The Language of Goldfish Short Guide

The Language of Goldfish by Zibby Oneal

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Overview

The Language of Goldfish is a coming of age novel featuring Carrie Stokes, a confused 13-year-old girl on the verge of a mental breakdown. Carrie is the middle child in an affluent, seemingly happy family, and she is struggling with insecurities about growing up and forming relationships with other people. Carrie lives in a chaotic world within her head, and her absorption with her own thoughts leads her to believe that she is going insane. She describes herself as a piece from a different puzzle, one that will never fit into the ordered world she sees around her. Carrie does not understand her illness for a long time; she knows that she suffers from "dizzy spells" and she knows that she is afraid of moving from the safety of childhood to the uncertainty of adulthood. Feeling alienated from her parents and plagued by increasingly frightening "spells," she eventually attempts suicide. But with the help of psychiatric counseling and the therapeutic expression of painting, she slowly begins to heal.

Carrie Stokes is a typical adolescent in many ways, but she is atypical in her obsession with childhood and her irrational fear of moving forward. Oneal explores the workings of Carrie's mind as she chronicles her journey to mental health. Oneal's novels typically deal with teenagers in conflict with other people as well as with their own emotions, and Carrie's world is full of conflict. But she eventually learns to work through the conflict and accept herself and other people for what they are. Carrie goes through a metamorphosis in the novel, changing from being a troubled child to a confident young woman. By the end of the novel she has learned to accept change, to separate reality from illusion, and to move forward and leave the security of childhood behind.

About the Author

Zibby Oneal (nee Elizabeth Bisgard) was born on March 17, 1934 in Omaha, Nebraska. She came from a nuclear uppermiddle class family; she has an older sister, her father was a doctor and an amateur painter, and her mother a homemaker and an avid book reader. Oneal always loved books and wanted to be a writer even before she could read. She attended Catholic girls' schools in Omaha, attended Stanford as an English major from 1952 to 1955, then finished her degree at the University of Michigan and earned a B.A. in 1970. Oneal has been writing since she was very young, and she wrote her first children's book, entitled War Work, in 1971. But she received wide recognition in 1980 after writing The Language of Goldfish. This was her first young adult novel and the book she considers the favorite of all her published works. The Language of Goldfish received rave reviews and won the American Library Association's Best Book for Young Adults in 1980 and one of School Library Journal's Best Books of the Year citations. Oneal went on to write two more young adult novels as well as two nonfiction books for young adults and four books for children. All three of her young adult novels are realistic portraits of young women dealing with the problems and complexities of adolescence. Oneal is married to a doctor, has a grown son and daughter, and lives in Ann Arbor where she lectures in the Department of English at the University of Michigan.

Setting

Carrie lives in an upper middle class neighborhood in a family concerned with appearances and with maintaining the illusion of stability. Carrie feels anything but stable, and the pressure she feels to conform adds to her feelings of isolation. Oneal places Carrie in an affluent community, an ordered household, and an environment where people place social skills and the ability to conform to middle-class conventions above intellectual skills and the freedom to express creativity. Oneal contrasts Carrie's ordered life with the confusion in her mind. She feels out of place in the world, and believes that such pressures did not exist in Hyde Park, the neighborhood where Carrie believed she had a carefree childhood.

Change can be frightening for all of us.

Carrie seems to have had a difficult time dealing with her move from Hyde Park.

Her fear of change increased after her move, and then spun out of control. She felt safe and secure in her old neighborhood, and she moved at a time when the changes in her body triggered changes in her emotional well-being. She felt awkward and insecure, and misplaced, like a piece stuck in the wrong puzzle. Oneal speaks of the Stokes ordered household, of how Carrie's mother hates the catalpa that Carrie loves because it is messy, dropping blossoms all over the place, and of how she values a broken lamp more than a broken child. The environment is different in Mrs. Ramsay's house and in Dr. Ross' office. Carrie realizes that there, it is okay to act disorderly, it is okay to get angry, and it is okay to express herself.

Oneal uses images of springtime to convey Carrie's comfort. The sunshine wafting through Mrs. Ramsay's house and the green grass she feels with her toes after her uplifting conversation with Daniel Spangler make her feel warm and happy. She and Moira visit the pond in the back yard in the summer, and for a long time this is where she derives the most comfort. In contrast to these happy times, Carrie seems to sink to her lowest points during the fall and winter. Images of falling leaves and falling snow allude to Carrie's own sense of falling. It is cold and dreary outside the night she attempts suicide; earth dies its winter death, only to be reborn again in the spring.

Oneal hints of bipolar disorder, but more so she uses the images of color and warmth to convey happiness and the images of darkness and cold to convey isolation and depression. Carrie seems to move in time with the seasons; dying a metaphorical death in the winter and rejuvenating herself in the spring.

Social Sensitivity

Young adult novels about mental illness can deliver a powerful message to teenagers struggling to understand their confusion. Teenagers can relate to Carrie's fears and insecurities because they travel the same road. All of us battle with conflicting emotions and all of us feel overwhelmed at times by the changes that occur during adolescence. Oneal treats the problems of adolescence sensitively, in large part with her detailed analysis of Carrie. We understand Carrie to be a strong intelligent young woman, and Oneal ensures that we feel hopeful of her story's outcome and confident in her ability to get better.

Though most teenagers have not experienced the feeling of "going crazy," many find mental illness a fascinating subject.

Books about mental illness became popular in the sixties and seventies with the publication of J. D. Salinger's Catcher in the Rye, Joanne Greenberg's I Never Promised You a Rose Garden, and John Neufeld's Lisa Bright and Dark. It is important that Oneal develops Carrie's rational as well as her irrational side, and it is important that she affords Carrie the intelligence to acknowledge her condition. Though at first Carrie feels embarrassed about going to the psychiatrist, Oneal makes acknowledging and accepting what happened to her a part of her healing process. She endows her with all the emotional tools she needs to get better.

Carrie's initial embarrassment at seeing a psychiatrist stems from the pressure she feels to conform to the ordered and "normal" behavior her parents demand of her.

She knows that in her community people do not go crazy; they keep up appearances and they conform to the social conventions her upper middle-class society places upon them. By having Carrie's parents deny her condition and "pretty the truth," Oneal makes us aware of the stigma of mental illness. Oneal succeeds in removing that stigma. She gives Carrie depth and substance and makes her a likeable person with whom we can all identify. In comparison with Carrie, her parents seem shallow and superficial, more concerned with appearances and the semblance of normalcy than with Carrie's problems. Carrie needs people in her life who allow her to express her feelings and concerns, and Mrs. Ramsay and Dr. Ross give Carrie the opportunity to do that. Her art allows her to experience and understand her emotions.

Oneal delivers an important message about the necessity of accepting people as they are and recognizing that confusion is a natural part of growing. We see Carrie's flaws but recognize that this only makes her human, just as Carrie learns to recognize her parents' flaws and Mrs. Ramsay's flaws as a part of who they are. Carrie emerges as a complex and a rational human being, and this helps us learn not to judge or to discriminate against the mentally ill. If Carrie had not realized that she could love Mrs. Ramsay despite her indiscretions, would she have acted any better than her mother who denied Carrie's illness? If she had not accepted that her mother felt the need to "pretty the truth," would she have been able to accept her own needs and been able to

heal? Denial can be stifling, but Oneal makes it clear that it is a natural part of the healing process. Carrie does not deny her own emotions once she heads down the road to recovery but rather gains the ability to use her past confusion to propel herself toward a healthier future. The strength it takes for her to accept her difficulties, allows her to understand them and get past them. It downplays her illness, and it highlights her courage, her morality, and her ability to conquer adversity and move on.

Literary Qualities

Although Oneal writes her story in the third person, she is still able to create an intimacy between Carrie and the reader.

We identify with Carrie because we recognize that she fights the same demons many adolescents fight, she just has a much more difficult time conquering them. We know Carrie's fears and her insecurities and we understand the isolation she feels from her family. Her mother and siblings never gain much depth, and her father virtually disappears from the story after the suicide attempt. Perhaps Oneal intentionally underdevelops these characters to convey Carrie's sense of isolation. We never get a clear grasp on the other characters because Carrie herself has trouble identifying with them.

The clash between Carrie and her family is just one of the contrasts Oneal sets up to substantiate the torment Carrie feels in her mind. The Language of Goldfish is full of contrasts: order versus chaos; constancy versus movement; the stability that the Stokes expect of Carrie versus the confusion she feels; and the predictability that brings her comfort versus the uncertainty that so disturbs her. Carrie loves math because it is precise and ordered; the pieces of her equations fit together and make sense, unlike the shattered pieces of glass she sees tumbling through her mind during her dizzy spells. Oneal uses descriptive language and concrete images to describe Carrie's dizzy spells, and by doing so, she lets us know that this turmoil is Carrie's reality. The pressures of growing up make her feel disconnected, and the demands life places upon her seem to shatter her dream of an idyllic life—one that she believes exists in childhood.

Oneal conveys Carrie's sense of confusion through the use of moving images. She uses images of falling objects to represent Carrie's descent into madness and she uses images of fragmentation to reveal the mayhem in Carrie's mind. Carrie is obsessed with falling leaves and colored glass. During her dizzy spells she sees glass tumbling around in her mind, geometric shapes shifting and changing like pieces in a kaleidoscope. Oneal's image of the kaleidoscope helps us crawl inside Carrie's mind and understand her confusion. She perceives herself as a piece to the wrong puzzle, broken off from her world, and her thoughts seem jumbled and disordered like the glass in the kaleidoscope. Images of movement permeate the novel. Carrie is fascinated with the notion of Mrs. Padmore's soul flying out the window, as if she too feels disconnected from her body, moving forward with no control. The story begins with Carrie on a train, moving toward some uncertain destination and frightened all the way. The train trip seems a fitting symbol for Carrie's psychological trip. When the fear gets too overwhelming, she seeks refuge in some elusive place she perceives as paradise. But she can never reach the paradise she envisions in her mind. Somewhere along her journey, she must learn to separate fantasy from reality.

Oneal uses several symbols of refuge in the novel, such as Dr. Ross's office and Mrs. Ramsay's house. Both of these places offer Carrie a safe place where she feels sheltered from the pressures of life and free to express herself. She describes the light

filtering through Mrs. Ramsay's house, as if to acknowledge it as a place of enlightenment, a place that lends itself to self-exploration and allows her the freedom to express herself. Much can be said about healing through art, and Oneal uses Carrie's art to chronicle her emotional development. As her artwork changes from abstract to realistic, we understand that Carrie is gradually replacing her illusions with something concrete and tangible. She is piecing together the fragments of colored glass, forming pictures from the shapes and lines that once characterized her artwork. Unlike the imaginary island, Mrs. Ramsay's house provides a real place of refuge and allows Carrie to move toward self-acceptance.

Perhaps the most powerful symbol of refuge in the novel is that of the island.

Oneal once noted in Contemporary Authors that she wants to convey to readers that "adolescence is a self-absorbed world," and the island has traditionally symbolized isolation and solitude. In myths and legends, islands often appear as unattainable paradises; elusive, magic places that may house the Well of Life or some other promise of immortality. Oneal uses the island as a symbol of both isolation and of paradise—in Carrie's case, the isolation she feels from the world around her and the paradise she perceives in eternal childhood. Sailors envision the island as a refuge from the chaos of the sea, and Carrie envisions her island as a refuge from the chaos of her mind and from the confusing emotions she feels about reaching adulthood. Like a tired sailor blearyeyed after months at sea, Carrie sees the island of her dreams. It is hazy and ephemeral, like a sailor's island encased in fog. It is an illusionary paradise, like a mirage that appears then vanishes in the minds of sailors longing for land. When Carrie begins to paint the island, she paints it repeatedly, as if trying to give it form and substance and trying to establish its base in reality. Carrie's epiphany comes when she brings the island into focus and thus leaves her illusions behind. By the end of the novel, she no longer sees the island as paradise, but simply as "a pile of rocks in the middle of the pond, [one that] she could easily reach .. . with the handle of a broom."

Themes and Characters

The Language of Goldfish is about change, and about the tendency to resist change in people. As an adolescent Carrie is naturally changing, but she has a much harder time accepting that than most people, and she struggles with the uncertainty of where she will go and how she will deal with the increasing demands and responsibilities life places upon her. Oneal's story is introspective; that is, it centers on the inner workings of Carrie's mind rather than on the events that comprise Oneal's plot. Carrie lives in her own chaotic world, one which proves to be much in contrast with the ordered and "normal" world of her family and friends.

Carrie is not someone so different from the "normal" teenager that we dismiss her simply as crazy. We recognize many of her traits in ourselves. Carrie deals with confused emotions, but she has inner strength.

She is a complex character, smart and reflective. But she is also deeply troubled, and uncomfortable with her sexual development as well as moving away from the security of childhood. She clings to childhood games and fantasies, afraid to grow up and to face the uncertainty that comes with it. While Carrie's sister Moira attends school dances and feels comfortable with social interaction, Carrie lives largely inside her head. She would rather paint than go to a dance. She would rather be alone than interact with people. She loves math because it is precise and predictable, and it attests to the certainty in life Carrie so desperately desires. Carrie is afraid to move outside her realm of comfort and venture into the unknown. She says she is afraid she will lose everything if she leaves her childhood behind.

Carrie feels out of place in her home and her community, like a piece to the wrong puzzle, she tells her art teacher Mrs. Ramsay later in the novel. Carrie feels that she will never fit into the neat mold her parents expect out of life, and she feels that she can never please them as Moira does. She knows that they appreciate Moira's social skills more than her own intellectual ones. Carrie is coming of age in an affluent community where people consider appearances important and normalcy essential. But Carrie does not feel normal. She has panic attacks she refers to as "dizzy spells," and she truly believes she is going crazy. She knows that she does not live up to her parents' expectations and she feels the tension between her own disordered thoughts and the order her parents' demand. Feeling alienated from her family and frightened by the changes in herself and all around her, she retreats further into the chaos of her mind.

Carrie's family loves her but they do not understand her, and because they fail to understand her confusion, although they pay for a therapist, they deny her illness.

But Carrie needs to acknowledge her illness in order to heal. When Carrie tries to tell her father how scared she is when she has a dizzy spell, he dismisses it as typical, something that could logically be connected to low blood sugar. When she tries to tell her mother she thinks she is going crazy, her mother says that Carrie probably just does not eat properly. We know early in the novel that Carrie's mother is concerned with

appearances. Carrie says she "pretties the truth," and later she tells people that Carrie is out with bronchitis rather than in the hospital suffering from mental illness.

We also learn that the tension Carrie feels in her family makes her feel isolated, like an island, one of the primary metaphors Oneal uses in the novel.

Carrie creates a psychological island where she believes she can remain sheltered from the problems of encroaching adulthood. Oneal never explains why Carrie is so frightened of growing up, but we know early in the novel that she is fighting demons that could grow to monstrous proportions. Her "dizzy spells" get increasingly severe and her feeling of isolation intensifies. Then on Thanksgiving weekend, everything falls apart. She starts walking to her brother's hockey game and gets lost in her mind. She misses the game, manages to get a ride home, and stumbles through her parents' cocktail party. Throughout the evening, she feels the world closing in on her. In a daze, she takes a bottle of pills and wakes up in the hospital.

Carrie knew all along that her dizzy spells were something scary, but her parents denied it, and they continue to do so even after the suicide attempt. By refusing to acknowledge Carrie's trauma, they only intensify it, and they rob their daughter of the support she needs from the two adult role models closest to her. Fortunately, two other adults in Carrie's life are able to provide her the support she needs, her therapist Dr. Ross and her art teacher Mrs. Ramsay. These are the people who help Carrie bounce back after she swallows the pills. Unlike Carrie's parents, Dr. Ross and Mrs. Ramsay acknowledge Carrie's confusion and they take her problems seriously.

Carrie meets with Dr. Ross once a week for a therapy session, and she meets with Mrs. Ramsey once a week for a private lesson.

Oneal assigns a passive role to Dr. Ross, but she gives Mrs. Ramsay a more active role in Carrie's healing process. It is with Mrs. Ramsay that Carrie comes to understand herself. Carrie's parents never understand her artwork and they make her feel awkward for creating it. But Mrs. Ramsay uses Carrie's artwork to help her bring her problems in focus. Carrie calls Mrs. Ramsay her best friend, the only friend she feels close to other than her childhood friend Tanya Abraham back in her old neighborhood, before things got increasingly crazy.

The Language of Goldfish appears to be a book about insanity and suicide, but these are simply surface themes; Oneal makes the process of growing and changing tantamount to Carrie's mental breakdown. The book allows readers into the mind of a girl who thinks she is going crazy, but it also allows readers to witness Carrie's metamorphosis. Up until the suicide attempt, Carrie has an idealistic view of childhood; she sees it as a time without troubles, and a place where she wishes to remain forever.

So she creates an island, a place of isolation where things never change and where she can remain fixed in a comfortable world.

The event that led to Carrie's creation of the island occurred in her younger days when she and her sister Moira discovered goldfish in a pond behind their house. They created

the language of goldfish, whistling and believing that they could communicate with the fish. Carrie comes to believe that she can speak this magic language of childhood, and she desires nothing more than to retreat into the magic world in the pond and reach the pile of moss-covered stones in middle. She wants to remain on this magic goldfish island forever. Moira gives up this childhood fantasy as she grows older, but Carrie clings to it. She creates the island in her mind and later in her art work.

Oneal's book is about healing, and we can chart Carrie's healing process through her work in Mrs. Ramsay's art class. In the height of her confusion, Carrie creates abstract drawings without color, attempting to portray movement but not substance, and revealing the fact that she feels herself moving but cannot identify who she is or where she is going. After the suicide attempt, Carrie's artwork changes to what Mrs. Ramsay calls "marking time" pictures; transitional pictures that carry her through until she learns to resolve her problems.

These transitional pictures serve an important purpose, and Oneal uses them to convey Carrie's changing perceptions. Whereas before Carrie felt happy to create only shapes and lines, she slowly moves from creating abstract art to realism. But Carrie sees these transitional pictures as lifeless and disturbing. Then she begins to draw the island, and she draws it repeatedly. Saskia, Mrs. Ramsay's daughter, loves Carrie's pictures of the island, though she points out that there are no people in the drawings. But Carrie continues to draw the island, feeling compelled to create only what her mind tells her to create. Eventually, Carrie starts painting rather than drawing, and she begins to use vivid colors. Then she begins to paint animals and later, people.

We, as readers, can chart Carrie's journey to mental health through the progression of her artwork. Painting the island is an important step for Carrie. Mrs. Ramsay tells Carrie that art is about seeing things through your own eyes, not the way someone else sees them. By painting the island, Carrie acknowledges her sense of isolation and her need for security, and this kind of acknowledgment moves her along in the healing process. Dr. Ross questions Carrie about the island and he helps her pinpoint the cause of her dizzy spells. She has one after she signs up for the school dances, and another when Mrs. Ramsay talks about the power of sex. She has yet another when she is thumbing through a book of drawings by Aubrey Beardsley, drawings that frighten her because there is something going on in the pictures that she does not understand.

Dr. Ross helps Carrie realize that she is afraid to develop physically and sexually.

But Oneal reveals this fear to us through Carrie's actions rather than telling us directly. She lets us know that Carrie does not like undressing in gym class, that she does not feel comfortable with her developing breasts, and that she feels even more uncomfortable when Mrs. Ramsay talks about sex. When Moira has a boy over, Carrie sees her "drifting away someplace, spinning away like a bright yellow leaf."

In the first pages of the novel, Carrie remembers a story about Mrs. Padmore, their recently deceased neighbor. Mrs. Padmore's maid had told Carrie that when Mrs. Padmore died, her soul flew out the attic window, and that the maid herself had

witnessed it. Carrie later wishes that she too could fly like Mrs. Padmore's soul, but then acknowledges that she would not know where to go if she could. She wonders where footprints go when the snow melts, too, and she seems to be terrified that something can simply vanish. This fear of movement, this fear of having nowhere to go, keeps Carrie locked on her imaginary island for a long time. When she goes shopping with her mother and it looks like a blizzard, Carrie thinks that "it would be kind of fun to be stranded." She does not know where to go if she moves forward, or what to do if she were to just take off, like Mrs. Padmore's soul, free and unencumbered, but moving toward some uncertain destination.

Through the help of Dr. Ross and Mrs. Ramsay, Carrie eventually learns to accept movement and change as a natural part of life. She learns that she can go forward without erasing the past, and in realizing this she can accept the changes in herself.

Daniel Spangler, the new boy next door, also allows Carrie to open up and feel more comfortable with her changing self. She confesses to Daniel that she wishes she could find a place where nothing changes.

Then when he appears to understand, she confesses about seeing the psychiatrist, and she agrees to go to his math group. When Carrie leaves Daniel that day and continues walking home on her own, Oneal tells us that she took off her shoes to feel the damp grass and that she marveled at the catalpa in bloom and ran her fingers through the fallen blossoms. It appears that Oneal is using this awe of nature to link the present with the past, perhaps to serve as a thread that connects the healthy child with the healthy adult.

Though Daniel Spangler, Mrs. Ramsay and Dr. Ross help Carrie along her way, we realize that she must stand on her own two feet and allow herself to heal. She must be able to recognize her weaknesses but use her strengths to propel herself forward.

Toward the end of the book, Carrie learns that Mrs. Ramsay is leaving her husband for another man, and she gets upset that Mrs. Ramsay lied to her and did not trust her enough to confess that she was having an affair. Carrie becomes so upset about this that she throws a pillow and breaks her lamp. Nothing changes about Carrie's relationship with Mrs. Ramsay or about her relationship with her mother except for Carrie's own ability to accept the frailties of these people and love them as they are. She goes to see Mrs. Ramsay and realizes that she will always love her, and she finally is able to hug her mother, even though she calls the experience "strange." After Carrie throws the lamp, her mother acts as if the broken lamp was invaluable. "How was it that in this house a broken lamp were a terrible tragedy? How could that be so important to her mother?" Carrie wants to know, implying that her own broken person was not nearly so important to her mother as this broken object. Her mother continues to deny Carrie's instability, denying that Carrie could lose control and break the lamp out of anger.

Nothing has changed in the expectations Mrs. Stokes has of Carrie or for her desire to mold life into a neat, ordered package. But everything has changed about how Carrie chooses to deal with this. She is now able to face reality rather than retreat from it.

Before this time, Carrie wanted to remain on her magic island, in an untroubled world permeated with goldfish magic and her own secret language. After the suicide attempt, Carrie realizes that when she got lost on the way to Duncan's hockey game, "she had been nowhere, drifting toward an island that was more real than the streets." But now that she has learned the significance of the island, she has gained the ability to leave it. Oneal reveals Carrie's strength through the entire novel as she tries to come to terms with her illness. She never feels comfortable lying about it, and she eventually knows that it is a part of who she is.

Carrie has named the island and therefore comes to terms with her own anguish.

Topics for Discussion

1. What are some of the turning points in Carrie's movement toward mental health?

2. Do you think Carrie's relationship with her mother gets better as she gets better? Why or why not?

3. The people in Carrie's life are never well developed, and her father virtually disappears from the novel after Carrie's suicide attempt. Why do you suppose Oneal chose not to develop these characters further?

4. What function does Daniel Spangler play in the novel? What does he do for Carrie?

5. How do you view Carrie's relationship with Moira? Does Moira help Carrie in any way?

6. Why is Carrie so disturbed about Mrs. Ramsay's affair?

7. Why do you suppose Mr. and Mrs. Stokes have a difficult time understanding Carrie's abstract drawings?

8. How does Saskia's interpretation of Carrie's island drawings foreshadow her progression to wellness?

9. What message is Oneal trying to convey with Carrie's interaction with Katherine Fowles?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Carrie is fascinated with the idea of Mrs. Padmore's soul flying out the window. This is but one of the images of movement Oneal uses in the novel. Discuss how these images reveal how Car rie perceives her own movement from childhood to adulthood.

2. Oneal makes the kaleidoscope a powerful image in the novel. Compare Carrie's emotional breakdown to the idea of pieces of colored glass tumbling around in a tube.

3. Discuss the notion of the island as a symbol of paradise. Use examples from myth and legend to support your thesis.

4. Compare and contrast the adult role models in Carrie's life and how their actions affect Carrie's ability to understand herself.

5. Discuss the symbols Oneal uses in the novel to reveal what is going on in Carrie's mind.

6. Expand on Oneal's use of Carrie's physical journey on the train to Dr. Ross' office as a metaphor for her psychological journey to mental wellness.

7. This book is about healing, and we can chart Carrie's progress through her work in Mrs. Ramsay's art class. Write a paper on the therapeutic value of art.

How do psychiatrists and counselors use art to help their patients? Discuss the relationship between art and selfexploration and how the progression of Carrie's artwork relates to her emotional development.

8. Discuss the stigma of mental illness.

How does Carrie's initial embarrassment about seeing a psychiatrist reflect how society views the mentally ill?

For Further Reference

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Includes biographical information and critical reviews of Oneal's work.

Related Titles

Oneal's other two young adult novels deal with some of the same themes in The Language of Goldfish. Both A Formal Feeling and In Summer Light center around female protagonists who struggle with changes that occur in the transition from childhood to adulthood. In A Formal Feeling, Anne must learn to accept the death of her mother, and like Carrie, she resists change and retreats from the world. In In Summer Light Kate also struggles to cope with the confusion of growing up. All three of Oneal's protagonists struggle to separate fantasy from reality.

J. D. Salinger's classic tale of Holden Caulfield (Catcher in the Rye), a confused teenage boy on the verge of a mental breakdown, shares similar themes with The Language of Goldfish. Salinger dissects Holden's thoughts and reveals truths about the human mind that we all recognize as part of ourselves. Joanne Greenberg's I Never Promised You a Rose Garden is a popular novel of the sixties and seventies that chronicles the experiences of a mentally ill teenage girl who lives in a world she creates inside her head. With the help of her doctor, she embarks on her journey to recovery.

Another best-selling book of the sixties and seventies is John Neufeld's Lisa Bright and Dark. This novel centers around sixteen-year-old Lisa and her descent into madness. Like Carrie, Lisa must learn to conquer an illness her parents refuse to acknowledge. In her 1976 work Ordinary People, Judith Guest explores how death and suicide affect the lives of people in a seemingly perfect family. Ordinary People chronicles the Jarret family's struggle to deal with the death of one son and the suicide attempt of the other. Conrad Jarret, the main character, sinks into depression and attempts suicide after his brother's death, and Conrad, his mother, and father must then work to rebuild their lives.

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