goes to Portland to live with her grandmother after her mother, brother, and sister have died. A good deal of the story takes place in this house.

### **Salvation Army Harbor Lights Center**

The Salvation Army Harbor Lights center is the place where Drew works. He gets Rachel a job there hoping that it will help her to stay out of trouble. It is at this center that Rachel meets Jesse, a white boy who turns out to be a bad influence on her. She also meets Brick at this center.

### **Oaks Park**

Oaks Park is the amusement park to which Brick takes Rachel. It is at this park that Brick tells Rachel what he knows about her accident and her father.



# Themes and Motifs

## The Differing Ways in Which People Handle Grief

Through the various tragedies described in this novel, the author depicts various ways people respond to sorrow and grief in their lives. Among the characters that react in differing ways to the sadness in their lives are Rachel, Brick, Grandma, and Roger. The children seem to deal with their grief in a more positive manner, leading the reader to wonder if children are more resilient to tragedy. The adult characters seem to let the grief in their lives build up, eventually weighing them down.

Rachel, the character most closely touched by tragedy, is the character who tries to respond most positively to her new situation. She sees herself as the “new-girl” (3) when she emerges from the hospital after surviving a fall from the nine-story apartment building in which she lived with her mother and siblings. Her mother and siblings were killed when they jumped from the building. Not only is her mother dead, but her Grandma, with whom she lives, does not recognize her mother as a person who loved her children at all. Rachel knows differently. She tries to store up her feelings of anger and sadness in an imaginary blue glass bottle inside herself. She imagines ways in which she can continue to show love and compassion to her grandmother even though her grandmother makes it clear she does not understand Rachel.

Brick is another character that has been touched by tragedy. He not only saw the mangled bodies of Rachel and her family when they had first fallen from the roof, but also felt ignorant because he had glimpsed the boy falling from the roof and thought he was a bird. Brick could not believe he had so badly misjudged what he saw. Brick also grieved because of his lacking relationship with his mother, who was addicted to drugs. When his mother gave him unexpected affection Brick believed things were changing. He was again angry with himself for misjudging the situation when he saw track marks on her arms and heard a man calling her from her bedroom. Brick ran away from home hoping to redeem himself by finding Rachel and telling her the story that Rachel’s father told him.

Although Rachel’s Grandma is upset by the loss of her grandchildren, she does not seem to be immediately brought down by her grief. It is when Loretta dies unexpectedly that Grandma loses hope in her life. She begins drinking and stops watching Rachel as carefully as she had in the past. In addition to missing Loretta, Grandma also grieves the downfall of her neighborhood. She sits on the porch and lectures the drug dealers and gang members who roam the streets. Rachel reports that her grandmother’s behavior is exceptionally bad after she has been drinking. Grandma’s grief also causes her to stop doing the things she had once loved, like working in her garden.

Roger’s grief caused by the loss of his children and the injuries to his oldest daughter causes him to believe his family is better off without him. Roger is an alcoholic who has had no luck in cutting his ties with alcohol. One of the things that Rachel remembers



about him is his addiction to alcohol. She remembers how he depended on alcohol to make it through his days even before his life had been touched by tragedy. When Roger sat by Rachel's bedside after her accident, Brick reported how Roger drank from the flask in his pocket and became more and more inebriated as the days passed. He was finally asked by the nurses to leave because he was disruptive. Before he left, Roger tried to make himself feel better by leaving Brick, still a small boy, with a big job to pass along an important story to Rachel. He wanted Rachel to know that he left because he felt she would be safer without him.

## The Widespread Damage Caused by Addiction

Addiction, whether it is to drugs or alcohol, affects far more people than just the user. The novel *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky* demonstrates how entire families can be devastated because of addiction. Even though characters like Rachel may be aware of the dangers of addiction, it does not necessarily stop them from starting drug or alcohol use.

Rachel's family is completely devastated by alcohol abuse. Roger and Nella's abuse of alcohol began even before Rachel was born. Nella became pregnant with Charles, the couple's first child, when she and Roger met at a bar. It was a fight in a bar when both Nella and Roger were drunk that led to the fire that killed Charles. Even though Nella and Roger stayed together and promised one another to create a family they would protect, the pull of addiction was stronger, especially for Roger. When Roger began drinking again, Nella left him for Doug.

Although Nella had imagined a different life with Doug, she soon became caught in the same trap as she had been in with Roger. Doug convinced Nella to move to America with him. Once he was back in Chicago, Doug fell into his old groups and began drinking again. It was Nella's desperation not only caused by her struggle to stay sober on her own and take care of her family, but also her loneliness and unfamiliarity with American culture that were factors in her decision to kill herself and take her children with her.

Roger continued to drink even after Nella left him. Even though he knew how destructive his habit was, he could not stop. Even as he sat by his daughter's bedside he depended on alcohol and kept a flask in his pocket that he drank from regularly. The nurses finally made him leave the hospital because his drinking made him too loud and disruptive. It was because of his drinking and the destruction caused by it that Roger decided that Rachel was better off without him.

Rachel's life is touched by addition again when her grandmother begins drinking after Loretta's death. Rachel knows that addiction is hereditary and wonders why her father began drinking long before her grandmother ever did. She is puzzled as she thinks "Heredity isn't supposed to work backward" (178). It appears that Rachel's grandmother has just let the grief in her life pile up until she uses the alcohol as a way to escape from



her pain. When she begins drinking, her relationship with Rachel, which was already rocky, deteriorates further.

Because Rachel wants to be accepted by someone, she allows herself to begin drinking when she has her first date with Jesse. Remember that when she ate dinner with Jesse and his family she had allowed herself only to take only one sip of wine because “I don’t want heredity to start working on me” (204-205). When Jesse offers her beer during their date, Rachel does not hesitate. There is no mention of Rachel having any other encounters with alcohol during the rest of the novel so the reader should hope that she makes a decision to avoid it.

Another character who is affected by drug and alcohol abuse is Brick. His mother is a junkie who paid more attention to her boyfriends than she did to her son. Brick was lonely and confused as a child. When his mother reached out to him one day after the death of Nella and her children, Brick believed things were changing with his mother. He was disappointed when he looked closer and noticed the track marks on her arms and the hazy look in her eyes.

Brick ran away from home but was unable to escape drugs. He was picked up by junkies who belittled him and used him as a pawn to help them panhandle. When he became too old for them, the junkies abandoned Brick and he was left to make his own way working odd jobs as he could find them to earn his keep. It was at this point in his life that Brick began drinking and using drugs. Brick’s story has a positive ending because he meets Drew. Drew helps Brick get clean and get a job. At the end of the novel Brick goes back to Chicago to try to reconnect with his mother.

## The Reality of Racism

Although strides have been made in equalizing rights for the races, there is still stigma and racism suffered by those who are black or of mixed race, as seen in the novel *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky*. Because they have never encountered racism like it exists in America, both Nella and Rachel’s characters are particularly disturbed by the way blacks are seen as nothing but the color of their skin.

Roger knew the struggles the biracial couple would face in America and discouraged Nella from taking the children there. It was not until she arrived in America that Nella realized how right Roger was. Racism and the difference between races are also illustrated in the generational differences between Rachel and her grandmother. Even though blacks have better prospects for their lives in Rachel’s generation, they are still haunted by the preconceived notions people have of them based on their skin color.

It is not until Rachel goes to live with her grandmother that she realizes how strange her blue eyes are in a girl who has dark skin. Because she had lived overseas with her black father and Danish mother, Rachel had never really faced the stigma of racism before. Her family had not been judged by their skin color.



When she begins her school career in Portland, Rachel learns that because she is biracial, she does not fit in with either the blacks or the whites. She is called an “Oreo” (148) and accused of wanting to be white. As time passes, Rachel learns to call herself black because she understands that is what others see her as. The author uses this hurtful habit of categorizing people based on skin color as one of her major themes in order to draw attention to the lingering cruelty still shown to blacks.

Nella was also deeply affected by the emphasis Americans place on skin color. She was a white woman who was mother to three biracial children. When people asked her if the children’s father was black, Nella was deeply disturbed. She did not want her children to be known only as a skin color. Nella wanted to protect her children from any pain the world would inflict on them and was devastated when she learned that she was inadvertently calling them by a derogatory name. When Laronne, Nella’s boss, heard Nella refer to her children as “jigaboos” (154) she told her it is the same as calling the children “nigger” (154). Nella was devastated that she had done something inadvertently to hurt her children. She wondered if it were because of the racial disparities that exist in America that Roger did not want to return there.

Meanwhile, Rachel is growing up in a very different landscape than the one in which her grandmother lived. Rachel goes to public school while her grandmother never finished school. Her grandmother mentions that things might have been different if she had been allowed to go to a private school but she never shares that story with Rachel. Rachel is studious and looks forward to getting a college education. Because her grandmother thinks the best a black woman can hope for is a good husband and a job as a secretary, she discourages “book sense” (36). She believes Rachel should spend her time learning how to cook and type instead of reading books.

Even though Rachel has the opportunity to go to school and have a career, she is held back not only by those who want to categorize her but also by her grandmother’s old fashioned ideas. Rachel is devastated when her Aunt Loretta, the one woman who supported and understood Rachel’s desires for herself, died young. With no role models for a strong, modern black woman, Rachel is left to find her own way to be strong.

## Coming of Age

All in all, the story told in the novel *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky* is a coming of age story. Rachel struggles to bridge the gap between her grandmother’s desires for her and her desires for herself as she grows up in a very race-oriented atmosphere. It is against the backdrop of her struggle to accept herself as a black person that Rachel must also deal with the typical teenage challenges like dating, popularity, and sex.

One of the biggest challenges Rachel faces in her new life is her need to find some way to maintain a relationship with her grandmother, a woman who is very different from Rachel. While Rachel strives to be a good student, achievements she believes will make her grandmother proud, her grandmother seems to want something different. It is when Rachel and her grandmother meet Lakeisha, Drew’s daughter, and Rachel sees





the way Lakeisha and her grandmother bond over music that Rachel understands what she is missing. Because Lakeisha can sing like a black woman, Rachel's grandmother is able to overlook the things in the girl that bother her in other black girls. Rachel knows she will never be able to connect with her grandmother the way that Lakeisha has.

There is also a disconnect between Rachel and her grandmother when Rachel begins dating and showing an interest in boys. Even though Grandma wants Rachel to get a good "lizard" (8) or husband, she does not approve of Rachel spending time with boys. She warns Rachel not to let her sexual desires get the best of her but does so in a way that degrades Rachel's mother. She warns Rachel not to be "trash" (237) like her mother was.

Also causing distress for Rachel is the American requirement that she identify herself as a black person. She does not want to be pushed into a category based solely on the color of her skin. Because she has blue eyes, she is not completely accepted by the blacks. The one other biracial girl in her class even makes fun of Rachel and is mean to her. For most of her younger years in school, Rachel has only one friend.

Rachel loses her virginity to Anthony, a boy from her class, when he begs her to let him know what sex feels like. Rachel's grandmother walks in on the two and calls Rachel a "hussy" (172) without even asking for an explanation. Rachel next meets Jesse, a white boy who seems to respect her but after he has sex with her makes a big deal about having slept with a black woman for the first time.

Frustrated with her grandmother's attitude toward her mother, Rachel makes up her mind to run away from home. She believes she would be better off on her own. Brick helps to change her mind when he tells her the story of her family. She learns about the brother she never had and her father's decision to leave her so that he did not hurt her any further. Armed with this new knowledge that her parents did care for her in their own strange ways, Rachel stays with her grandmother.

## The Power of Stories

After she has sex with Anthony, Rachel makes up a story which she decides will be the one she will tell herself is true. This act of making up a story to believe about an incident in one's life is a theme that reverberates throughout the novel. While Brick and Laronne learned differing stories about Nella and Roger's life experiences, the reader gets a full picture of the reasons why Nella chose to end her life and take her children with her. By choosing to share all of these stories with her reader, Durrow gives the reader a full picture of the tragedy—something that none of the characters has.

One of the most moving stories told by the characters of this novel is the story told by Nella in her journals. When Laronne read Nella's words, she came to understand how desperate Nella was to keep her children from getting hurt. This desperation came from Nella's belief that she had failed her first son and allowed him to be killed. Nella's desire to protect her children led her to take them to America—a place she thought would be



better for them but turned out to have even more ways than she had imagined for her children to be hurt. When Nella saw that the place was so dangerous that her children could not even go to the park alone and would suffer being judged by the color of their skin all of their lives, she decided she could not let them grow up in that type of lifestyle.

Roger's story, which is eventually passed along to Rachel, helps Rachel to understand why he never came to get her as he had promised. Brick is able to explain to Rachel that her father was afraid that he would only cause her more pain by being around. He felt he could not protect her from the dangers of the world. In fact, Roger saw himself as one of the dangers from which he needed to protect his daughter. When this story is put into the context of the death of Nella and Roger's first son, Rachel is able to better understand why her father never returned for her.

Had Durrow chosen another way of telling this story, the reader would not have gotten a full picture of Rachel's life and the lives of her mother and father. By giving each character's perspective emphasis, all sides of the story are told. The reader has a full picture he can use to make a decision about the actions of the characters.



# Styles

## Point of View

The *Girl Who Fell from the Sky* is related from the points of view of a variety of characters. Rachel is the main narrator for the story. She tells her parts of the story in the first-person point of view and in the present tense. The author does this in order to make Rachel the center of the story. Rachel relates her own feelings, thoughts, and emotions so that the reader can see how much she has grown and matured over the years since her mother's death. The reader must also know Rachel's own thoughts in order to understand how deeply she is affected by the way others use her skin color to define her.

Several other characters are the focus of sections narrated by a third-person omniscient narrator. These characters are Brick (aka Jamie), Laronne, and Roger. Each of these characters is important to the novel because they have different layers of meaning to add to the story of Rachel's life and the incident in which her mother was killed. By recording their stories in the third-person point of view, the author keeps the reader from getting too emotionally involved with these characters. She reserves this emotional connection for Rachel.

A final character who acts as a narrator for the novel is Nella. Parts of the journals that Nella kept are included in the novel. Because they are journal entries written by Nella, they are in the first person. Because of this personal look into Nella's pain the reader becomes emotionally involved with her, although not as much as with Rachel. The journal entries give the reader needed insight into the struggles Nella was facing and her decision to kill herself and her children. The pain that Nella describes and her desire to protect her children give the reader some sympathy for Nella's actions.

## Language and Meaning

The language in *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* forms an important thematic element in the novel. Not only does the language reflect upon the characters in the story, but it also develops a barrier between the cultures of white, black, and biracial individuals. The language, idioms, and dialogue employed are symbolic of the divide between the races and generations represented in the story.

Because this story is about racism and racial injustice, there is a good deal of derogatory language included in the novel. Many terms used to degrade blacks are included in the body of the novel. Rachel also describes in many places the way that blacks talk about things differently from the way white people do.

Attention is also placed on the speech patterns of different characters. Rachel says of her grandmother, for instance, that she "can't lose Texas" (2-3) because of the way she talks. The author mimics Grandma's speech patterns in the quotes credited to this



character. In the opening line of the novel Grandma says to Rachel, “You my lucky piece” (3). Rachel also describes the way her grandmother yells by making her letters capitalized as she speaks. The author gives a visual representation of this in her quote “BUT, he STILL keepin YOU AWAY from the WORD” (27). In contrast, Rachel says “There is no Texas in the way Aunt Loretta talks” (33). She also describes the way Lakeisha speaks: “She has North Carolina in all the vowels, and still her voice sounds related to Drew’s” (113).

## Structure

This book has an interesting structure because there are a variety of narrators. There are two major parts to the novel. The first includes the incident in which Rachel’s family was killed and her first several years with her grandmother. The second part describes Brick and Rachel’s journey to each other and his act of finally telling her the story that her father wanted her to hear. Each part of the novel is divided into chapters that are notated not by chapter numbers but instead by the name of the person who either narrates that chapter or is of the focus in that section.

The exposition and rising action of the novel begin right away as the characters’ stories weave together to begin telling a sketchy story of Rachel’s childhood and growing up years. The climax comes when Brick and Rachel are on the Ferris wheel together and Brick is able to tell Rachel that he knows she survived her family’s fall. Their connection and his act of telling Rachel the story her father wanted her to hear is the part of the story in which the action falls. The denouement comes when the reader realizes that Rachel holds no animosity toward her mother for what she did.



## Quotes

I learn that black people don't have blue eyes. I learn that I am black. I have blue eyes. I put all these new facts into the new girl.

-- Narrator (Part I, Rachel)

**Importance:** Before she had lived in America, Rachel had never understood the differences in blacks and whites. Once she begins going to a school in America she learns that she has characteristics that do not completely fit those of a black person or those of a white person. Her blue eyes, which Rachel believes she inherited from her mother, are her major characteristic that distinguishes her from the other black people.

But when a person fakes happy, it has edges. Regular people may not see, but the people who count, they can see edges and lines where your smile ends and the real you, the sadness (me) or the anger (Grandma), begins.

-- Narrator (Part I, Rachel)

**Importance:** Because she is very perceptive, Rachel can sense even when people pretend to be happy that they are covering some sadness or anger in their lives.

Instead he said, 'I saw a man. At the top of that building. He pushed them off and ran.'"

-- Jamie (Part I, Jamie)

**Importance:** Jamie, who told the reporter that his name was Brick, did not think when he told the reporter that there was a man who pushed Nella and her children from the roof. Only after he was accosted by the Pigeon Man, who was angry because the police suspected he was the one who pushed Nella and her children off the roof, did Brick think about the effect his accusation might have.

Doug — that was his name. Funny how Laronne made him a black man in her mind when Nella first mentioned him."

-- Narrator (Part I, Laronne)

**Importance:** This is an example of bias. Laronne had assumed that because Nella had a black husband that Doug was black as well. The fact that Doug did not have a job strengthened Laronne's belief that Doug was black. She was surprised when she saw he was white.

She means grown up, I say inside, but there are special rules for how she says things since she's from down South. I want to correct her but don't."

-- Narrator (Part I, Rachel)

**Importance:** Rachel continues to be irritated by the way that her grandmother talks. Even though she knows what her grandmother is intending to say, Rachel does not correct her. Rachel believes her grandmother talks the way that she does because she is from the south. She does not see it as her grandmother's lack of education.



But I can see she's not, and for the first time I think that smiling Aunt Loretta has middle layers like me. Maybe she's made herself into the new girl too."

-- Narrator (Part I, Rachel)

**Importance:** It is after Rachel overhears the conversation between Aunt Loretta and Helen that she realizes that Loretta has things in her life that she tries to keep hidden. She realizes that Loretta has hurts she tries to hide, just like Rachel does. Rachel refers to these hidden hurts as being part of her middle layers.

I care about my little girl getting better — if she gets out of here — keeping her safe from everything. Including me.

-- Roger (Part I, Roger)

**Importance:** Roger related to Brick that he believed Rachel would be safer if he were not around her. This statement comes after Roger told Brick that he was drunk the night he went to sleep on the couch with a lit cigarette. The cigarette started a fire. His oldest son, Charles, died in that fire.

We lie to ourselves in many ways; we write down only what we want to understand and what we want to see. Laronne had many questions from just the few entries she'd read. Who was Charles? What was it that broke Nella? Had it been a thought and then a plan?

-- Narrator (Part I, Laronne)

**Importance:** When she was cleaning out Nella's apartment Laronne found several journals written by Nella. As Laronne began reading the story of Nella's life she discovered the journals raised more questions than they actually answered.

I know only a few more things about Grandma than I did when I first came to live with her, because some of things I did know I had to subtract after Aunt Loretta died."

-- Narrator (Part I, Rachel)

**Importance:** Rachel notes that since she moved in with her grandmother she has not gotten to know her any better than she did at first. In fact, Rachel notes that after Loretta died, Grandma stopped doing some things, like gardening, that had defined her personality when Rachel first met her.

I am fourteen and know that I am black, but I can't make the Gospel sound right from my mouth. I can't help make Grandma's feelings show. They hold hands and Grandma hugs Lakeisha again. I can see what Grandma sees in Lakeisha. It is a reflection."

-- Narrator (Part I, Rachel)

**Importance:** Rachel feels something kin to jealousy when she sees the way that her grandmother reacts when she hears Lakeisha sing. Because Lakeisha can sing the gospel like Grandma can the two share a special connection.



Today the woman at the kiosk was staring at us, and she said if the children father was black? Roger never was black. He was charming and fun and handsome.”

-- Narrator (Part I, Nella)

**Importance:** Nella is confused and angry when a woman in America asks her if her children’s father was black. Where she had lived, the differences between black and white had never been discussed.

When he said but you cannot be pregnant, we cannot get married, and when I said why not he said cause you are white and I am not. I did not know that was a problem. So many white women were dating NCOs with brown skin, and it was normal to me.”

-- Narrator (Part I, Nella)

**Importance:** Nella was surprised how Roger had acted when she told him that she was pregnant. He said they could not get married because of the differences in their skin color, a statement that Nella did not understand.

I can still be something to be proud of: class vice-president, National Honor Society head, coeditor of the school’s creative writing journal. I am a good student if not a good girl. Those are the things I will make count.”

-- Narrator (Part I, Rachel)

**Importance:** Rachel knows that she has disappointed her Grandma by the way she acted with Anthony. She decides even though she is not good, she can still be a person that her grandmother can be proud of through her achievements.

If there’s no one else to tell another side — the only story that can be told is the story that becomes true.”

-- Narrator (Part I, Rachel)

**Importance:** This quote ends the first Part of this novel. The quote directly refers to the story that Rachel decides to tell herself about her sexual experience with Anthony. The reader understands that the quote also refers to what little Rachel knows about her family. It foreshadows that Rachel will learn more of the story about her family from Brick.

He couldn’t hear the black in Brick’s voice. He shared his theories about spooks with Brick for a week until Brick could take it no longer.”

-- Narrator (Part II, Brick)

**Importance:** Brick worked as a yard and maintenance man for a blind army veteran for a short while before he arrived in Portland. He left when the man, who could not tell from Brick’s voice that he was black, continued to talk about black people and refer to them using derogatory language.

I forget that what you are — being black or being white — matters. Jesse makes me see there’s a different way to be white. And Brick makes me see there’s a different way



to be black.”

-- Narrator (Part II, Rachel)

**Importance:** When Rachel first begins spending time with Jesse and Brick, these two young men make her see that not everyone thinks of everything in terms of skin color. Jesse is a different kind of white man from anyone she has met before while Brick is different from any black man she has met before.

He realized he was going too fast. You couldn't fill a room with ghosts when you didn't know what power they might have.

-- Narrator (Part II, Brick)

**Importance:** When Brick first visited Rachel at her home, he realized he could not pressure her with too much information about her family too soon. After he had questioned her about her Aunt Loretta, whom he learned had died, he knew bringing up her father as well might be too painful for her.

I hurt a lot of people with my using. No one more than Nella.”

-- Doug (Part II, Laronne)

**Importance:** Doug admits to Laronne that he hurt Nella because he used drugs and alcohol. He does not indicate that his habit had anything to do with her death but the reader suspects he was responsible in at least a small part for her unhappiness.

When he looks at me, it feels like no one has really seen me since the accident. In his eyes, I'm not the new girl. I'm not the color of my skin. I'm a story. One with a past and a future unwritten.”

-- Narrator (Part II, Rachel)

**Importance:** It is when Brick tells her the story that her father wanted her to hear about her family that Rachel feels like a complete person for the first time.

But I think, If only Robbie had been a bird. If only we had been a family that could fly.”

-- Rachel (Part II, Rachel)

**Importance:** Rachel returns to the images of birds as she indicates she wishes that her family had been birds, like Brick imagined Robbie was. If they had been, Rachel believed they would have been able to rise above the difficulties of their lives.