

# **The Girl Who Owned a City Study Guide**

**The Girl Who Owned a City by O.T. Nelson**

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# Plot Summary

In *The Girl Who Owned a City*, a virus has killed off everyone over twelve. Ten-year-old Lisa Nelson takes on a leadership role, finding stores of food and organizing Grand Avenue for protection against gangs. After the local gang burns down her house, she gets the idea of making a defensible castle, and Lisa leads the way in turning the local high school into her own castle, a new city that she fights to run and keep.

As the novel begins, ten-year-old Lisa is foraging for food in deserted houses nearby. Everyone over twelve has been killed off by a sudden and deadly virus. Lisa lives in her house with her young brother. Her neighbor, Jill Jansen, takes in orphaned young children, and Lisa shares some of her supplies. Food is running out, though, and gangs are beginning to form. Lisa worries about the future.

Lisa finds a stash of supplies at a farmhouse out of town and teaches herself to drive to make a supply run. Her first big load, though, is stolen by a local gang. Lisa decides she must organize the neighborhood for protection and calls a meeting of the kids on her street. She also has an idea to get supplies from a grocery warehouse. At the meeting, Lisa promises to share her ideas and supplies in exchange for the neighborhood forming a militia. The children set up defenses, including watch dogs and booby traps.

Lisa and her neighbor Craig go on a supply run to the warehouse, and while they're gone, the local gang attacks. Their leader, Tom Logan, is hit on the head with a rock from one of the defenses. It's a victory, but it's mostly luck. While Lisa and Todd are away on their next supply run, the gang comes in, loots their house, and burns it down.

Lisa decides that the kids need someplace defensible. She thinks of the old high school and forms a plan to create a castle, a defensible city in the high school. The neighborhood children prepare in secret and one day just seem to disappear from Grand Avenue. No one knows they're inside the high school, working in secret. When their defenses are prepared, they make the city public. Lisa makes a constitution, making it clear that the city belongs to her, and others are free to stay only if they follow the rules. The defenses work, through several gang attacks including two by Tom Logan's gang.

When Tom Logan attacks the third time, he takes over the city. Lisa is hurt and believed killed, but her friends quietly take her away to the farm and care for her. Lisa spends her recovery time planning and preparing to take back her city, with the help of her friends. Meanwhile, the people of the city learn that Lisa is alive and desert Tom to come to the farm. When Lisa sneaks into the city to take Tom hostage, she finds a trap awaiting her, but she is able to berate Tom into giving up his hold on the city. Her city is back, but in future danger from the growing gangs in nearby Chicago.



# Part One: Chapters 1 and 2

## Part One: Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

In *The Girl Who Owned a City*, a virus has killed off everyone over twelve. Ten-year-old Lisa Nelson takes on a leadership role, finding stores of food and organizing Grand Avenue for protection against gangs. After the local gang burns down her house, she gets the idea of making a defensible castle, and Lisa leads the way in turning the local high school into her own castle, a new city that she fights to run and keep.

As the novel begins, a fifth-grade girl whose life has suddenly, horribly changed breaks into an empty house. She tries to calm her fears by reassuring herself that the occupants are gone, and probably dead. She almost flips the light switch but realizes that there's no electricity. She takes a purse, canned foods, toiletries, and a can opener. She sees a writing desk, and out of curiosity begins looking at the letter. She finds a letter from Mr. Williams, the house's former occupant, to his son John at a military academy.

The letter says that Mr. Williams and his wife have only a few days to live. The neighbors have died. The virus is spreading throughout the world, killing all adults but no one under twelve. He asks his son to get a vaccine in Atlanta, saying the telephones are gone and hopefully the letter will get through. He says goodbye to his son, apologizing for a trip they never took. The girl remembers a similar letter from her father before he died.

In chapter two, the girl heads home. She is stopped by Jill Jansen, a neighbor who has taken in homeless children. Reluctantly, the girl gives her some soup, charcoal, and matches. Then the girl, Lisa, goes home to her brother Todd. They have some soup, crackers, and powdered milk. Lisa has come to love the brother she once found annoying and is taking on the role of a mother. Supplies are running out, and the supermarkets have been looted. On the trip Lisa and her brother made to gather supplies last week, only things children don't like, like vegetables, were left.

Todd has learned to haul out trash and take in water, and Lisa has given him an empty gun to scare other kids away. Todd even volunteers to do dishes. After they eat, Lisa makes the small handful of popcorn she's saved, and other neighborhood kids come to share. It's badly popped, but it's a special treat.

Gangs begin to form, and Lisa and Todd board up their windows. They sleep in a small basement room for safety. Todd asks for a story, and Lisa tells them about Todd and Barney Beagle going fishing. In the story, the boy and his dog catch a fish for him and his sister, so they won't have to eat soup all the time. After Todd falls asleep, Lisa thinks about ways of getting food. Fishing is one possibility. She might learn to garden. She thinks of riding her bike north, to some farms, to find food, maybe even a chicken. Lisa thinks about how animals live on instinct and realizes that people must think to survive.



## Part One: Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

The first chapter of the novel serves primarily to set up the main premise of the story and establish its main character. Lisa has been suddenly thrust from her old life to her new one. She has quickly become accustomed to looting empty houses for food. She knows looting is a kind of stealing, but she justifies what she is doing. No one owns the empty houses anymore, and she and her brother have to survive.

The letter from Mr. Williams to his son explains the setup of the story. A terrible virus has hit the world, killing off everyone over twelve. Lisa's parents are dead, as are all the adults. The children are left to survive on their own.

Lisa's encounter with Jill sets up an attitude that Lisa struggles against throughout the novel. Jill has taken in young orphans and takes on a role of caregiver. However, she doesn't push her children to help and contribute. She tries to shelter them and provide for them. She ends up taking without giving, just as she takes Lisa's soup by pleading for help. To Lisa, and the author, earning what you have is important. Jill and her orphans need to learn how to earn what they get.

Lisa's brother Todd is a contrast to Jill's orphans. He is young and needs to be cared for, but he takes out the trash, takes in water, and does the dishes. He contributes to the household and earns his keep. Lisa believes in the power of thought and ideas. She is constantly thinking about ways she and Todd can increase their chances of survival and better their lives. To Lisa, a human being's power comes from thinking, and the power of ideas is a main theme of the novel.



# Part One: Chapter 3

## Part One: Chapter 3 Summary

In the morning, Lisa puts on her Girl Scout uniform, another part of her lost past, and rushes through her chores. Lisa suggests that Todd try fishing, and once he's gone, she prepares to bike to the farms. Todd returns empty handed, and Lisa reassures him. Though he protests, she leaves him at home for safety as she heads on her journey. The bike ride is arduous, but Lisa is distracted by her thoughts. She stops at an empty gas station, and a few minutes later, she comes to a farm.

The crops are gone, and the cows are dead. Still, she finds a note on the kitchen table asking whoever finds the farm to come live there. Lisa is moved by the note but has no time to waste. She gathers supplies and even finds a chicken. She promises herself that she will learn to drive the car so that she can make bigger trips for supplies. When she arrives home, she tells Todd that she's going back in the car, and if she's not back by 3:30, he should come looking for her.

Nervously, Lisa gets into the car, remembering the instructions her father always gave her mother. She starts unsteadily, crashing into a neighbor's motorcycle. She presses too hard on the brake and stalls out. Finally, she starts again, with more confidence. Luckily, there are no other cars on the road. She successfully fills the car with supplies, goes home, and gives her brother instructions to hide the food. Then she heads out again. When she comes back, she finds her brother injured. Other children came and took their supplies, but still, Lisa is pleased with the new possibilities.

That night, lying awake, Todd asks for another story. Lisa tells of two orphans living in an impoverished town. The orphans make a living selling eggs and vegetables. In the story, some children come and steal the orphans' chickens, and the brother blames himself. Then the brother has an idea, to re-open the candle shop where his father used to work, and where many people in the town once worked. No one in town will help, but the children make candles to sell by the road-side. Their business is a success, and the girl is able to buy her brother three Christmas presents. She says his present to her was his great idea.

After Todd falls asleep, Lisa thinks of ways to hide their food and defend themselves. She thinks of putting a tripwire around the house that will set off rocks falling from the roof. While she sleeps, she thinks of the word warehouse, and the next day, she looks up a grocery warehouse in the phone book. She plans to get the neighborhood children together to help protect each other and gather food.

## Part One: Chapter 3 Analysis

Lisa's life is filled with remnants of her past, like her Girl Scout uniform. Putting on the uniform makes her feel better because she feels a connection with the secure, easy



past that is gone forever. Although Jill is sad for the past, she is excited when she has new ideas that she wants to test out. Jill's great pleasure in life comes from discovering new ideas and following through with them. Some of Jill's ideas, like Todd trying to fish, don't work, but she keeps thinking and trying.

Lisa is willing to constantly try new things. The fact that she's ten and can barely reach the pedals of her parents' car doesn't stop her from trying. She teaches herself how to drive out of necessity, but she also does it out of her attitude to keep trying and to keep reaching for bigger and better things. Lisa has big ideas and goals, and they get bigger as the story goes on.

Lisa's biggest problem is the local gang. When Lisa's ideas pan out, the gang comes to steal her rewards. The gang represents the thinking of a group: to take what belongs to an individual and distribute it among a group who didn't earn it. Lisa will fight this attitude, not only in its violent form represented by gangs, but also in its more subtle form, represented by the children's desire to share and the assumption that Lisa's supplies will be shared out among the Grand Avenue kids. Lisa's ideas represent an objectivist or libertarian political point of view. Her philosophy is that everyone must earn what they receive, and that the people who earn the most shouldn't be hampered by rules or taxes that take away their earnings and redistribute them to the group.

The stories that Lisa tells her brother reflect her thoughts and their life together. The story of the children who reopen the candle shop reflects Lisa's dreams for the future. She wants to start society going again and recapture the past.



# Part One: Chapters 4 and 5

## Part One: Chapters 4 and 5 Summary

In chapter four, Lisa rises early and goes outside to plan the day. She finds that the car's tires are flat. Someone seems to have let the air out. Lisa is dismayed, but Todd quickly gets the tire pump from the garage. After they inflate the tires and have breakfast, Lisa does the dishes and tells Todd what supplies to gather to create a better defense for their house. Todd asks her about the word "logical" and Lisa tries to explain it to him.

Lisa and Todd make an alarm system with thread and tin cans. Then, they make warning signs, secret storage spaces in the house, and booby traps. After the day's work, they make invitations to a neighborhood militia meeting. When Lisa goes to give an invitation to her friend Julie, she finds the house a mess and Julie sick in bed. Julie scoffs at the idea of taking vitamins, but it turns out her family is starving. Lisa promises to help, but Julie confesses that she didn't ask for help because she feels guilty at not stopping the gang who stole from Lisa and Todd. Her brother Charlie was with the gang that sold the supplies.

While Lisa goes to get food, Julie tries to convince her brother not to join the gang. They're still arguing when Lisa returns. Charlie insists they need the gang to survive. Finally, Charlie promises not to join the gang, but Lisa doesn't trust him. She advises Charlie to think about where he can find food, instead of feeling sorry for himself, and invites him to the meeting. Lisa also finds the Cole family, Cheryl and Steve, in a desperate situation and thinking about becoming involved with the gangs. Craig Bergman, a twelve-year-old with a six-year-old sister, is faring better and has plans to garden in spring. Jill Jansen is caring for eight orphans plus her two young sisters. After delivering the invitations, Jill is exhausted and falls asleep before her brother can ask for a story.

In chapter five, Friday arrives, and Lisa plans for the meeting. She wants to provide her ideas for finding food, in exchange for the neighborhood forming a protective militia. She plans to tell the children the militia will protect individual rights on Grand Avenue. Lisa and Todd bring popcorn, Kool Aid, and a closed bag to the meeting. Lisa explains how the children can use warning signals, like a trumpet or bell, to come to each other's aid if they're attacked.

The other children object that maybe they should form their own gang. After all, they have no food. Craig begins talking about growing food. He's making a solarium to garden in the winter. One child suggests building a church; another suggests forming a bond with the Chidester gang that attacked Todd. Someone else suggests hiring the gang, using Lisa's supplies. Lisa finally speaks up, saying that her supplies are her own. She shows the supplies she's gathered, including aspirin, Coke, and seeds. She promises to help the others, but only if they agree to a militia. The children agree, and Lisa makes Craig commander of Grand Avenue Militia. As Lisa falls asleep that night,





she realizes how much she needs to stay in contact with her neighbors to protect what she's worked for.

## Part One: Chapters 4 and 5 Analysis

Lisa explains the word "logic" to her younger brother as well as she can. The author highlights the word "logic" because it is an idea that he and his main character hold dear. Lisa tries to think logically and find solutions that work. When she finds that the car tires are flat, her emotions take over. The car, which is so important to her, no longer works. Lisa doesn't think. She is overwhelmed by her feelings instead. Lisa's brother Todd provides the solution quickly and easily: a car tire pump. The solution is one that Lisa could have thought of, if she stopped to think. The scene illustrates not only logic but the importance of thinking and ideas.

Lisa's friend Julie, on the other hand, is not thinking and being logical. Lisa finds Julie in bed, unable to stand. She is starving. She scoffs at the idea of vitamins because she is mimicking things her mother said, not thinking through her real life problem. Julie and Charlie are being ruled by the events around them, being pulled into gang life instead of taking control of their own lives. To Lisa, all that is needed to fight the problems Julie and Charlie face are ideas.

Lisa uses her supplies, her wealth, in order to buy leadership. She has proven her ability to have good ideas by acquiring wealth, and with that wealth, she buys the children's backing of her ideas. Like the gangs, Lisa provides supplies in return for services and loyalty from the other children. The difference is that Lisa is well-meaning. She doesn't hurt others to gain supplies and power. She uses ideas to get supplies and has big ideas for the future.



# Part One: Chapters 6 and 7

## Part One: Chapters 6 and 7 Summary

In chapter six, Lisa takes Craig with her on a trip for supplies. She makes him promise to keep the destination a secret. She also makes him promise to care for Todd, if anything happens to her. They go through the deserted streets to the Jewel Grocery Warehouse. Lisa is distressed when she sees the building's windows are broken, but Craig convinces her to go look. As they approach, it looks like the doors are closed and lower windows intact. They break in through a window behind a bush, and saw through protective bars with a saw that Lisa brought.

The warehouse lives up to their wildest expectations, and Craig and Lisa share a can of pears. They plan how to hide the new-found supplies, deciding on six hiding places: an airport hangar, a farm silo, a furniture store basement, and furnace rooms at three churches. They fill up the car with a load of supplies, and Craig drives home, his first time driving a car. The supplies they've discovered could give them a secure year to plan for the future. Lisa tells Craig about the farm she's discovered, and Craig is interested. He can see himself starting a farm. Lisa, on the other hand, wants to get the whole world running again.

In chapter seven, the children meet, and Craig describes his defense plan. They plan to make alarms, get weapons from the police station, and make bombs of bottles of gasoline. Then, the Chidester Gang approaches. Tom Logan steps forward and tries to make a deal: protection in exchange for Lisa's food and supplies. Lisa refuses, saying she can't trust the gang and that they'll take care of themselves.

After the gang is gone, Lisa suggests they go to the lake for a campfire, complete with marshmallows, soda, and chips. Realizing Christmas is coming, Lisa sends Charlie to the house for a box of Christmas ornaments, and the children decorate a pine tree. When Lisa wanders away to think about things, Jill comes to talk to her. Jill is worried that the fourteen kids at her place need supplies. Lisa promises help, in exchange for the children taking sentry duties along the street and helping with supply runs. Jill is worried that the children are too young, and finally Lisa gives in. She is uneasy that the others feel it's her duty to help them and don't work for themselves.

## Part One: Chapters 6 and 7 Analysis

The grocery warehouse is one of Lisa's best ideas. When Lisa sees that the grocery warehouse windows are broken, she has an emotional reaction, much like her emotional reaction when the air is let out of her tires. She is ready to give up without even checking the warehouse. Craig is the one who convinces her to take a look, even though some of the windows are broken. What would have happened if Craig had let her turn around, then snuck back later to take the supplies? Why doesn't Lisa attribute



some of her success and supplies, which she takes complete ownership of, to Craig? Is Lisa's original idea enough to "earn" all the supplies in the warehouse?

Lisa refuses to make a deal with Tom Logan. Is this a smart idea? It could be possible to turn Tom Logan into a useful member of the group. Lisa doesn't trust him, and what she succeeds in doing is creating an enemy and adversary throughout the rest of the novel. Tom becomes the antagonist in the story. In a way, Tom is too much of a leader to fit into Lisa's plans. Lisa has no rivals for leadership throughout the story and takes total control and responsibility for what she builds. She also demands total ownership of everything that she builds.



# Part One: Chapters 8 and 9

## Part One: Chapters 8 and 9 Summary

In chapter eight, the children set up defenses. Julie and her family train watchdogs. Each household sets up an alarm. Craig holds target practice each morning for all children over five, using 22-calibre rifles. Each family sets up a rock-slide booby trap like the one Lisa and Todd built. The kids make Molotov cocktails out of Coke bottles. The street becomes a line of fortresses, with barbed wire, boarded windows, and wood catwalks connecting the roofs. They hold drills to prepare for battle, and one girl comes up with the idea of using fire extinguishers. The children take pride in what they're doing. They block off the ends of their street with barbed wire, barking dogs, and warning signs.

When the defenses are ready, Craig and Lisa take two cars out at night for a supply run. On the way, Lisa scrapes a parked car and then is rear-ended by Craig when she stops suddenly for a cat, but the damage is minor. As they drive, Craig worries that building up their militia will lead to fighting. Lisa thinks about rebuilding civilization. At the warehouse, Lisa and Craig pack the cars with essentials, bringing only a few treats. On the way home, they speed up their cars in a race.

When Craig and Lisa return, they find the street was attacked while they were gone. Tom Logan got knocked out by the rock booby trap trying to break into Lisa's house. Todd is the hero for springing the trap on the intruder. Though the militia was mostly cowed by fear, soon the group is congratulating themselves on the working traps. They celebrate with a bonfire, singing a made-up song about their town of Grandville. Lisa declares the next day a holiday.

In chapter nine, Lisa asks Todd to come with her on the next supply run, so Craig can stay behind to be on guard. She also wants Todd to learn to drive. The next morning, in the excitement of the holiday, the children go around to wake everyone up. They go to Lisa's house from the roof catwalks. They sneak into the house from the attic and wake a surprised Lisa and Todd. The whole street goes to the lake for a celebration.

Lisa sneaks off to teach Todd to drive, but soon the other children find them. Lisa starts to teach Steve to drive, too. That night, Lisa and Todd head off to get supplies, but Lisa is nervous. She has Todd practice driving part of the way. When they arrive, Todd asks Lisa not to call him by his old nickname, Toddy-boy. They load the car, and Todd sleeps on the way home. When they arrive, they find another tragedy. Their house is burning to the ground.

## Part One: Chapters 8 and 9 Analysis

Lisa and Craig work hard at establishing defenses for their street. They prepare constantly and think of many ideas. What fails when Lisa and Craig return is not their



ideas, but the children. No one comes to help Todd. The booby traps succeed, but Lisa knows it's because of luck. If a rock hadn't hit Tom on the head, then their house would have been overrun. Lisa cannot rely on the other kids themselves. She has to have a better system that will account for the lack of calm and bravery from the other kids.

Craig worries about Lisa's militia. He believes that Lisa is encouraging violence and inviting attacks from the gangs. Lisa sees the militia as a defense of what's rightfully hers. Ultimately, the militia is not for the defense of Grand Avenue but for the defense of Lisa, her home, and her supplies.

The end of chapter nine is the end of the first part of the novel and marks an important ending in Lisa's life, as well. Her house is burned to the ground while she and Todd are off getting supplies. This is an ultimate failure for Lisa. She has hoped that the lucky success of the previous gang attack, and Craig's presence as a leader, would bring a different result. Instead, the results are worse. The tide has turned in the direction of the gangs, and Lisa has lost everything. However, she does not lose her knowledge. Her ideas about where to find food and how to survive are still with her.



## Part Two: Chapter 10

### Part Two: Chapter 10 Summary

For the week after the fire, Lisa does nothing but blame herself; she has lost confidence. Jill takes care of her, and Lisa watches the children Jill has taken in. The children fight over the toys they're supposed to share, and Lisa thinks the children suffer from lack of ownership of their own toys. Lisa has a plan to give each child a toy, if he or she can find a can of gasoline for the group. She promises a box of candy to any child who brings their parents' car keys. Jill is worried because she wants children to share, but Lisa thinks the children need jobs to do and ownership of their own things and shouldn't be forced to share.

While the kids are gone, Lisa calls a meeting of the militia. She wants better protection. She starts talking about her dreams for the future, and Charlie calls her crazy. Fed up, Lisa leaves to sit by the lake. She worries about the Chidester Gang, and how big they'll become in the future. They need a castle, someplace they can defend. Then Lisa sees the old Glenbard High School and realizes that it's defensible.

Lisa rushes back to find the young children hurrying in with gasoline and keys. One of the little girls, Eileen, is crying because she has no gas, but she has the keys to her father's road construction business. Another girl says she'll help Eileen find some gas. When Lisa gets back to the meeting, Charlie is talking about his plan to train dogs for protection. Lisa tells them about the "castle." They make plans for the move, for which Steve will learn to drive one of Eileen's father's trucks. That night, Jill's children sleep well, and Jill wonders if it is because they earned their own toys.

That night, Lisa tells Todd a story about a king who, instead of taxing the people, sells them advice. He makes more money than other kings and has happier, wealthier, harder-working subjects. He specializes in giving advice for happiness, which his subjects swear never to repeat. The one sad person is the king's son. No matter what the king gives him, his son isn't happy. The king offers a reward of his kingdom to anyone who can help, but no one can. One night, the prince disappears, and the king loses confidences and begins losing money.

The king is on the verge of having to tax his people, when one day a visitor comes looking for advice. The young man has much but isn't happy. The king gives his usual advice: that it's earning what you have that's important. The visitor turns around and tells the king that he should have followed his own advice with his son. The king agrees and begs the man to find his son. The visitor turns out to be the son in disguise, who has already learned his lesson of needing to earn what he has.

The Glenbard plan works. On January first, by which time Chidester has joined with the Elm gang, Grand Avenue suddenly becomes deserted.



## Part Two: Chapter 10 Analysis

After the fire, Lisa's confidence is shaken and she stops having ideas. Just like when she saw her tires were flat, Lisa becomes mired in her emotions. She is so overwhelmed by the idea of the fire that she cannot do anything but blame herself. The thing that saves Lisa from being mired in her distress is putting her mind to another problem.

Lisa thinks through the problem of Jill's children. Lisa sees being forced to share and communally owning property as bad. It causes behavioral problems with the children. Is this a true representation? Can human beings live together, sharing, in a functional society? The depiction of Jill's children is designed to be a criticism of socialism and communism. The children don't earn what they have. Jill, as the caretaker, is asked to do too much, while the children don't contribute. In the end, the children and Jill are all unhappy. However, when the children are given a job and earn a reward, all the problems go away. There are no more nightmares. Is this a realistic solution to the problem? Does it apply to larger, more complex situations equally well?

Lisa's story of the king shows an objectivist view of the world. The king rules through his mental power and in a capitalist system. The king is a businessman, not a politician. He doesn't grab power, but he earns it through his ideas. However, the king still has absolute power. He is a dictator, but a benevolent one, much like Lisa will become. The story is about ruling as much as it is about the benefits of earning what you have.



## Part Two: Chapters 11 and 12

### Part Two: Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

Chapter eleven describes the secrecy of preparations for the move. On the night of the move, captains wake the children, telling them of the plan. Children quietly gather and load their possessions on the truck. To stay at the new "city," the children must follow the rules and help fortify the city. While it's being fortified, the building will seem deserted, with no lights and no one at the windows. The new city has living quarters, a cafeteria, a hospital run by Jill, classrooms run by Craig, and a job for everyone. Lisa says that the building is hers. People who stay have to work, but everyone is free to leave. All the children will learn farming, medicine, defense, machinery, or building. The strategy room is run by the new general, Charlie, and there will be strategy meetings daily. They plan to bring children's books in from the library and have six library rooms.

At night, the only light is in a carefully sealed tower room where the leaders meet to plan. Lisa thinks the city needs to be sealed off with steel and bolts. Craig suggests welding metal doors to the window frames. They plan to seal up the first floor only, so there will be light in the upper floors, and the windows will be the last job since they're visible from outside. They plan a secret tunnel entrance, and Charlie is training dogs. The main defense will be armed sentries stationed on the roof, given cover by the roof's edge. There will be drums of hot oil that can be poured on attackers. At night, the children silently gather supplies, train, and plan.

Snow on the ground prevents Charlie from going out to train the dogs for four days. He doesn't want to leave tracks. Meanwhile, Lisa has been thinking that after the fortress is ready, they could rent rooms to other children. Craig is worried about spies and bringing in conflict and problems, but Lisa thinks those problems can be overcome. They plan to start with just three new families, to see how it goes.

Jill asks Lisa why she says she owns the city. Lisa says she has a right to what she found, supplied, and runs. Without her, no one would be in charge. If they were a sharing group, the group would own her. Jill talks about cities that were just getting started at the time of the plague that were owned by private individuals, and she says they worked well. Even a country, the Republic of Minerva, was being built that way. Lisa insists she needs the freedom to run her city as she sees fit. She writes a constitution where the city is her property. Others are free to leave but cannot be in debt when they leave. Offensive violence is prohibited. Everyone signs it. On January 16, the city bursts to life with celebration, and they raise a yellow and orange flag.

In chapter twelve, the city prospers over the next year, and new children join. The city grows to five hundred, and many children are skeptical about Lisa owning the city. She thinks, and plans, and read books, which often confuse her. Then she finds one that makes sense to her, and keeps it as her secret. The days are filled with problems to solve. The defense strategy works wonderfully, though, staving off eight enemy attacks.





Tom's gang, now 150 strong, was the only one to attack twice. Charlie worries about him returning.

Lisa goes to the roof to get some air, and finds that the dogs below aren't responding. She calls the militia to the roof. She goes down to check on the dogs and finds them poisoned. Then she is grabbed by three soldiers, including Tom Logan. She breaks away and runs, but gets shot. Tom calls up that they have Lisa, and his gang overruns the city. Tom claims they're holding Lisa captive and takes over the city.

## Part Two: Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

Lisa sets out all the rules for the new city, because she feels she owns it, by virtue of having the idea to make a city out of it. She sets the requirements for those who come live there, and she sets the rules about what is owed to her. Lisa's idea is that others are free to go out and make their own fortunes. However hard Jill works to build up the hospital, she will never own it. However hard Craig works to teach the other children and create a school, he will never own that school. Lisa pays the other children with her ideas, goods, and protection, which she has earned through her ideas. Has she earned everything she takes? Do the other children get everything that they earn?

Lisa is opposed to voting. Anything driven by a group, she believes, will be about dividing up the goods. Lisa is merely a leadership group of one. She divides up the goods, and her decision is that she owns everything she's found because of her ideas. She divides up the goods according to what she believes others deserve based on what they earn from her. She has a dictatorship, which prevents squabbling. What would happen if Lisa weren't well meaning? She decides what others' toil is worth. What if she always declared people to still be in debt to her when they wanted to leave her city? Wouldn't she then have serfs or slaves instead of citizens? What will happen when Lisa is gone? Who will take over the city, and what's to ensure that they are as well-meaning as Lisa? Lisa's system of government relies on a well-meaning industrialist overseer, acting as a good parent to those beneath.

In chapter twelve, the city grows and prospers. This seems to support Lisa's ideas about governance, but that is because the author believes in Lisa's ideas about governance. The author shows Lisa prospering because she is an example of his own views. The book that Lisa finds is likely B.F. Skinner's *Walden Two*, a novel about a similar experiment in setting up a self-run city.

Tom's gang, however, also grows. Violence is successful, just as Lisa's benevolent dictatorship is. Tom is the example of a dictator who is not benevolent but leads through physical power and violence. Tom also continues attacking Lisa, seeming to consider her a personal enemy. Lisa's system can't hold out against him forever, and when she makes a mistake by climbing down the wall, he swoops in. Lisa is shot and loses her city. This brings to an end the second part of the book, where Glenbard rises and falls.



## Part Three: Chapters 13 and 14

### Part Three: Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

In chapter thirteen, Todd is on the roof and sees his sister fall. After his initial grief, he climbs down the rope. He finds she's still alive. Using the rope ladder from the roof, he climbs to Craig's window. He gets Craig's sister Erika to pretend to be sick, to gather Craig and Jill for help. Todd meets Craig, Jill, and Erika at the hospital window, and they go to get Lisa. Todd takes his family Cadillac, and they transport his sister to the old farm.

Lisa has lost a lot of blood. Jill issues orders to the others. Gathering her confidence, she washes the wound. Lisa was only shot in the arm and must have hit her head. Jill removes the bullet and sews up Lisa's arm. Lisa wakes in the middle of the night, and Jill gives her a glass of whiskey for the pain. Todd sits with Lisa. He tries to tell her a story and fails miserably, but he doesn't care. Finally, they both fall asleep. Meanwhile, Tom Logan is in the Glenbard tower. He is angry about Lisa's death, angry about the victory that was really only luck, an angry at his own fears.

In chapter fourteen, Lisa wakes, ready to start planning to retake her city. Jill and Todd go looking for supplies, while Lisa plans to hire an army to take back Glenbard. She thinks about sneaking in and taking Logan, then keeping him prisoner after his army is forced to leave. Lisa is so deep in thought that the other children think she's delirious. Finally, they get her to eat. They found Tang and even fresh chicken eggs from a chicken living in the house next door. After breakfast, Lisa tells a little about her plans. She wants Todd to have a disguise and become a spy. Then, she sleeps most of the day away.

Todd and Jill work to find a disguise that doesn't look silly. Meanwhile, Craig looks through the farmer's library. Craig decides he's going to take over the farm and get it running again, with his sister Erika. He and Erika take a tour of the farm, and when they get back they see Todd's disguise. He's dressed as a girl. Lisa explains Todd's mission, to sneak in and learn where Tom Logan's room is and what the defenses are. If it's safe, Todd will also talk to Charlie about their plans, and Charlie will help with supplies and people.

While Todd is gone, Lisa asks Craig if he will help her reclaim her city. He refuses, asking her to stay on the farm with him and his sister. He accuses her of building valuable things that others want to take away, making herself a target. Lisa is not giving up, though. She sees that the real problem that causes the fighting is fear.

### Part Three: Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

Lisa is not dead. Part three of the novel will be about Lisa regaining what she's lost. Jill, Craig, and Todd must save Lisa's life. They care for her without thought of being repaid.



They are "earning" their friend's life, and through this, Jill gains knowledge and confidence that are exceptional. Meanwhile, Tom is contrasted to Lisa. He is filled with fear and anger. Tom is overcome with his emotions. He does not use his mind in the same way that Lisa does.

As soon as Lisa awakes, she begins thinking and planning. She believes that if she can't keep her city, then she doesn't deserve it. Only through her own efforts can she keep what she has. Does this mean that there shouldn't be a government to protect people from thieves? Does it mean that if a thief steals your possessions, you didn't deserve them?

Lisa also still considers the city her own. She admits that when Craig accuses her of calling it "our" city when she wants his help in reclaiming it. No matter what Jill and Todd and Craig have done to save her life, Lisa considers the city hers, exclusively. If she gets it back, she will own it, no matter how much help she's had from other people. Craig decides to leave the city to have his own farm. He is not in debt to the city. After all, he has lead its school, kept its secrets, worked on its security and stores of resources, and rescued its leader. Craig certainly is not in debt to the city, but is the city in debt to Craig? Who decides how much Craig's efforts are worth? Lisa seems to feel that the protection and supplies Craig has received in the past year are equitable returns for all his labor. Craig doesn't think to ask for anything else, but is the deal really fair?



## Part Three: Chapters 15 and 16

### Part Three: Chapters 15 and 16 Summary

In chapter fifteen, Lisa plans to send Jill back to the city. She outlines her plans. Jill will tell Tom that Lisa was only wounded, and that Jill tried to save her. Jill will say that Lisa died but forgives Tom for the shooting. Todd returns at two in the morning. Tom is having trouble running the city. He is beating the children who cause problems, and most children think Lisa is dead. Tom even beat Charlie, but Charlie kept the supply locations secret.

Todd goes back to the city to take up his spy role again, while Lisa thinks about what she's learned. She realizes that through her experiences she has grown and learned more. She has earned values and knowledge, which is much better than a city. She thinks back to her family arguing about saying prayers at dinner. In the end, the family's prayer was: "As we have earned this food, so must we earn all that is valuable in our lives."

In chapter sixteen, it's the night of May 23, and Lisa and Todd are on Swift Road. Charlie drives up with cars, trucks, and soldiers. They plan to drive to a neighboring city to find an army to help them. They plan to return at dawn, May 26, and recapture the city. The children in the first city they visit, Lombard, are frightened. No one has learned to drive yet, and there seem to be no leaders. At Villa Park, they find only death.

Wheaton has an army and a leader, but the leader, Scott Donald Mennie, is cruel and violent. This is not an alliance they want. Mennie's army plans to join with the vast Chicago army. Then an army of thousands led by the King of Chicago will capture small towns. Scott laughs when he finds out the small force is led by a girl, and Lisa hits him in the face, making an enemy instead of an ally. Lisa decides they'll have to make due without an army.

Back at the farm, there is shouting and fire, but it's a celebration. A crowd from the city found out Lisa was alive and is waiting for her. Lisa is afraid. Does Tom know? Was Jill tortured to reveal Lisa's whereabouts? As Lisa sits alone in a room, thinking and planning, three hundred children travel to her from the city and await her leadership. When the plan is done, the three hundred children silently surround the city while Lisa sneaks in the secret tunnel. In the city, there are no guards or people. Only Tom is waiting in the tower chamber. Tom apologizes for the shooting and says he wants to talk, but it's a trick. Fifty guards come and capture Lisa.

### Part Three: Chapters 15 and 16 Analysis

Tom can take the city through violence, but violence cannot hold onto the city. Tom alienates all the other children and can't hold on to his authority. What if Tom were a better leader? He could be both efficient and violent, able to make the city run, while



being cruel and enforcing children into slavery. In the book, Tom is a poor leader because he turns to violence through fear. He is weak and unable to think and plan well. However, many people are violent and are also good thinkers and leaders, something the novel doesn't address, except perhaps in the idea of the King of Chicago.

When Lisa goes out into the world seeking an alliance with a local army, she finds the situation is dismal. Most of the children in the world are unable to think, plan, and build, except through violence. Lisa finds a deserted, dead city, a city where the children are completely unorganized, and a city run by a violent army. This fact sets Lisa apart as being extremely exceptional. If Lisa didn't exist, would all civilization be lost? The trip out of town also sets up greater problems to come. In the future, Lisa will have to fight against bigger, more powerful armies. She lives in a small town. The city of Chicago, though, is not far away, and Lisa is unprepared for what may come out of Chicago.

At the end of chapter sixteen, Lisa falls for another trick. She puts down her gun and lets herself be captured. The people of her city might have deserted Tom, but Tom's soldiers are still following him. Lisa has suffered another mistake and another setback in her reclamation of her city.



## Part Three: Chapter 17

### Part Three: Chapter 17 Summary

Alone with Tom after falling for the trick and losing her city again, Lisa asks Tom why they have to fight. She asks if he's afraid he can't earn things for himself and accuses him of depending on fear and leading a useless life, with no fun or joy. She says that she earned the city with her brains and hard work. Tom sets down his gun, but Lisa doesn't pick it up. She accuses him again of being afraid and says she feels sorry for him. She tells Tom that he's free, and that he should go and take his army with him. Tom leaves and the army flees the city.

Lisa is finally alone. Todd comes in and tells her that the people are waiting for her to speak. She tells Todd to take a nap on the couch, and before she knows it, he is asleep. Eileen knocks at the door. Lisa tries to explain to Eileen that it's important to be without fear and to think, but there is too much noise in the hall. Lisa realizes that she can't give the people knowledge or make them learn. They need to earn it. Lisa sits with Eileen on her lap, and Eileen also falls asleep. Lisa lights her candle.

The children in the hall start shouting for Lisa, but she doesn't know what to say to them. She doesn't want to tell them about the King of Chicago or about her secret book, which they won't understand. She realizes that he'll have to find some way to show them what she's learned, so they'll earn the knowledge for themselves. Finally, she opens the door to the waiting crowd.

### Part Three: Chapter 17 Analysis

Lisa earns her city back by identifying Tom's fears and weaknesses. She speaks the truth to him, and he is cowed by what he hears. He takes his soldiers and leaves the city. Is this realistic? Would Tom really be overcome by his emotions to the extent of giving up the defensible fortress that he's captured, as well as its leader?

Tom seems to have feelings for Lisa. He is angry when he thinks she's been shot, and he seems to want to form some sort of bond with her. His desire to defeat her seems to be based in a desire to befriend her. Like a young boy who hits a girl because he secretly likes her, Tom's feelings come out in a negative way. These feelings may be behind Tom's actions, but even then, are those actions realistic?

Lisa ends the novel with her power intact. Her followers love her. However, she knows that her followers don't truly understand her philosophy. She can't explain to her people what she's learned about human nature and about life. She promises herself to find some way to teach her philosophy to others. At its core, this book is the author's attempt to do the same. The author has a message about libertarian/objectivist philosophy, which he wants to teach to young people through the novel.



# Characters

## Lisa Nelson

Lisa Nelson is a ten-year-old girl who is left to fend for herself and care for her brother when her parents, and all adults, are killed off by a virus. Lisa is intelligent, and she comes to believe that intelligence and ideas will help her survive. Her greatest asset is her ability to think through problems and come up with ideas for solutions. When supplies start running out in local houses, Lisa thinks of going to nearby farms to find supplies. She also teaches herself to drive the family car so that she can get around her town.

Lisa has an even better idea of where to find supplies, and she finds a huge store of goods at a local grocery warehouse. She forms her street into a coalition with a militia to try to stave off the local gangs. She refuses to join into a partnership with the Chidester Gang because she doesn't trust them. Lisa takes on the responsibility of forming her neighbors into a society, and she feels ownership over her ideas and the things she finds. She takes ownership of the goods at the warehouse and also of Glenbard, the local high school that she decides to turn into a city.

Lisa spends her time thinking, planning, and solving problems. When she loses Glenbard to Tom Logan's attacks, she blames herself for not having the foresight to prevent Glenbard being taken from her. She feels she earned Glenbard and must continue to earn it by thinking up the ideas to protect it.

## Todd Nelson

Todd is Lisa's young brother. At the beginning of the novel, Lisa takes care of Todd, but she also tries not to boss him around too much. Lisa used to find her young brother annoying, but she has come to love and appreciate him. Lisa sleeps with Todd in their basement room every night, and she tells him stories. Todd tries to help out, even trying to fish, but he is unable to catch anything. He learns from Lisa what "logical" means, and when the air is let out of their tires, he is the logical one, going into the garage for a hand pump to re-inflate the tires.

Todd recriminates himself when the Chidester Gang beat him up and take the supplies Lisa has gathered at the old farm. Later, when Tom Logan's gang attack his house while Lisa is out gathering supplies, he sets loose a booby trap of rocks on the roof and knocks out Tom.

At Glenbard, Todd becomes one of the citizens. He still sleeps with his sister, and their bond is close. He is one of the sentries on the roof the day that his sister is shot, and he manages to sneak Jill and Craig out of the city to help her. He drives his injured sister to the old farm, where she can recover from her injuries. Todd disguises himself as a girl





and sneaks back into Glenbard to gather intelligence to help his sister take back the city. He is loyal to his sister and shares her values.

## Tom Logan

Tom Logan is the head of a local gang called the Chidester Gang. Early in the novel, Tom offers to join forces with Lisa and provide protection in exchange for supplies, but Lisa doesn't trust him. She rejects his offer. Later, when Tom's gang joins with two other gangs, Tom retains leadership.

From the very beginning, Tom is antagonistic toward Lisa and attacks her repeatedly, stealing supplies and burning down her house. After Glenbard is founded, Tom and his gang attack the fortress twice. On the second attack, Tom is burned by boiling oil while he's trying to scale the wall of the fortress, and his face is permanently scarred. On Tom's gang's third try, Lisa is shot, and Tom takes over the city. Still, Tom is angry at his subordinate for shooting Lisa. He doesn't want her hurt. Tom does not have the skills to lead Lisa's city, and all the citizens desert him.

Lisa gets back her city by talking to Tom and haranguing him about all his weaknesses. Tom is driven by fear, and Lisa accuses him of lacking confidence and being afraid that he can't survive by virtue of his intellect and effort. That's why Tom has to resort to violence. Lisa calls Tom's life a miserable one.

## Craig Bergman

Craig Bergman is a twelve-year-old who lives on Grand Avenue and takes care of his young sister after the plague. He enjoys gardening, and at the beginning of the novel, he is planning a garden in spring. He even starts building a solarium so that he can grow food during the winter. When the children first meet, Lisa likes what Craig has to say and feels that he's trustworthy. Lisa makes Craig her companion on supply runs, trusting him with the location of her supplies.

Craig becomes the general in charge of the Grand Avenue Militia, but he doesn't like his job. He thinks that the existence of a militia will attract violence, and he doesn't relish the idea of war. He is much happier when the children move to Glenbard and he takes over as the leader of the school, leaving the military planning to Charlie. Still, Craig doesn't share Lisa's dreams of rebuilding civilization and creating cities. He believes that Glenbard itself will attract violence.

After Lisa is shot, Craig decides to give up living in Lisa's city. He tells her that he won't help her in reclaiming Glenbard. Craig wants to start his own farm on Swift Road. He will work the fields and raise crops, while his sister will run the house and cook. Craig hopes to avoid violence and conflict in his new life, but Lisa is concerned that once he starts growing crops, gangs will attack him for his food.





## **Jill Jansen**

Jill is a neighborhood girl who takes in homeless children. She cares for eight orphans plus her two young sisters, and her orphanage keeps growing. She takes some soup from the supplies Lisa has foraged from local houses at the beginning of the novel. After Lisa's house burns down, Jill takes care of Lisa, and Jill becomes the head of the hospital at Glenbard, studying medicine. She takes the bullet out of Lisa's arm after Lisa is shot.

## **Julie Harris**

Julie Harris is Lisa's former best friend. Since the plaque, Lisa has hardly seen her friend. When Lisa goes to visit Julie, she finds her ill and living in squalor. Julie is upset because her brother is trying to join a gang and helped steal supplies from Lisa. Julie later joins the kids who unite at Grand Avenue and goes with them to Glenbard.

## **Charlie Harris**

Charlie is Julie Harris's brother, who is rude to Lisa. He has joined a gang to try to get food for his family, and he was part of the group who stole Lisa's supplies. After Lisa starts implementing her plans for uniting Grand Avenue, Charlie is saved from joining a gang. He is in charge of the defenses at Glenbard and enjoys training dogs.

## **Cheryl and Steve Cole**

Cheryl and Steve Cole are two of Lisa's neighbors, eleven and twelve respectively, who are struggling to survive before Grandville is formed. Steve is thinking of joining a gang before Lisa starts implementing her plans.

## **Eileen**

Eileen is one of the little girls who lives with Jill. She has the idea to use fire extinguishers to help defend against gangs, and she brings Lisa keys to her father's business, which has dump trucks, bulldozers, and other equipment.

## **Erika Bergman**

Erika is Craig's younger sister, who helps Todd by pretending to have a stomachache and getting Craig and Jill to sneak away to help Lisa after she's shot.

## **Scott Donald Mennie**

Scott Donald Mennie is the leader of a gang in a nearby town, and he laughs at the idea of a girl leader, causing Lisa to hit him. He tells Lisa about the large conglomeration of gangs forming in Chicago.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Grand Avenue/Grandville**

Lisa and her brother Todd live on Grand Avenue, and when the street's children unite, they call themselves Grandville.

### **Grand Avenue Militia**

The children of Grand Avenue form a coalition for protection from the local gangs, called the Grand Avenue Militia.

### **Jewel Grocery Warehouse**

Lisa realizes that she can probably find stores of supplies in a warehouse, and she finds the Jewel Grocery Warehouse in the phone book. She calls the warehouse the Secret Place and reveals its location to as few people as possible.

### **Swift Road Farm**

Lisa finds a farm on Swift Road where she locates stores of food. Craig eventually decides to take over the farm and try to run it.

### **Chidester Gang / Chidester and Elm / Chidester, Elm, and Len**

The Chidester Gang is a local gang that forms after the destruction of the virus, lead by Tom Logan. The Chidester Gang later joins with other gangs, becoming first Chidester and Elm and then Chidester, Elm, and Lenox.

### **Lake Ellyn**

Lake Ellyn is near Grand Avenue, and the children go there to celebrate.

### **Todd's Trumpet**

Todd has a trumpet which is used as an alarm signal on Grand Avenue.



## **The Triangle**

The Triangle woods border Grand Avenue, and the Chidester gang sometimes hide there.

## **Glenbard High School**

Glenbard High School is a contained building that Lisa and her neighborhood's kids convert into a castle, turning the school into Lisa's city.

## **The Beat-up Old Cadillac**

Lisa and Todd's family have a beat-up old Cadillac that Lisa teaches herself to drive by remembering her father's repeated instructions to her mother.



# Themes

## The Power of Ideas

Lisa believes in the power of ideas. Good ideas can conquer any problem and bring amazing success. When Lisa is alone, she sits and thinks. When she is with her brother, she spends her nights thinking through problems, considering ideas, and planning for the future. She does the same thing when she is ruler of her own city. She spends time alone in her tower room, thinking by candlelight. Everything that Lisa gains, she gains by virtue of her thoughts and ideas. Everything that Lisa loses, she loses because she does not think and anticipate well enough.

Lisa's ideas aren't just about how to solve problems and what to do in the immediate future. Lisa also has grand ideas about where she is heading. She wants to rebuild society. She sees herself as a leader, able to plan ways to recapture the society that's been lost. Other children are put off by Lisa's grand ideas about making whole cities run again, but Lisa's grand ideas and goals are behind her success. They direct Lisa's actions and what she chooses to do in the short term.

Every time Lisa has a set-back, she uses ideas to move forward. When her house is burned down, Lisa is faced with the problem that the children on her street are not warriors and won't jump into a fight to fend off the gangs. The idea of the defensible high school alleviates the problem by making a situation in which the children are able to defend themselves. Lisa has ideas for every aspect of the city, and her ideas are her core talent as a leader.

## Independence and Self-Sustenance

Lisa is independent. She works with others, but she considers herself free and independent. She says that she owns the supplies that she finds, through virtue of her ideas. She believes that people have an inherent desire to be independent and to sustain themselves through their own effort. Lisa's way of helping Jill's orphans is to make the children self-sustaining and independent. She gives them each a job to do and makes them earn toys for themselves. As a result, the children are happier.

According to the novel's philosophy, doing work and earning rewards is essential to happiness in the human condition. Being cared for and gaining things without earning them is antithetical to happiness. It makes people dissatisfied, restless, and whining. Lisa believes in the power of earning, of taking action for one's self. The effort to care for one's self and to be independence is one of the keys to happiness, in Lisa's philosophy, even if that effort is filled with failures and problems.

Lisa thinks of all the citizens of her city as being independent people who are free and who are earning their own sustenance in her city. However, she also acts as a protector, and she is the person who doles out the jobs and decides what the rewards will be. The



novel starts with the slate of humanity wiped clean. All the adults are gone, and many things are left without owners. Goods exist for Lisa to merely take, if she has an idea of how to get them. There are also goods for gangs to take through another route, violence. As the power is consolidated among leaders like Lisa and Tom, eventually the open gaps of resources will close. When the resources are doled out among leaders, what choices will people have for independence and self-sustenance? Will they be free, or only as free as the local leaders decide?

## Capitalism, Pride, and Work

Lisa's philosophy embraces free-market capitalism, although she doesn't use those terms. Lisa believes that everyone deserves whatever they are smart enough to earn. She doesn't believe that people should be forced to pay for others, as happens in taxation. She also doesn't believe that people should vote. Instead, whoever is most successful, and therefore smartest, will have the power and be in charge. In the novel, this person is Lisa. She is smart, and she has large goals. She builds a city, and she believes she should own the city. If she loses it, then she didn't deserve it. Therefore, there is no need for regulation.

However, this poses problems. The lack of regulation is what causes the rise of gangs and the rampant death and fear that Lisa finds throughout nearby cities. In Lisa's philosophy, each individual works and earns whatever he or she gains. This gives individuals pride and teaches lessons that stay with the individual, even if the individual loses his or her material goods. Still, the lack of regulation and stop-gaps against disaster lead to fear, violence, and death, as Lisa sees in the outside world.

Can Lisa's ideas change humanity to eliminate fear, violence, and death? Can pride and the value of work be spread through society without regulations, taxes, welfare, and all the ideas that are opposed to Lisa's philosophy? Without regulation, won't the powerful be corrupted and take advantage of the less powerful? Lisa is well-meaning, but she is exceptional. Can a world without regulation function?

# Style

## Point of View

The novel is told from the third-person point of view. The narrator is semi-omniscient, showing the reader mainly Lisa's thoughts and ideas. Ideas are important to Lisa and to the novel, and the reader is inside Lisa's mind to hear her ideas and plans. At night, as Lisa sits or lies alone, the reader is with her to experience the inception of the new ideas that will lead her forward.

However, the novel occasionally shows other characters' thoughts as well. When Lisa and Craig are driving to Lisa's warehouse in separate cars, the novel shows Craig's thoughts. Craig disagrees with Lisa on several levels. He doesn't share her ambition to restart civilization. He thinks that her plans for defense are dangerous. Showing Craig's thoughts shows alternate points of view to Lisa. The novel doesn't show how Craig's ideas turn out and whether his farm succeeds or fails, but the reader has Craig's thoughts to consider and weigh against Lisa's ideas. Todd's thoughts are also shown, when his sister is shot and Todd must take action to save her.

Another significant point of view that the novel shows is Tom's. The novel takes on Tom's point of view after he takes over Lisa's city, at his highest moment of success. However, his inner monologue shows not joy and victory but fear and anger, which drive his actions. The author's point of view is that violence is caused by fear and self-doubt, and Tom is the illustration of this.

## Setting

The novel is set in Illinois in the 1970s, in the suburbs of Chicago. In the heart of the Midwest, the young characters are safe and secure before the virus that kills all adults. After the virus, the setting takes on a different aspect. The children are surrounded with the remnants of civilization. They need to find ways to work with the resources they have to survive. One of the resources the children have is a nearby lake. They can find water there, and they hold celebrations there, with bonfires. The lake provides both sustenance and a social environment for the children.

Another resource allowed by the setting is the high school, Glenbard. Glenbard is built like a fortress, a large, square building with everything a small city needs to survive. It makes the perfect fortress for Lisa to establish her kingdom. Other aspects of the setting serve as resources for Lisa, as well. The farm, near enough for Lisa to bike to, falls into this same category. Even the warehouse isn't far away and forms an important aspect of the setting that allows Lisa to gather resources. Lisa finds at her disposal resources that she can use to create her own small society.



Although Lisa and her friends are in the suburbs, Chicago is nearby. The presence of a nearby large city poses the threats that are revealed near the end of the story. Because Chicago is nearby, larger, more dangerous gangs loom in the future.

## Language and Meaning

The language of *The Girl Who Owned a City* is simple, geared for readers around middle-school age. The children in the novel don't necessarily always understand words. Todd doesn't know what the word "logical" means, and Lisa herself is unsure how to explain it. She has to work to get across the concepts that she intuitively understands about the word, which is very important to her. Lisa also thinks about the idea that the militia of Grand Avenue is protecting "individual rights," but she doesn't fully understand what that means. Lisa is learning about ideas and concepts that are abstract and far away from her normal thinking. When she starts reading books about good and bad and about developing societies, she doesn't understand much of what she reads. She becomes more confused by the strange language and foreign ideas than enlightened.

Lisa finally finds a book that she understands and believes, but the reason it makes sense to her is because it reflects her experience. Lisa has the background and experience to understand the words. Todd is the same way. He needs background and experience to know what "logic" means. Ultimately, this is true of all the children. Lisa knows Tom and her citizens aren't ready to learn the importance of earning and what "earning" really means to her. They lack background and experience, without which words are meaningless.

The novel is interrupted by stories that Lisa tells her brother Todd. These reflect their experiences, their hopes, and their feelings. These stories are a way for Lisa to process her thoughts and experiences. They are also a way for Lisa to communicate with Todd. She uses a story to help him feel better after he gets beaten up and is unable to prevent the gang from stealing supplies. She uses a story about a king to explain something about her ideas about governance. In a way, these stories reflect the novel itself, which the author is using as a parable to impart ideas about earning and governance to the reader.

## Structure

The novel is divided into seventeen chapters, in three parts. The first part of the novel is almost half the length of the book, spanning chapters one through nine. During the first part of the novel, Lisa begins her journey to strive to create a better life for herself and her brother. Lisa is only barely surviving at the beginning of the novel, gathering food from empty houses nearby. She is scraping by and resources are fading. Lisa decides that she has to be proactive and think of new ideas and ways to provide for the future.

Lisa's path to secure her future leads her to organize the children of Grand Avenue into a militia for mutual defense. She finds large supplies of resources through her ideas and her willingness to try new things. She even teaches herself to drive her parents' car. The





end of the first part of the novel is Lisa's first major set-back. Her house is set on fire by the local gang. This event will necessitate a change.

The second part of the novel is about the founding of Glenbard. Lisa comes up with the idea for a fortress that can be defended, and she establishes the fortress-city in the old high school. Lisa builds up her city to house hundreds of children, a high point of the novel. The second part of the novel ends with Lisa's second major set-back. Tom takes over the city, and Lisa is shot and believed dead. The third part of the novel shows Lisa reclaiming her city and her position as leader.



## Quotes

"All the things that they had once taken for granted were gone. But at least there was their home, and the empty houses where she could search for supplies. But that source couldn't last long."

Chap. 2, p. 13

"And with her first real tears in a long while, Lisa surrendered to the kindness in the woman's word. 'All this time I've been truly alone and her note...it's...it's like the last words I'll ever hear from those people.'"

Chap. 3, p. 28

"But Lisa had guessed wrong, because Julie explained in rapid, nervous words that they were actually starving."

Chap. 4, p. 47

"But for some reason, and this surprised her, Lisa didn't seem to get tired of 'figuring things out.' As each new problem came, its solution seemed easier than the last. She was acquiring new skills and confidence in her ability."

Chap. 5, p. 52

"Her heart sank, and she almost cried at the sight of the warehouse. Its broken windows seemed proof that she hadn't been the first to think of the idea."

Chap. 6, p. 64

"It seemed to her that they all felt it was her duty to help them—that what belonged to her was theirs also..."

Chap. 7, pp. 77-78

"The two children stood shaking silently in front of the home they'd always loved. They cried to themselves as motionless as statues, while the blazing heat baked away their tears."

Chap. 9, p. 96

"The more Jill told them to 'share,' the more they all seemed to need one particular toy for themselves. 'What these kids need is to have at least one toy they can call their very own.'"

Chap. 10, p. 102

"Lisa ignored the insult. 'Do you think it would be fair for the group to decide that all the supplies I found were suddenly community property, and that I don't have the right to decide how they should be used?'"

Chap. 11. p. 133

"The sight of the wound would not have seemed shocking to nurses in a regular hospital. They might even have said that it was minor. But to the children, it was



horrible."

Chap. 13, p. 153

"Defeat has taught her a lesson and strengthened her mind. And what improved her mind, of course, improved her life."

Chap. 15, p. 172

"She felt she didn't deserve the room, or the city—she had failed to earn them back."

Chap. 17, p. 184



## Topics for Discussion

Does Lisa have a right to own the city of Glenbard, even though she could not have built it alone or maintained it alone?

Is Lisa right that voting is bad?

What will happen to Glenbard after Lisa is gone? Who will run it? What prevents a less kind ruler from taking over?

Lisa puts in her constitution a provision that, to leave Glenbard, you must be free of debt. Who decides how much is owed to Glenbard by a person? Who decides whether that decision is reasonable?

What qualifies as "earning" something? What do the different characters earn, and how?

Craig thinks that Lisa attracts violence through her militia and her city. Is he right?

Nothing like Lisa's city, or even the Grand Avenue coalition, has sprung up in any of the nearby cities. Why not?

What is Lisa's attitude to religion and prayer in the book?