

# **The Lions of Little Rock Study Guide**

**The Lions of Little Rock by Kristin Levine**

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## Plot Summary

The Lions of Little Rock is a work of historical fiction. In this case, the real-world events are those of 1957/8 in Little Rock, Arkansas – events in which the conflict between those in favor of continued segregation of the races and those in favor of integration focused on schools and education. This novel personalizes that conflict, centering it around the home life and experiences of 12-year-old Marlee, a shy and quiet student at one of the affected schools whose life and perceptions are entirely changed by a young “colored” woman passing as white.

The novel begins with descriptions by narrator/protagonist Marlee of what her life is like: solitary, mostly silent, and relatively happy. Her closest relationships are with her compassionate older sister Judy, with her sometimes snotty school-friend Sally, and with the lions at the zoo, whose roaring and strength comfort her. When Marlee makes friends with new girl Liz, her life begins to change: Liz inspires her to talk more, to reveal her feelings more, and to face the world more directly.

The surprise revelation that Liz is “colored”, and passing as white, combined with Liz’s disappearance from school, almost cause Marlee to withdraw back into herself. However, conversations with a supportive and inspiring Sunday school teacher, with her pro-integration father, with her hitherto carefree brother, and with the family’s usually silent maid lead Marlee to think about the injustice that Liz faced, the injustices that other “colored” people face, and her own possible role in ending both sorts of injustice. Her fight begins at home as she watches her pro-integration father argue with her anti-integration mother over whether the races should “mix” or be kept separate. Her fight continues outside the home as she secretly continues to see Liz, despite the danger to both of them, and as she starts to work with pro-integration organizations.

Despite her father’s warnings to stay out of the integration / segregation battle in general, and to stay away from Liz in particular, Marlee’s commitment to the cause increases even as she’s becoming more and more comfortable living outside the self-imposed shell of silence she had been living in for so long. While frightened by threats of violence, and by repeated reminders of the difficulties Liz and other coloreds face, Marlee continues to both discover and act on what she believes to be true – that the races should interact, and that she and Liz should be allowed to continue their friendship.

Threats of violence become more real and more frightening when the older brother of one of Marlee’s friends takes control of a box of dynamite Marlee found by accident and threatens Liz and her family. In spite of Marlee’s best (and riskiest) efforts, the home of a politically active “colored” family is bombed, using the dynamite. No-one is hurt, and Marlee’s efforts to convince the police that she knows who is responsible go unheard. She does, however, manage to convince her parents to try a plan to reveal the truth, and together the family manages to trick the bomber into revealing himself.

In the aftermath of the crime being solved, Liz tells Marlee that her (Liz's) parents don't want them to be friends any more – but later, as they're saying goodbye, Liz gives Marlee her new phone number. As the novel comes to an end, a new stage in the friendship between the two girls begins.



# Section 1, Chapters 1 – 5

## Summary

**The High Dive** – Narrator Marlee begins her story by describing a summertime incident in which she, 13 years old at the time, is mocked by longtime “friend” Sally and some other kids for being frightened of going off a high-diving board. She’s helped down by her sister Judy, who takes her to her favorite place (the zoo). Marlee comments in narration on how much she listens to the lions there roaring, and how she can always understand how they’re feeling.

**Coffee, Tea or Soda** – Marlee describes people she knows in terms of beverages: Sally, for example, is described as cough syrup (tastes bad, but good for you), while Marlee’s mother is described as black and “so strong she’s almost coffee.” Narration reveals that the next day is the first day of school, with several circumstances for the family changing: Marlee is starting at Junior High; Marlee’s mother is going back to teaching; and a new black maid (Betty Jean) has been hired to help around the house. Various conversations refer to growing racial tensions in Arkansas – the fact that “negro” students are being bused into local high schools, and that several white people (including Marlee’s mother) fear that it will lead to “race mixing”. In her narration, Marlee makes specific reference to “The Little Rock Nine”, nine “Negro” (sic) students who started at Judy’s high school the year before.

**Queen Elizabeth** - Marlee’s dad drives her to her new school, Marlee commenting in narration that he’s done so ever since he invited a “colored” (sic) pastor to speak at church and received a note with his newspaper shortly afterwards – a note he never showed anyone. At school, Marlee finds her homeroom, enjoys math (taught by new teacher Mr. Harding), and meets a new girl in class, who looks like Judy and has a beautiful tan, and reveals that her name is Elizabeth, just like the Queen of England, but that she can be called Liz. She also, much to Marlee’s secret happiness, stands up to the bossy Sally. At lunch that day, Marlee sits by herself, but when Liz asks whether she can sit at the same table, Marlee does something unusual: she actually says yes (Marlee, as she again points out, doesn’t usually speak).

**Five Little Words** – That night, Judy is unhappy because the start of school is going to be delayed while a judge decides whether racial integration at the high schools in Little Rock should go ahead. Her conversation with Marlee about whether integration is a good thing takes place in front of the silent Betty Jean. The mood changes, however, when the family happily learns how unusually talkative Marlee has been at school that day. But that that night, Marlee herself doesn’t feel that happy, believing that her talking so much that day was the exception, not the new rule.

**James Thomas** – Handsome, charming football hero James Thomas (JT) asks Marlee to help him with his math homework. Happy that he asked her, Marlee agrees. Later, the class is assigned a history project, which is to include an oral presentation, a prospect



that terrifies the silent Marlee. The next day, she waits for JT with her homework ready. He arrives late, driven by his brother, football star Red who, Marlee notes almost runs down one of the “colored” cafeteria workers. Meanwhile, JT takes her homework into class with him.

## Analysis

In this section, the narrative introduces its principle characters, including protagonist / narrator Marlee. The portrait of Marlee that emerges in this section – silent, thoughtful, watchful, lonely, smart, insecure – clearly places her at the beginning of her “journey of transformation” – that is, portraying her personal normal that, over the course of the narrative and as the result of the story’s main events, transforms into a “new normal”, both in terms of her identity and how she interacts with the world. Meanwhile, the narrative also introduces several other key characters: primary friendly antagonist Liz (who, as Marlee’s inspiring friend, triggers and/or catalyzes changes in protagonist in her) and unfriendly antagonists Red and JT (whose confrontational and manipulative actions also trigger changes in Marlee, but in different ways and for different reasons. The narrative also introduces important supporting characters Judy, Mother, Dad, and Mr. Harding, whose interactions with Marlee also affect her process of change, but to a somewhat less significant degree.

This section also introduces several important thematic elements: “finding your voice” (which begins with Marlee’s speaking more than she usually does); “facing fears” (which establishes the difficulty with which Marlee faces her fears – i.e. the diving board incident, an event that is particularly important when the narrative comes to a close); “facing racism” (which begins with initial sketches of the kind of racism that Marlee and the other characters will have to face – i.e. the attitudes of both Mother and Red); and the nature of friendship (which begins with the contrasting friendships of the judgmental Sally and the open-minded Liz). All of these are manifestations of the book’s primary thematic focus on “coming of age”. At the same time, the incidents associated with these various thematic developments are foreshadowings of similar incidents / references later in the book that simultaneously move the narrative along and develop its themes further.

Other important foreshadowings, which also function as repeated plot elements and/or motifs include the reference to Marlee’s habit of identifying people in terms of the kind of beverage they resemble and the beginning of Marlee’s homework-based relationship with JT. While these moments/incidents are related less specifically to the novel’s specific themes outlined above, it’s important to note that late in the novel, and after several experiences that cause her to change perspectives on herself and on her relationships, both these aspects of her initial character / state of being are transformed, becoming further evidence of how she has “come of age”, or been transformed by the novel’s events.

Finally, a note about the terms used to describe characters like Betty Jean and the pastor brought home by Marlee’s Dad. Because the book is set in the late 1950’s, the



author has chosen to use the terms of the time (“Negro” and “colored”) to refer to persons who, in more contemporary language, would be identified as “black”, or even more currently, as “African-American”. This use of time-appropriate language reinforces the book’s sense of being historically accurate, as does its integration of real-life historical events / characters such as, for example, the debate over integration vs. segregation in Little Rock (which actually occurred), and the reference to the Little Rock Nine.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What is your experience with racist attitudes? What have you, like Marlee, seen or heard in school or at home that has caused you to think about what racism means?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What do you think is the significance of Marlee’s specific reference to the lions in Chapter 1? How does that relate to who she is and how she relates to the world?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Given the racially-defined conflict and tensions in the narrative, what do you think might have been in the note Dad received that he never showed the family?

## **Vocabulary**

waft, flamingo, mahogany, console, polio, titter, leprosy, pimento, hygiene, integration, spatula



## Section 2, Chapters 6 - 10

### Summary

**A New Partner** – Liz asks Marlee to be her partner for the history project. Marlee hesitates, glancing at Sally who, narration reveals, has been Marlee's partner for school projects for years. Liz notices her glance and starts to leave, but then Marlee notices that at the back of her book, Liz has a Magic Square. Knowing that Liz likes Magic Squares makes Marlee agree to work with her on the school project, and she and Liz agree to meet the next day, Marlee commenting in narration that she's having difficulty figuring out what kind of drink Liz is. The following morning, Marlee meets JT and again gives him her homework. That afternoon, Liz and Marlee work on their project, Liz convincing the very reluctant Marlee to participate in the oral presentation by promising to give her a book of Magic Squares.

**A New Roommate** – The following weekend, it's decided (against Marlee's protests) that Judy is going to move into their brother David's old room. That night, Marlee is so upset at being alone in the bedroom for the first time in her life that she goes and sleeps on Judy's floor. The next morning, however, Judy tells her to stay in her own room. Later that day, Liz stands her ground with Sally, who wants to work on the project with Marlee. Meanwhile, Marlee resolves to give JT a little more time to actually ask her out on a date before she tells him she's not going to do his homework any more. The next day, though, Judy brings Dad's parakeet Pretty Boy into Marlee's room to keep her company.

**A New Friend** – Liz makes a schedule and work plan for preparing the history project. Ignoring Sally's doubt that Marlee is actually going to speak at the presentation, Liz helps Marlee get more comfortable with talking, taking her to the zoo (where Marlee feels safe and relaxed) as they chat. To her surprise, Marlee realizes that she's actually having conversations. She also realizes what kind of beverage Liz is like: a cup of warm milk with cinnamon. One day, in front of the lion's cage (where two female lions are playing together), Liz and Marlee reveal their shared affection for the lions, and how they both listen to them roaring as they fall asleep.

**The Football Game** – Marlee's narration reveals that the courts decided that integration would happen in the schools, but that classes are still delayed by public outcry. In the aftermath of that decision, Liz accompanies Marlee and her dad to a Friday night football game. Liz reveals that Marlee is planning to speak during the history presentation, and Dad seems both surprised and proud, even though Marlee is embarrassed. At the game, Liz urges Marlee to go talk to JT, and she does, JT hinting that he might take her to the movies. Later, Marlee and Liz talk with Sally (who is upset when Liz tells her that Marlee has already talked with JT) and her mother (who looks closely at Liz before moving on). As they're going home, Dad says he likes Liz, and proudly confirms with Marlee that she really is going to speak during the presentation.





Behind the Grin – In the middle of an argument between her parents about the integration issue (Mother against it, Dad for it), David arrives for dinner. Private conversation between Marlee and David reveals that David, who has been grinning and happy the whole evening, is actually unhappy at school, feeling particularly behind in his math class. He tells Marlee to keep working, and maybe one day she'll be the scientist to “beat those Soviets”. That night, Marlee has mixed feelings – glad that her brother thinks so well of her, but curious about what other unhappy things he's keeping secret behind his grin.

## Analysis

The first point to note about this section is its reference to the Magic Square. This is an Asian number puzzle similar to contemporary Sudoku in which working out the mathematical relationships between various numbers provides the solution. This type of puzzle has a lot of appeal for the mathematics-minded Marlee, who is happily surprised to discover that someone else enjoys these sorts of puzzles. Later in the narrative, Magic Squares play an important role in sustaining the friendship between Liz and Marlee, a role that goes beyond their shared interest in this type of puzzle. Meanwhile, Liz's encouragement and support for Marlee to participate in the oral presentation simultaneously develops three of the book's themes.

Other points to note include Judy's desire to have more space (a secondary example of the book's thematic interest in “coming of age” – this time in a character other than Marlee) and the reference to Pretty Boy, a foreshadowing of his appearance in an important story told by Marlee's Dad later in the narrative. Other important foreshadowings in this section include the reference to Sally's mother's attention to Liz (which foreshadows Sally's mother's actions in relationship to Liz in the following section); references to the ongoing legal battles over integration (which foreshadow the intensification of those battles throughout the narrative); and JT's hint about taking Marlee to the movies (which foreshadows the important role that “going to the movies” plays in Marlee's story later in the narrative. Meanwhile, all these elements, while moving the plot forward, also develop, to varying degrees, the novel's various themes – coming of age, fighting racism, “finding your voice”, confronting fears, and the nature of friendship.

Finally, a word about David's reference to “beat[ing] the Soviets. This is another example of how the author integrates actual history into the story. At the time in which the novel is set (the late 1950's), what is now Russia was part of what was then called The Soviet Union, a group of Communist states similar in political structure to the United States but very, very different in terms of political and economic philosophy: where the United States' economic system was/is founded on capitalism, the Soviet Union's was founded on communism, a practice by which, in theory at least, every citizen was treated equally in terms of income. This philosophy was, in the middle part of the 20th Century (including the time at which the novel is set) was viewed as dangerously threatening, un-American, and potentially destructive of the world. To “beat the Soviets”, as David comments, to chase away this perceived threat, was the goal of American



politics, science, culture, and economics. It could be argued that there are significant parallels, both in history and in the narrative, between American society's views of "Soviets" and "Negroes" – both threats to the status quo, both threats to governing social and political structures.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Which of the book's themes manifest in Liz's encouragement of Marlee's participation in the oral presentation? How do those themes manifest in this particular plot element?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is it about Liz, do you think, that makes Marlee think of her as "warm milk with cinnamon"?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What, do you think, is the relationship between Marlee's discovery about what lies behind David's "grin" and other elements of the story? Why is it significant that she has this particular experience with her brother at this time in the story?

## **Vocabulary**

imperfection, symmetrical, quarry, endearment, dainty, blemish, parakeet, bribe, sibling, glum, holler, savanna



## Section 3, Chapters 11 - 15

### Summary

**The Talisman** – On the day of an election in which integration is a major issue, Liz and Marlee make final preparations for the oral presentation. Marlee tries to talk Liz into practicing one more time, but instead Liz finds Marlee a talisman, or good luck charm: a black crow's feather, similar to the one used by Dumbo, the flying elephant.

**Blood like a Jewel** – The Sunday night before the presentation, Judy takes Marlee out to the nearby rock crusher, a place where the two of them and David used to play. After conversations about integration (which Judy agrees with) and boys (both revealing they have crushes), they arrive at a field, where there's a single gray horse. Marlee reaches into her pocket and touches the black feather, feeling a surge of bravery and deciding to ride the horse. It bolts, but she stays on it, excited and proud of herself. As they leave the field, Marlee realizes she cut herself. Judy comforts her and helps her stop the bleeding. Marlee calms down, and they sit quietly together.

**Not the Stomach Flu** – The day of the presentation, Marlee realizes she's excited, not frightened. When she arrives at school, however, she's upset to learn that Liz has withdrawn from school. At lunch, Marlee's classmates wonder whether Liz withdrew because of some illness like the stomach flu, but Sally reveals that she and her mother saw Liz in the "colored" part of town. JT says he can't believe there was a "nigger" (sic) at the school, and Marlee suddenly leaves, furious. In the bathroom she looks at her sore finger (which is throbbing) and at herself in the mirror, noticing how her complexion is similar in color to Liz's. She then resolves to continue what Liz helped her to do: make the presentation. It takes her a while to get going, but eventually she manages to get through the whole thing, including the involvement not of the eager JT but to a quiet, shy boy named Little Jimmy.

**Facing Facts** – Marlee hurries out of school, hoping to find Judy at home to talk to. Instead, she finds Betty Jean, who's preparing dinner and asks what's wrong. Marlee asks whether Betty Jean knows any "Negroes" (sic) who have pretended to be white. Betty Jean explains that it's called "passing", telling Marlee about the kind of life it leads to. When Judy comes home, instead of telling her about the presentation, Marlee talks about Liz. Judy compares the experience of being a Negro to being talked to nastily by boys. That night, Dad and Mother reveal that they know what's been said about Liz. The upset Marlee leaves the table and goes to bed, lulled into sleep by the roar of the lions.

**Talking to Daddy** – The next morning, Dad's newspaper reveals that the results of the election indicate that Little Rock is anti-integration, meaning that the schools will remain closed indefinitely. Later, while Daddy is driving Marlee to school, he tells her to stay away from Liz: she and her family are now in danger, and he needs Marlee to be safe. He goes into more detail about the integration struggles in Little Rock, how Sally's Mother is a member of the anti-integration league (the Capital Citizens' Council – CCC),



how Betty Jean's husband was the "colored" pastor Dad brought to church (Pastor George), and that the note Dad got after Pastor George's appearance at the church was from the Ku Klux Klan, and threatened Marlee's life. He also speaks of how it would be possible for Little Rock to change and be a community again, if enough right-minded people could "find their voice". He again urges Marlee to stay away from Liz, and she indicates that she understands – but doesn't make any promises.

## Analysis

"Dumbo" was an animated film made by the Walt Disney Corporation in 1941. It told the story of a baby elephant, born with gigantic ears, who discovered he had the ability to fly. Silent, lonely, an outcast, and insecure, at first he needed the support and presence of what he believed to be a magic feather in order to really fly, but later discovered that the feather wasn't necessary – that he could do it on his own. Meanwhile, the black feather Liz gives to Marlee appears on several other occasions in the narrative when Marlee and other characters need courage – as such, it is a representation / embodiment of the novel's thematic interest in facing fears, as is her experience of riding the horse, an event that foreshadows several other situations later in the novel, both narratively and thematically significant, where she finds the courage to go beyond what she usually does.

Meanwhile, an important point to note in this section is the first use of the term "nigger" to describe Liz in particular, and "colored/Negro" people in general. At the time in which the novel is set, the more hateful and/or patronizing "nigger" was commonly used by more overtly racist people (like JT, and later in the novel Red) in place of the more polite / tactful "colored" or "Negro" (tactful, that is, for the time and place – the point is not made to suggest that such terms are "tactful" in contemporary usage). It is, in short, part of the language / terminology of the period, and as such increases the novel's historical accuracy while, at the same time, not shying away from portraits of the racist attitudes of the time. A related element is the reference to the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist organization active in the Southern United States from the late 1800's to the present day. The Klan, as it was / is commonly known, takes violent exception to the idea of integration and persists in the active belief that the black race is inferior. The reference to the Klan here foreshadows references to the group, its values and actions based on those values, later in the story.

Other important points to note here include the introduction of Little Jimmy (a character who becomes more important later), and the information on "passing" passed on to Marlee by Betty Jean (which not only adds impact to the novel's thematic and narrative consideration of racism, but also develops the "friendship" theme by deepening the relationship between Marlee and Betty Jean into something other than "master/servant"). Then there are the references to Sally's mother, to Pastor George, and to the note received by Dad, all of which follow up on / develop ideas / incidents introduced earlier in the narrative. Finally, there is Dad's reference to the community "finding its voice", a clear reference to one of the book's central themes and an expanding of that theme from the individual (i.e. Marlee) finding her voice to entire



communities and/or groups finding theirs. This latter aspect of this particular theme is developed later in the narrative, as various communities are actually portrayed as finding their voices.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Aside from their use of the black feather, what are the metaphoric and/or literal parallels (in terms of experience, life, and perspective) between Dumbo and Marlee?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What thematic / metaphoric point is the narrative making by specifically drawing a parallel between Marlee's and Liz's skin tone / complexion?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why is it significant that Marlee involves Little Jimmy in the presentation and not JT? What might it be saying about her relationship with the latter?

## **Vocabulary**

outcry, varsity, burly, smear, hyena, correspondence, talisman, amulet, wisp



## Section 4, Chapters 16 – 21

### Summary

**Sent Away** – At school the next day, Marlee stays in her math classroom over lunch, wanting to talk to Sally who brags about her discoveries about Liz. That night, Dad and Mother take Judy and Marlee out for dinner, and Dad announces that because Judy has missed so much school, she's being sent to live with her Grandmother in a nearby town (Pine Bluff) and go to school there.

**The Negro Church** – The next morning, Marlee says a quiet goodbye to Judy at the bus depot, and then goes to school, where she gives JT homework that is completely wrong. At lunch, Marlee hears Sally bragging (again) about how she discovered the truth about Liz by passing the Baptist church. Realizing that the church is a way for her to contact Liz, Marlee writes a note (arranging to meet by the lions at the zoo at the usual time) and takes it to the church to be passed on. At first the pastor (Pastor George) is reluctant, but Marlee soon realizes that he knows exactly who she's trying to contact, and Pastor George realizes whose daughter she is. He then tells her he'll do what he can to find Liz.

**When Pretty Boy Died** – After Dad and Mother argue whether Mother should teach at a school being set up for white students, Dad tells Marlee about the time when the family thought that parakeet Pretty Boy had died after colliding with a wall, but that in time he revived, as birds sometimes do when they've been stunned by an accident. He tells Marlee that the family is like Pretty Boy, but Marlee doesn't quite believe him. That night, Marlee finds her mother in the kitchen crying. She (Marlee) reflects in narration on how much her life / world has changed, then goes back to her room and whispers her hope to Pretty Boy that he not die.

**Colored** – Marlee and a disguised Liz meet at the zoo. After a difficult initial conversation, Liz tells Marlee that she is colored, that her parents convinced her to try to pass, that she was caught and now goes to the "colored" school, and that the students there resent her for trying to pass. She also reveals her fear that something could happen to Marlee if they keep being friends, but Marlee, realizing that the two of them have more things in common (i.e. they're both in danger and afraid), recommits to the friendship. Liz conceals her phone number in a Magic Square and gives it to Marlee, and the two of them make arrangements to keep the friendship going.

**The WEC** – At church that week, a lesson from the Bible inspires Marlee to continue her friendship with Liz, and to keep fighting in her own way for equal rights. Later, she becomes angry when her mother refuses an invitation from Sunday School teacher Miss Winthrop to join the WEC (Women's Emergency Committee) fighting to open the schools, saying she doesn't believe in integration. Marlee joins instead, quoting the Bible lesson.



Three Good Things – One day, while eating lunch in the math classroom as usual, Marlee is invited by Mr. Harding to work with him on some advanced math. Later that day, she receives a letter from Judy (which makes her happy) and also a leaflet from the WEC (which makes Dad happy). On the weekend, she makes a call to Liz (after first writing down everything she plans to say). Liz tells her that she can't see Marlee that day, as she's taking her brother to the movies – specifically, to the “colored” theatre. Later, as she's cleaning the bathroom, Marlee reflects on how much courage it took Liz to go to a white school, and if she can do that, Marlee can find the courage to go to the “colored” theatre and see her friend.

## Analysis

As was the case with the previous section, there are several elements here that refer back to events earlier in the narrative. These include the revelation that the Baptist preacher is both Betty Jean's husband and the preacher brought home by Dad (their friendship resulting in the threatening note from the Ku Klux Klan); the reappearance of Pretty Boy (the story told by Dad having been foreshadowed by the reference to Pretty Boy earlier); and Liz's writing of her phone number into a Magic Square (foreshadowed by the previous references to Magic Squares, and how Liz and Marlee both enjoy them). Finally, there is the reference to Marlee going to the “colored” movie theatre, an ironic following-up on the earlier reference to JT possibly taking Marlee to the movies).

Other important elements in this section include the ongoing integration of real-life incidents (the vote on integration, the establishment of the WEC) with this fictionalized narrative; the introduction of Miss Winthrop (an important mentor character for Marlee in her journey of transformation and her awakening activism); and the reference to the Bible verse / lesson. This last is particularly significant in that, like the black feather, the verse / lesson proves to be an important catalyst for the development of Marlee's courage and that of several other characters. In other words, the appearance of the verse/lesson here is the first of many connected manifestations of the book's thematic exploration of finding courage and/or facing fears.

Other thematic elements include the reference to how Liz is viewed by other students at the “colored” school she now attends (a kind of reverse racism, which deepens and varies the book's consideration of various aspects of racism); the continuing exploration of different types of friendship (the contrast between the Liz/Marlee friendship and the Marlee/Sally friendship becomes even more vivid); and Marlee's continued exploration of finding her voice. Here it's important to note that at this point in the narrative, she's not just finding her literal, physical voice (i.e. in terms of speaking out loud), but also her MORAL voice (i.e. in terms of speaking and/or taking action because of what she believes and/or values).

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Marlee give JT completely incorrect homework?



## Discussion Question 2

Why does Dad say that the family is like Pretty Boy? Why doesn't Marlee believe him at first? Given the story that Dad told about Pretty Boy, what do you think Marlee is really saying at the end of this section when she asks Pretty Boy to not die?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Liz disguise herself for her meeting with Marlee at the zoo?

## Vocabulary

triumphant, exhausting, console, avow, sympathizer, integration, correspondence, wallow, heartfelt, relent, befallen, misfortune, supersede, collision, random, hypothetical, bandanna, conspicuous





## Section 5, Chapters 24 - 27

### Summary

**The Gem** – Marlee comments in narration on how happily surprised Liz was to see her when she arrived at the theatre; and how nervous she became when she realized she was the only white person in a crowd of “colored” people. She tries to calm her nerves by holding onto the black feather, which she carries in her pocket, but is ultimately unable to enjoy the film (“The Wizard of Oz” with, among other things, its Cowardly Lion struggling to find courage). After the film, Liz says it will be difficult for her to see Marlee again, but that she wants to. Marlee suggests they meet at the rock crusher, and Liz agrees.

**The Rock Crusher** – Marlee arrives early at the rock crusher and waits, increasingly nervous. Liz eventually arrives, assured that the difficulty of finding the meeting place means that it’s less likely they’ll be discovered. She reveals that being at school is difficult because people think SHE thinks she’s better than them for trying to go to a white school. She also reveals that she can’t keep from yelling at them to understand, and asks Marlee to help her learn to be quiet.

**Halloween** – On Halloween, and thanks to their costumes, Marlee and Liz manage to meet up and say hello. They interrupt JT and Red throwing eggs at the house of an elderly neighbor, and Liz cries out for them to stop. JT recognizes her voice, and Liz runs off. JT and Red then bully Marlee into throwing eggs as well, saying that she can’t tell on them without incriminating herself. After they eventually run off, Marlee hurries home, lying to her mother about being all right (while wishing she could still curl up in her mother’s safe arms) and calling Liz to reassure her that she’s okay. Liz reminds Marlee that she really needs those quiet lessons. Marlee goes to bed, so nervous and frightened that even the roaring of the lions can’t calm her down.

**Betty Jean’s Son** – The next day (which includes Marlee giving JT his homework), Marlee comes home to a very upset Betty Jean: her son Curtis has been arrested for the egging attack on the neighbor’s house. Marlee makes some notes about what she’s going to say, calls Dad’s school, and explains to him what’s happened. She and Betty Jean spend a nervous afternoon together, reacting with relief when Dad comes home with Curtis, who blurts out that Dad paid his fine. Betty Jean promises to pay Dad back, and she and Curtis go home. That night, Marlee hears Mother and Dad arguing about what Dad did. She wonders if Mother reacts the way she does because she’s afraid, and gives her a copy of the Bible quote.

**Being Quiet** – Marlee teaches the initially reluctant Liz a numbers-based way to help her keep quiet when she’s angry. Later, Mother asks Marlee about the Bible-verse note, but doesn’t say very much. She also gives Marlee her mail: a postcard from Judy, and a flyer from the WEC that refers to an upcoming WEC meeting and which inspires Marlee to do more to help Liz.



At the Meeting –At the WEC meeting, Marlee watches and listens as the attendees debate the need to put together a slate of pro-school candidates for the next school board elections, and as the women there privately debate the pros and cons of having “Negroes” at their meetings. Meanwhile, Marlee recognizes one of the more nervous attendees as Mrs. Dalton, Red and JT’s mother, and notices a scar above her eye. That night, when she gets home, Marlee receives a phone call from someone who calls her a “nigger lover”.

## Analysis

A key component of any “coming of age” experience, in literature/narrative and in life, is the development of empathy – that is, the emergence of understanding how someone else feels. In the case of this particular “coming of age” story (i.e. Marlee’s thematically-central journey of transformation), Marlee’s experience at The Gem is particularly significant. She comes to understand, in a very emotional way, how Liz felt at the school they went to together and at the school she goes to now (where she’s reviled for having attempted to “pass”). In short, Marlee’s experience at the theatre is a key element of her journey of transformation (i.e. her coming of age) over the course of the narrative.

Other important elements in this section include the reference to Marlee’s being called a “nigger lover”, which indicates the danger that she’s in, foreshadows the danger she eventually faces, and reiterates – through the use of the word “nigger” – the hatred at the heart of the segregationist cause. Then there is the ironic request from Liz that Marlee teach her how to be quiet; the revelation of the potential for violence in both Red and JT (which foreshadows later incidents in which the depth and intensity of that potential is fully revealed); and the commentary, in narration, on how much Marlee wants to feel loved by Mother. This foreshadows later developments in the narrative in which Marlee becomes aware of just what her Mother’s feelings for her actually are. Other foreshadowings include the detailing of Marlee’s mail (which foreshadow both her increased involvement with the WEC and a significant birthday gift she receives in the following section) and the reference to Mrs. Dalton, JT’s mother. This is significant for two reasons: her appearance foreshadows later points in the narrative in which she has an increasingly important impact on the story and on Marlee’s journey of transformation; and her appearance here also very subtly (but still very clearly) implies there is physical abuse in the Dalton family home, an implication borne out by future observations made by Marlee.

On the other side of the coin, in terms of events that are foreshadowed earlier and which come to importance and/or fruition here, there are the reappearances of the black feather and the Bible verse (then, as now and as in future events, representative of the novel’s thematic and narrative interest in characters finding courage and facing their fears).



## Discussion Question 1

Why is the film that Marlee and Liz see significant? What particular element of its content is thematically and/or narratively relevant?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is it important / useful for Marlee and Liz to meet at the rock crusher, instead of at the zoo?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is it ironic that Liz asks Marlee to teach her to be quiet? Why is the chapter in which this event takes place particularly ironic?

## Vocabulary

recollection, algebra, intimidating, repercussion, foolhardy, vouch

## Section 6, Chapters 28 - 33

### Summary

Thanksgiving – Marlee realizes that Liz is a words person and suggests that she write her feelings down in order to calm her anger. Liz agrees. Meanwhile, both Judy and David come home for Thanksgiving with revelations: David that he's given up all his math courses in favor of studying English like Dad did; and Judy that she's found a boyfriend. Marlee feels betrayed, as though her sister has found someone she prefers to spend time with instead of her. As a result, she keeps quiet about everything that's been going on with Liz, revealing only that she (Marlee) has been working with the WEC, an idea Judy says she supports. That night, the house receives a couple of late night phone calls, which Dad says are wrong numbers.

Good Enough – As Marlee and Liz fold flyers publicizing the school board elections, they talk about plans for the annual Christmas parade, for which each church (each “white” church, Marlee comments in narration) puts in a float. Marlee talks about how her church is basing its float this year on a Bible verse and tries to encourage Liz to come. Liz explains it's too dangerous. Later, as they help each other with chores, Betty Jean tells Marlee more about how complicated the race situation is, and encourages her to keep working with the WEC.

The Christmas Parade – After the school board elections, it turns out that only three of the WEC's candidates were elected: the other three are segregationists. A few days later, it's time for the parade. Marlee ends up sitting next to Little Jimmy who, as the parade progresses, tells her that JT is spreading rumors that she's spending time with Liz, and that he (Little Jimmy) wishes it was true, because he likes Liz. He also reveals that he writes things down in a journal, making Marlee wonder if she's dealing with her feelings in the wrong way. At the end of the parade, Marlee sees JT and Red deliberately messing up the work of a “colored” street cleaner.

An Unwelcome Christmas Gift – Marlee's family gathers at Granny's home in Pine Bluff for Christmas, with Marlee becoming unhappily aware there's more distance between her and Judy than ever. On Christmas morning, Dad surprises the family with the gift of a plane ride from Pine Bluff to Little Rock.

The Airplane Ride – On the day of the plane ride, Marlee is too nervous to respond to David when he tells her that he's noticed the silence between her and Judy, and almost too nervous to board the plane: but then she touches the black feather in her pocket and feels better. When the plane takes off she immediately feels more comfortable and safe, as opposed to the rest of the family, who are all air sick. She has a conversation with one of the stewardesses, and realizes that she had an actual conversation with a stranger without resorting to the comfort of numbers and counting. Later, after telling Liz everything about the plane trip, she realizes that she might want to try other new things,



including talking to more people – she, as her father suggested earlier, wants to find her voice.

New Year's Resolutions – Following up on her determination to speak up, Marlee volunteers an answer in class; stands up to Sally at lunch in the cafeteria; and tells JT that she's not going to do his homework any more. The next time she and Liz meet, Marlee wants to tell her everything that happened, but Liz stops her: she's excited that Curtis has started talking to her after noticing her writing in her journal. As Marlee starts to become concerned, Liz describes how they realized they both knew Marlee, and Marlee reveals that Little Jimmy said to say hi to Liz for him. They both wonder how long they can keep up the pretense that they're not really friends, but hope that they can for a long time.

## Analysis

There are several important elements in this section, some of which might seem, at first glance, as though they're not particularly significant but which, upon further consideration, can be seen to have deeper layers of meaning. For example: in terms of the overall plot, and the journey of transformation of the central character (Marlee), David's decision to drop his math classes might be perceived as an irrelevant detail. But when one considers that a key element of the story sees protagonist Marlee both realizing who she truly is and acting on that realization, David's decision can be seen as reflecting / reiterating Marlee's choice: he too is becoming more of who he truly is. Other important elements include developments in the growing relationship between Marlee and Little Jimmy (which manifests the book's thematic interest in different kinds of friendship); the further integration of real-world incidents (i.e. the school board election) with fictionalized, narrative incidents; and Marlee's glimpse of JT and Red, which foreshadows later, more extreme acts of violence, particularly those perpetrated by Red.

Meanwhile, most of the book's themes are developed further in this section, with Marlee continues to mature / come of age as the result of events, encounters, and experiences here. First, she continues to face her fears (with the help of the black feather) and re-discovers the positive value of doing so (most notably as the result of her experiences on the plane). Second, she continues to find her own voice (both her actual voice and, as previously discussed, her moral voice, manifest here as she tells JT she is no longer doing his homework). Third, her deepening friendship with Liz is juxtaposed with the brief, but vivid (and rewarding) friendship with the airline stewardess. And fourth, she continues to fight racism overtly through her involvement with the WEC (which results from her learning more from Betty Jean about what experiencing racism actually feels like), and less overtly through continuing her friendship with Liz.

## Discussion Question 1

Are the late night phone calls really wrong numbers, or are they more likely to be something else?



## Discussion Question 2

What is the “unwelcome Christmas gift”?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is the plane ride metaphorically significant? What does Marlee’s positive experience on the plane represent?

## Vocabulary

injunction, energetic, fascinating, uppity, tousle, impressive, lurch, contraption



## Section 7, Chapters 34 – 38

### Summary

**Mail, Measles, and More** – On her thirteenth birthday, Mother gives Marlee a silver letter opener engraved with her name, because she's been getting so much mail (i.e. notices from the WEC). This leads Marlee to reflect on how little she actually talks with Mother anymore. The day after her birthday, Marlee comes down with a bad case of measles. She's confined to bed for a few days, but at one point when she's feeling a little better, she finds Mother reading a newspaper article announcing that a similar race/education dispute in another state has been resolved. She tells Marlee that she's sick of all the fighting, and just wants Judy to come home. Marlee brings down some WEC flyers, and Mother helps her fold them. "Working on a project together had turned Liz and me into friends," Marlee comments in narration. "Maybe it would work with Mother too."

**Mother Gets Involved** – When Little Jimmy brings her some homework, Marlee's happy to see him, and notices how his eyes are a pretty caramel color. The day she is to go back to school, Mother announces that she's coming in as a substitute teacher, which embarrasses Marlee a lot. At lunch, Marlee invites Little Jimmy to sit with her and Sally, and he reluctantly agrees. Also during lunch, Mother tells Marlee that she's arranged for her to help JT with his math homework. Marlee keeps her anger to herself and helps JT as arranged, saying nothing to either him or Mother even when Mother arranges with JT and HIS mother that he and Marlee will go to Sally's birthday party (at a roller skating rink) together.

**Facing Fears** – The next Tuesday at the rock crusher, Marlee complains to Liz about how she (Marlee) was unable to find her voice in the conflict with her mother. Liz suggests that she concentrate instead on what she DID do. They then encourage each other to face their respective fears – Liz of "creepy crawly things" like crawdads (which Marlee teaches her to catch), Marlee of heights (with Liz teaching her to climb a tree). At the top of the tree, Marlee realizes how free she feels, just like she did when she was flying.

**The Roller-Skating Party** – Red drives Marlee and JT to the party, making racist comments all the way. At the party, JT tries to make friends, but his racist attitudes towards Liz and his judgmental attitude about Marlee's friendship with her make Marlee speak up about how she truly feels about him. Later, Sally reveals that she doesn't really feel as negatively about Liz being "colored" as she said she did, explaining that people say things to friends that they may not actually feel or believe. This reminds Marlee of how her friendship with Liz includes saying everything to each other. Later, Little Jimmy (who is also at the party) tells Marlee he would have asked her to go with him, only he knew that her mother had made other arrangements. At the end of the evening, Marlee calls home for a ride so she doesn't have to ride with JT and Red. When Mother comes to pick her up, Marlee confesses to her everything about her





relationship with JT (including doing the homework) and how Mother messed everything up. Mother apologizes, and is silent for the rest of the trip home.

Secrets on the Bus – When Judy comes home for Easter, she and Marlee visit to David, taking the cross-town bus to the school where he's studying. On the ride, Marlee tells Judy that she's still spending time with Liz. Over dinner, David talks about Act 10, a new law that requires public employees to list all the service organizations to which they belong, an act that David says could damage the careers of anyone who reveals that they're with pro-integration organizations. On the bus ride home, Marlee apologizes for leaving Judy out of the conversation, but Judy confesses she's upset for another reason: her boyfriend has broken up with her. Marlee makes her laugh, and the two of them joke playfully together.

## Analysis

The first element to note about this section is the appearance of the letter opener, an object which plays an important, even decisive role in later events. Meanwhile, Marlee's increased longing for connection with Mother, triggered by the gift, is partially resolved in this section and resolved even more significantly in the next. Another important element is the reference to Little Jimmy's eye color, which is never mentioned again, but which can be seen as indicating that Marlee's interest in / acknowledgement of him is deepening. It might even be seen as indicating that Little Jimmy, like Liz – whose eyes are a similar color – might also be “passing”.

By contrast, at the same time as Marlee's growth as a person allows her to consider the value of being Little Jimmy's friend, she slips backwards a little in terms of finding her voice, discovering herself unable to speak up (at least at first) when she feels like Mother has disrespected her – initially, it seems, Marlee has not yet been able to find her voice consistently. Later, however, when Mother picks her up from the birthday party, Marlee finds that she IS, after all, able to speak up. This is arguably the result of her conversation with Little Jimmy who finds the courage to find his voice, speak his mind, and tell the truth about his intentions.

These thematic developments are juxtaposed with other developments along the same thematic line – i.e. the facing of fears. Marlee's and Liz's challenges to each other in this section are among the most vivid manifestations of this theme throughout the book. Other thematic lines developed here include Marlee's still-deepening insight into the differences between her friendships with Sally and with Liz; and the ongoing exploration of the challenges of fighting / facing racism. This thematic element appears first as an aspect of the experience that's political, rather than personal: specifically, the reference to Act 10. The racism theme also appears, in a rather different way, in relationship to JT and Sally – specifically, their almost simultaneous indications that their apparent racism does not run in them as deeply and as powerfully as their initial actions and comments led Marlee (and the reader) to believe. Here it's important to note that Marlee sees their comments for the shallow, hypocrisy they are: she isn't buying what they're selling, having become clear and strong enough in her own beliefs and values to know when





she's being fed a line. She also, in an aspect of her coming of age, seems to realize that she doesn't need their friendship badly enough to buy into their protestations. As a result of the events of the story, she's become far more independent: it's arguable that the Marlee at the beginning of the book would never have responded to JT and Sally in the way she does here.

Finally, the reference to Act 10 is an important piece of foreshadowing – specifically, to events in following sections of the book that affect Marlee's Dad and, indirectly, the rest of the family.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why is Marlee so angry when Mother arranges for her to help JT with his homework?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What experiences have you had that parallel Marlee's experiences at the top of the tree and in the plane? How did those experiences change you and you related to the world / other people / yourself?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does Mother not react more strongly to Marlee's confession that she did JT's homework? What other events in this section might affect Mother's decision to not speak up about Marlee's apparent dishonesty?

## **Vocabulary**

envious, stethoscope, crocus, jonquil, crawdad, crevice, protractor, aghast, complexion, limbo, polka



## Section 8, Chapters 39 - 44

### Summary

**Robes in the Closet** – One day while doing work with the WEC, Marlee opens letters with her new letter opener and comes across some threats of violence against the women of the WEC. The women there (including Miss Winthrop) reveal that the threats are common and mostly just talk, but that there is genuine danger, referring to a lynching in 1927. Conversation leads the usually quiet Mrs. Dalton to reveal that she found white robes (of the sort used by the Ku Klux Klan) in her husband's closet.

**Dynamite** – At her regular Thursday meeting with Liz, their climbing of a tree is interrupted by the arrival of Red and JT. When she climbs down to confront them, they reveal that they followed her out of the belief that she's still seeing Liz. Marlee denies it, the whole while hoping that Liz stays quiet in the tree. When Marlee doesn't respond to Red's taunting, he throws her satchel into the woods. As she goes to find it, she trips over a box that turns out to be full of dynamite, which Red says could be used to show Liz and her family what they think of "niggers who are trying to pass". As he fills Marlee's satchel with the dynamite, JT tries to stop him, but Red calls him a coward and takes off, JT following. Back at home, Marlee is reassured by a phone message left by Liz that she's home and all right – but then Betty Jean, who passed on the message, says that she recognized Liz's voice, and tells Marlee to start talking.

**Consequences** – First Marlee tells Betty Jean what happened, then Dad and Mother, then the police chief, who makes arrangements for increased patrols around Liz's home. That night at dinner, Dad tells Marlee that Liz wouldn't be in danger if she (Marlee) had done what she was told and stayed away from her. Miss Winthrop arrives and tells Dad that he, like dozens of other teachers and administrators who revealed (because of Act 10) that they supported integration, have been fired, adding that there's a Parent/Teacher Association (PTA) meeting that night to discuss the situation. Mother, who had been silent the entire dinner, announces that the family is attending because as a former president of the PTA, she has something to say.

**Mother's Speech** – At the packed PTA meeting, Marlee sees Mother's nervousness, and gives her the black feather. Mother takes it up to the podium with her, and is calm and collected as she talks about how she's changed since the beginning of the integration dispute; how she's come to believe that it's time to speak up, partly because of being inspired by Marlee's putting the Bible quote in her purse; and how the words and insight of one of Marlee's teachers further inspired her (Mother) to speak up. The room applauds, and Marlee notices that Mother is holding the feather.

**After the Speech** – Marlee and Mother convince Dad that Marlee should be allowed to stay home, Marlee saying she wants to be as strong and courageous as the Little Rock Nine. Dad agrees, and even agrees to let Marlee and Liz keep in touch over the phone. That night, while he's making phone calls, Marlee thanks Mother for her support with



Dad, and Mother comments that she (Marlee) should be supported in her bravery. They embrace each other, and Marlee once again feels like her “mother was the one who could make everything okay.”

Stop This Outrageous Purge – At school the next day, Marlee is confronted by JT, who blames her for the police search on his family’s home. He reveals that the dynamite wasn’t found, and that Red must have hidden it. At home at the end of the day, Marlee discovers that Dad and Mother are part of a group together called Stop This Outrageous Purge (STOP), aimed at restoring the fired teachers (including Dad) to their jobs. Their plan includes a legal petition that has to be signed by thousands of people. Marlee fetches Betty Jean who suggests that there are probably a few “colored” people who would sign. That night, Marlee and Liz talk on the phone, Marlee revealing the events of the day and both saying they’re worried because Red has the dynamite.

## Analysis

This section contains several important elements. Perhaps the most significant, in terms of plot and/or foreshadowing later events, is the discovery of the dynamite. This particular incident, and the actions taken in response to the discovery by several characters (including Marlee, Red, and JT) both propel and define important action in subsequent sections of the narrative: the threat of violence, implied here, becomes very real later on. This, in turn, leads to a key structural point: the sense that as of this chapter, narrative momentum and plot are beginning to build towards the novel’s climax. The discovery of the dynamite is an important part of this build, which shows how intense the conflict is becoming on the personal level: so is Dad’s being fired in the aftermath of Act 10, which shows how intense the conflict is becoming on the political level.

Another particularly important element is Mother’s apparent transformation. Up to this point she has been vividly portrayed as being anti-integration, and as such has been an important representation / personalization of the negative attitudes faced by Marlee, Dad, Betty Jean, and others who are fighting segregation: her presence in the house, and her attitudes, make the conflict over race even more personal than it would be if it only involved Liz. Her actions and choices in this section, however, suggest that for even the more hardline supporters of segregation, transformation is possible. It could be argued that this aspect of this particular incident is a foreshadowing of the beginning of larger, societal transformations portrayed at the end of the novel, and arguably of the real-world changes in society that took place in the years after the time in which the novel is set.

Other noteworthy elements here include Liz’s apparent silence while hiding in the tree (she is, it seems, finally learning how to stay quiet); further revelations (in the form of the story about the sheets in the closet) that life at the Dalton home is heavily colored by racist attitudes; and the return of the Bible verse and the black feather (both important recurring symbols / representations of courage). There is also the fulfillment of Marlee’s wish that she and Mother could be closer and, perhaps most importantly, Marlee’s



continuing and deepening journey of transformation, as she becomes more and more willing to speak up and to take risks, both in relation to her increasing determination to fight for what she believes in and values.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Which character's actions in this section manifest the theme of finding courage / facing fears most vividly?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What issues do you feel strong enough to, like Mother, stand in front of people and take a firm position on? What issues do you feel strongly enough to fight for, and why?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What are the indications in the narrative to this point that suggest Liz and Marlee have good reason to be worried about Red?

## **Vocabulary**

notary, compliment, aria, lynch, satchel, quorum, stricken, fidget, disregard, boycott, reputation, perceptive



## Section 9, Chapters 45 - 49

### Summary

Maybe Brave – Marlee and Mother go out gathering signatures on the petition. They encounter Sally and her mother, who are collecting signatures on a petition for CROSS (Committee to Retain Our Segregated Schools). Later, while having lunch, Mother recalls an incident when Marlee was a child that, Mother says, proved to her that she had a brave daughter. The next day, JT (who has a black eye) tells Marlee that Red has been keeping the dynamite in his car. Marlee tells Dad, who tells the police, who reveal that the car's been searched and found nothing.

Saints, Sinners, and Savables – Both CROSS and STOP get enough signatures on their respective petitions to force a new election. This puts both sides into higher gear to get out the vote to win the election, with Marlee providing the math that indicates STOP'S goal is possible, with hard work and organization. Both the Colored and White supporters of STOP get to work contacting voters, with Liz dividing them into pro-integration Saints, anti-integration Sinners, and Savables, who aren't sure. As the work continues, Marlee notes that there are separate rallies and committees for the Whites and the Coloreds, but also notes that no-one else said anything about it.

The Keys – When Marlee visits the zoo on a break from her hard work on STOP, she sees Red and a buddy throwing stones at the lions. She almost speaks up, but then realizes it would get her into trouble and hides, beckoning Liz (when she arrives) to join her. Marlee and Liz realize they have an opportunity to find out the truth about the dynamite: steal Red's car keys and look for themselves. They eventually get the chance to do just that, but almost stop out of fear. A sudden roar from the lions inspires them, and they discover the dynamite in the trunk of the car. They hurriedly steal it, resolving to take it to the police, but leave two sticks behind. As she's retrieving them from the back of the trunk, Marlee accidentally locks herself and the keys in the trunk, and is driven away by the returning, unsuspecting Red.

God Bless Mother – Fighting fear and panic through both counting and remembering Mother's words about her bravery, Marlee stays calm until the car stops and Red and his buddy disappear. She remembers the silver letter opener (with the thought "God bless Mother"). She uses the opener to get out of the trunk and runs through the woods for home, eventually finding an isolated, empty farmhouse. Almost without hesitation, she breaks in.

God Bless David – Marlee finds a phone and calls Liz, who has been just about frantic with worry. Together they reason a way for Marlee to be rescued, Marlee telling Liz to call David to come and get her, giving Liz his phone number. Shortly after hanging up, the home's owner comes home. Marlee races out into what has become a rainstorm. She trudges home, increasingly unhappy and still worried about the dynamite she left in the trunk. David eventually appears, driving a professor's car. When he picks her up, he



promises to not tell Mother and Dad what happened if Marlee tells him the truth about everything. She does, and while he's concerned for her, he's also impressed. "It's always the quiet ones who are the craziest," he says. Marlee, still worried about what's to happen, also feels happier than she had in a long time.

## Analysis

The theme of finding courage and facing fears is dramatized with particular vividness in this section, as Marlee and Liz (but particularly Marlee) take extreme, courageous risks in order to get proof of what they suspect about Red. Here again is a significant example of how much Marlee has changed as a person, how far she's come on her journey of transformation since the beginning of the novel: it's difficult, if not impossible, to imagine the timid, quiet, reserved girl that she was at the beginning of the story doing what she does here, a clear and vivid example of how events in a narrative can change a character, who in turn drives further events in that same narrative in a different direction BECAUSE of that change. Meanwhile, the story continues to build in momentum, energy, and narrative drive: even though Marlee feels so happy at the end of this section, there is still a sense of lingering, looming danger: there is still the dynamite in the car, and Red's racism-defined anger, to be dealt with. The impact of both those circumstances is felt powerfully, and violently, in the following section.

The other important element of this section has to do with the return of an important metaphor / motif: the connection between the lions and Marlee/Liz. Earlier in the story, there was the clear implication that the relationship between the two friends was, on some level, parallel to the relationship between the lions. There was also the clear implication of a relationship between the lions' roaring and how Marlee feels / felt, and later how Liz feels / felt. The moment here again ties both these parallels together, but then adds another layer of meaning: the symbolic relationship between the lions and courage – specifically, the courage needed by Marlee and Liz to follow through on their plans to steal the dynamite.

## Discussion Question 1

Who do you think injured JT? Why? What impact do you think the injury had on him?

## Discussion Question 2

Identify the two most significant relationships between siblings in the book, and contrast the two relationships (i.e. what are the similarities / differences between the ways the two sets of siblings interact).



## Discussion Question 3

Why is the division of the pro-STOP committee into “colored” and “white” committees ironic?

## Vocabulary

disobedient, corny, rebellion, variable, quadratic, circulate, enthusiastic, hesitant, persuasive



## Section 10, Chapters 50 – 53

### Summary

**Worries** – When she gets home, Marlee discovers that everyone is out and she can clean herself up and go to bed safely. The next day at school, JT challenges her to reveal how she got rid of the dynamite. At first she denies it, but lets the truth slip. For his part, JT warns her that Red and his father have been talking a lot about some racism-defined bombings that took place in another state, and warning her that Liz could be a target.

**Stopping By Betty Jean's** – On the Sunday before the new school board election, Marlee and Mother go to the home of Betty Jean, Pastor George, and Curtis. While there, Liz and Marlee have a happy reunion, and Liz meets Mother, who greets her warmly. As Betty Jean serves tea, Marlee becomes aware that Red's car is repeatedly driving by the house. At first she's not sure, but when it passes for a third time, she urges everyone outside. For a while, everything is calm, but just as they're going back in, a car pulls up; there is a crash, and breaking glass; a car drives off; and there's an explosion.

**Afterwards** – In the aftermath of the attack, Pastor George looks in the house and discovers that a brick with two sticks of dynamite attached to it had been thrown through the window. While the adults all reveal their shock and worry, Marlee feels only relief – that Red has no more dynamite. Liz's parents come and take her away; Dad arrives and embraces his family; and the police arrive, an older officer taking Pastor George into the house and a younger officer talking to Marlee and the others. Marlee reveals everything that happened, but the younger police officer clearly doesn't believe her, suggesting that both she and Liz are lying and that football star Red couldn't possibly be guilty. He reveals his suspicions that everyone was at the house for an integrationist meeting, Marlee commenting in narration that it was at that moment that she realized the police weren't going to do anything.

**The Election** – The next day is the election for the school board. After school, Marlee talks with Betty Jean, who says she can't afford to reveal her true feelings about what Marlee did because she needs to keep her job (as a result of the bombing, she has to find a way to pay for replacement furniture). Marlee tells her that Mother and Dad would be glad if Betty Jean yelled at her, because they've been too tired. Betty Jean almost smiles, and lets Marlee go. The next day the election results are announced, and the STOP side has won. At school, though, Marlee is too upset about no longer being friends with Liz (Liz's mother had forbidden them to talk) that she cries in front of Mr. Harding, who tactfully and gently explains that life is not as easily solvable as a math problem. Later that day, Marlee has a final conversation with Liz, who tells her that they both need to find other friends, and that she (Liz) isn't the only person Marlee could get along with. After saying what seems like a final goodbye, Marlee realizes that Liz was both right (in that they can't be each other's only friends) and wrong (in that they have to





be, if only to prove that interracial friendships are possible). That night, Marlee comes up with a plan for revealing the truth about Red.

## Analysis

Both political (in terms of the school board elections) and personal (in terms of the bombing) aspects of the novel's thematic emphasis on fighting racism seem to come to a climax in this section (i.e. a story's point of most significant conflict, tension or action). It's certainly true that the political side of the issue climaxes here: the integrationist side wins the election, and while there is a degree of reference to ongoing fallout from that issue in the book's final section, there is the strong sense that here, at the point the election is won, the novel's interest in the political side of the argument has peaked.

The same, however, cannot be said of the personal side of the issue. The bombing of the home of Pastor George and Betty Jean is undeniably significant: even though no-one is physically injured, there is emotional and personal damage to individuals and relationships. It's also undeniable that in terms of interaction between the protagonist (Marlee) and the events of a possible climax (the bombing), there is a clear relationship: Marlee's awareness and actions here clearly save lives. But if the reader considers that a narrative's climax is also defined by its relationship with / to the protagonist's journey of transformation AND the narrative's themes, then the bombing is not the book's ultimate climax: that comes in the following section, making the bombing, in fact, a key event in defining and/or making necessary the book's ACTUAL climax.

The other important point to note about this section is the unexpected, but welcome, insight of Mr. Harding. Up to now, he has been a relatively insignificant supporting character, but in this section he reveals that he has a degree of wisdom that emerges at a most appropriate, and welcome time. What's particularly noteworthy is that that wisdom is expressed in language that Marlee will both understand and appreciate: he speaks to her in her terms, rather than in his, which is arguably a sign of a good mentor ... his / her wisdom and experience, expressed in terms that the hearer/student can understand and appreciate.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the most likely reason that Liz's mother has forbidden contact between her daughter and Marlee?

## Discussion Question 2

Has there ever been a teacher, or other mentor, who has been as insightful and/or as understanding as Mr. Harding is for Marlee? How did that come about? How did you change as a result?



## Discussion Question 3

What do you think the novel / author might be saying about elections and voting? What are your personal thoughts on elections, voting, and politics? What causes would you vote to support, if you could?

## Vocabulary

migraine, inkling, indentation, compartment, mimeograph



## Section 11, Chapter 54 – 57

### Summary

**Speaking Up** – Marlee, Mother and Dad go to the Daltons and confront them about what Marlee knows. Mr. Dalton and Red angrily deny Marlee's accusations, refusing to allow Marlee to look for the letter opener that she says she forgot in the trunk. Marlee asks for JT's help, and he tells his mother Marlee isn't a liar. Mrs. Dalton supports both JT and Marlee, and everyone goes to look in the trunk. Marlee finds the blade of the letter opener with her name engraved on it. Mr. Dalton confronts Red, who says he was only doing the kind of thing his father suggested. Mr. Dalton takes him into the house, threatening to beat him. Dad says he has to call the police, and Mrs. Dalton agrees. JT looks stricken, and Marlee briefly comforts him before leaving with her family.

**The Last Days of School** – On the way home from the confrontation with the Daltons, Dad and Mother simultaneously reveal that they have to punish Marlee, but that they're also proud of her. The next day, conversation with JT reveals that Red isn't being criminally charged, but that he's been sent to the army; that he (JT) is trying to be a better person; and that he's interested in dating Marlee. She refuses, suggesting he ask Sally. He does, and she's thrilled. Meanwhile, Marlee makes a tentative date with Little Jimmy to spend some time together over the summer. He suggests that they go off the high diving board at the pool, but she says she'd rather do something else.

**Summer** – Marlee reveals, in narration, that over the summer Dad was rehired, and that Judy came home. Marlee writes a letter to Liz, saying (among other things) that she'll wait by the lions every Tuesday hoping that Liz will be there. She also encloses the black feather, but then reveals in narration that Liz never meets her at the lions. At the end of summer, as school is about to start again, there are segregationist protests outside the schools – but this time, they are broken up by police spraying protestors with fire hoses. Marlee and Dad watch, Marlee noting that Dad seems quite upset, but then she quotes the Bible verse for him and he seems stronger.

**The High Dive, Part 2** – The following Tuesday, on her regular visit to the zoo, Marlee is happy and excited to see Liz there. Their conversation is careful, given that Liz's mother is nearby – although she does acknowledge Marlee, which Liz says is the result of her mother reading her journal, which contains details of the ways the girls helped each other. They discuss the idea of friendship, with Marlee suggesting that even though they don't see each other much, they'll still be friends: "a friend," she says, "is someone who helps you change for the better. And whether you see them once a day or once a year, if it's a true friend, it doesn't matter." They chat a little more, and Liz goes – leaving a magic square with what Marlee recognizes as her new phone number. Marlee then leaves the zoo and goes to the pool, knowing what she's got to do: she climbs the high board and jumps off, startling herself with the impact on the water and swimming to the surface. "And when I took that first deep breath and saw the clear summer sky, and



heard my sister and Little Jimmy ... and even Sally and JT cheering for me, I swear I heard the lions roar.”

## Analysis

The first chapter of this section contains the novel's climax: specifically, Marlee's confrontation of Red and his family. Again, it's important to note that there are arguably two possible climaxes: the bombing of the house in the previous section, and the confrontation with Red, JT, and their parents here.

Generally in these situations, there are three ways to determine which of two important events in a narrative is its climax. First: which event involves a greater choice by the protagonist, a choice that shows a transformation / change in character? Second: which event resolves the story? Third: which event has clear thematic, as well as narrative, implications?

In “The Lions of Little Rock”, the first potential climax sees Marlee reacting to the situation (i.e. the appearance of Red's car and the bomb) and taking action (getting everyone out of the house). It also has thematic implications, in that she's taking action to face her fears. On the other hand, it doesn't resolve the story. In the second potential climax, however, she reacts to the situation (Red's getting away with the attack) and takes action (confronts him and his family, which indicates a significant change in her character) that resolves the story (the threat against Liz is gone) AND illustrates SEVERAL themes: finding courage/facing fears ... finding your voice ... facing racism ... and defining friendship (an aspect of the moment that also, interestingly, plays out in the choices made by JT). This analysis, therefore, indicates that the confrontation with JT, Red, and his family is the book's actual climax.

Other important elements in this section include the reappearance of the letter opener (which could now be considered a gift to Marlee in more ways than one); the courage of both JT and Mrs. Dalton (whose actions manifest important themes); and the growing friendship between Marlee and Little Jimmy (a manifestation of the novel's thematic interest in different kinds of friendship). Then there are the reappearances of both the black feather and the Bible verse (again, metaphoric inspirations to the characters to find courage), and the reappearance of the Magic Square, used here for a very clever purpose.

Then there is the final moment: Marlee's story of how she conquered her fear and jumped off the high diving board. The first point to note about this moment is its structural placement: in the first chapter, there is a moment where Marlee is too afraid to go off the diving board, an experience echoed in the last chapter. This is an example of a literary technique called “bookending”, in which an event appears at both the beginning and the end of a narrative. A related point has to do with the implications of this particular bookending. The first time the image / experience appears, it is a snapshot of fear and of inhibition. Here, at the end, it is a snapshot of courage, of hope, and of possibility ... a clear indication of just how far Marlee has come on her journey of



transformation. The last point to make has to do with the reference to the lions in the novel's final lines: associated as their roaring has always been with Marlee and a particular aspect of her experience, here the sound and / presence of the lions takes on a new meaning. It is the sound of celebration.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why do you think JT chooses to support Marlee instead of his brother and father? What indications in the narrative are there to explain why he talks to his mother, rather than another member of his family?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What themes do the actions / choices of JT and Mrs. Dalton manifest here?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Do you agree or disagree with Marlee's interpretation of friendship, and what it means? Why or why not?

## **Vocabulary**

mimeograph, waft, quiver, tiara, appreciate, vicious, reckless, impulsive



# Characters

## Marlee

Marlee is the novel's central character – its protagonist, and also its narrator. About to enter her teen years as the novel begins (her thirteenth birthday is an important event in the story), she portrays herself as extremely quiet, rarely speaking even when she's spoken to (Marlee finding her voice is a key component of the book's primary narrative and thematic lines). She also portrays herself as being more comfortable thinking in terms of numbers than in words. For example, instead of calming herself with deep breaths or soothing word and thoughts, as many people advise / are advised, Marlee calms herself by reciting all the prime numbers in her head. She also portrays herself, at the novel's beginning, as being extremely dependent on her older sister Judy for support and encouragement. By the novel's conclusion, all three of these major elements of her character/identity will have changed: as the result of both external events and internal growth, she experiences a significant journey of transformation that, as noted above, directly relates to both story and theme.

Perhaps the most important point to note about Marlee is that she is a white girl growing up in late 1950's America – specifically in Arkansas, one of the Southern United States in which anti-black racism was prevalent, dangerous, and destructive. Here it's important to note that while black people of the time (referred to historically and in the novel as “colored” or “Negro”) were the primary potential victims of racism, white people who supported the cause of integration (i.e. the opening of “white” culture and society to “Negroes”) and protested racism were also in danger. The novel illustrates this aspect of the time by placing Marlee in a family in which the father is staunchly pro-integration, and who faces serious threats of violence for his views, threats that also come to bear on Marlee when she expresses / acts on her views.

This latter point is particularly noteworthy, in that throughout the novel, Marlee continues to act in the way she does (i.e. in defense / support of her “colored” friend Liz) in spite of both the immediate danger to them both and in spite of society's views – perhaps even because of them. In other words, by placing her in this situation, the narrative reveals what is arguably the most important part of her overall character: her sense of justice and her sense of courage, the latter part of the strong metaphoric tie between her and the lions of the book's title.

## Liz

Liz is an important secondary character in the book. She is Marlee's best friend, and plays a significant role in triggering, and/or participating in, Marlee's journey of transformation. Initially, she is an inspiration to Marlee: Liz's physical attractiveness, outspokenness, and directness trigger Marlee to make the gradual, courageous changes that eventually lead Marlee to find, and act on, her own outspoken-ness and



courage. Liz is what might be described as a catalytic antagonist – the sort of character who triggers change in a protagonist not by direct opposition, as more active antagonists do, but rather by simply being who she is and triggering change in the protagonist by example, by encouragement, and by direct challenge.

Meanwhile, in the same way as Marlee's race is an essential, narratively and thematically relevant part of her identity, Liz's race is also of fundamental importance to her identity, the book's plot, and its themes. A few chapters into the story, Liz is revealed to be a "Negro" passing as white – that is, a "colored" person with pale enough skin and Caucasian-enough features that she can be, and is often, perceived as white. In a world / time / society in which "colored" people were treated with such racist attitudes (attitudes the novel vividly portrays), the chance Liz takes to be free of such treatment is understandable. But what the novel also vividly portrays are the repercussions, from both whites and non-whites, with being caught. Liz's courage fails her somewhat when faced with those repercussions, but in the same way as she helped Marlee find her courage, Marlee helps Liz find HERS, with the result that by the end of the novel, the friendship of the two young women has been mutually catalytic, transformative, and enduring.

## Marlee's Parents

Marlee's parents (Richard and Maurine) are very different people. They love their daughter in different ways (Dad is openly supportive, Mother is distant and uncommunicative), stand on different sides in the integration debate (Dad is thoroughly pro, Mother is initially against), and have very different reactions to Marlee's transformation (Dad, out of protectiveness, tries to rein her in; Mother, as the result of her own transformative experiences, becomes supportive). Interestingly, they both say they're doing their best for their daughter (and their other children – see "Judy" and "David" below), but they are both, in their own way and for their own reasons, slow to acknowledge the truer, deeper value of Marlee's choices and changes. They come around eventually, but not before Marlee learns a key lesson: self-transformation is the result of self-choice.

## Judy

Judy is Marlee's older sister, the middle child of three in the family. Judy is practical and sensitive, but also volatile and independent. She is sensitive to, and supportive of, Marlee and her difficulties: occasionally she is impatient, but quickly and lovingly apologizes, consistently trying to be a good friend / big sister.

## David

David is the oldest child in the family, living and studying at a university across town from where the family lives. He is initially portrayed as being happy and content, but in a parallel journey of transformation to Marlee's (something of a third-level sub-plot), he



discovers how his own goals, talents, and values are different from those of his family and the society around him, eventually coming to agree with his father and with Marlee on the importance of racial integration.

## The Little Rock Nine

The real-world “Little Rock Nine” were nine “colored” students who, in 1957, were the first to attend a hitherto “whites only” school in Little Rock, Arkansas (the city where the novel is set). They faced verbal and physical violence from segregationists and, as the book suggests, were the triggers for the real-world integration vs. segregation battle in 1958 that the book fictionalizes.

## Betty Jean

Betty Jean is the new maid/housekeeper for Marlee and her family. A “colored” woman and leader in her community, she provides Marlee with a great deal of insight and/or information on what it means/feels like to be colored at that time and place in America.

## Miss Taylor

Miss Taylor and Mr. Hayden are two of Marlee’s teachers. Miss Taylor teaches history, and it is her assignment of an oral presentation that proves to be catalytic and/or transformative for both the friendship between Marlee and Liz, and Marlee’s journey of transformation.

## Sally

Sally is a long-time friend of Marlee’s from their elementary school days. Superficial, selfish, and manipulative, she is initially controlling of Marlee; resentful that Marlee becomes better friends with Liz than with her; and arrogant when Marlee starts working in support of the integration movement. She is, in many ways, an important contrasting character to both Marlee and Liz: Sally’s negative characteristics make their positive ones even more vivid.

## JT

JT, a football star, is in Marlee's class and regularly has Marlee doing his homework for him. Throughout the book, he becomes less supportive of his older brother's destructively racist actions.





## Miss Winthrop

Sunday School teacher Miss Winthrop introduces Marlee to the WEC (Women's Emergency Committee) and its fight for integration. Optimistic, hard-working, and determined, Miss Winthrop is an inspiration and mentor to Marlee as she becomes increasingly aware of the injustices around segregation and more active in the fight against it.

## Little Jimmy

Quiet, shy, and thoughtful Little Jimmy is a quiet member of Marlee's class both at school and at Sunday school. Picked on and bullied, when he's not being ignored, Little Jimmy reveals himself to be thoughtful, perceptive, and compassionate, characteristics that eventually make Marlee want to be more of a friend. The narrative offers occasional hints that he, like Liz, might be passing as white, but never addresses the possibility directly.

## Mr. Hayden

Mr. Hayden, a new teacher at the school, soon becomes Marlee's favorite: he teaches math, her favorite subject, and helps her learn more advanced math techniques. Later in the narrative, he also provides an important source of insight for her, reminding her that life is rarely solved as easily as a math equation.

## Red

Red is a football star a few years older than Marlee. He is extremely racist and becomes increasingly threatening as the story goes on. He ultimately throws two sticks of dynamite tied to a brick through a window in a racist-inspired action.

## Pastor George

Paster George is Betty Jean's husband. He is thoughtful and watchful, very much aware of the racial tensions in Little Rock and of the physical dangers they pose, but respectful of/responsive to Marlee's determination to reconnect with/stay friends with Liz after they've been separated.

## Curtis

Curtis is Betty Jean and Pastor George's son. He doesn't appear too frequently in the book, but he acts as a catalyst for racism-defined confrontations in Marlee's family, and eventually becomes a romantic interest for Liz.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Segregation / Integration

Segregation refers to the separation of white Americans and non-white Americans (referred to in the book and in the historical period as “colored” or “Negro”, referred to in more contemporary terms as “black” or “African-American”) in all levels of society – everything from schools (the focus of the situation in the book) to water-fountains to military service. Integration, on the other hand, refers to the process of breaking down and/or eliminating segregation (i.e. putting “coloreds” on increasingly equal footing with “whites”). Tension between the two sides arguing that each is the correct way to be forms the emotional, political, and cultural context for the novel.

## The Lions

Throughout the narrative, the lions in the Little Rock zoo are important narrative and/or thematic touchstones for the characters. Their roaring both lulls Marlee to sleep and inspires her to action, while their literal imprisonment can be seen as metaphorically representing / evoking different sorts of imprisonment, for various characters, throughout the narrative. Another of their primary metaphoric qualities is the representation of courage, again for various characters at various times in the narrative.

## Beverages

For approximately the first two thirds of the narrative, Marlee's understanding and/or description of the various characters she encounters is expressed in terms of different beverages. Later in the narrative, she realizes that such shorthand descriptions are superficial and limiting, and she resolves to think of people in fuller, broader terms and details, a manifestation of her maturing / coming of age.

## Magic Squares

“Magic squares” are a kind of math puzzle, similar in content and style to contemporary Sudoku. When Marlee and Liz each discover that the other likes Magic Squares, the game / puzzle becomes a common bond, and eventually a covert means of communication (when Liz conceals her phone number within the numbers of a magic square).

## The Black Feather

As Liz helps Marlee prepare for the oral presentation in history class, she gives Marlee a black feather as a talisman, or good luck charm. The feather is similar in intent and



function to the black crow's feather in the Walt Disney animated film "Dumbo", in which the title character (a flying elephant) only found the courage to fly when he was holding the feather. In the same way, the black feather becomes a "touchstone", an anchor, and / or a trigger for courage for Marlee on several occasions. Both Liz and Marlee's mother draw on the power of Marlee's feather when they have need of courage of their own, Marlee recognizes that need, and gives them the feather so that THEY can utilize its apparent power.

## Organizations in the Integration Battle

The book contains references to several organizations on both sides of the segregation / integration battle. In the narrative, each becomes known by its initials: the Ku Klux Klan (KKK - segregationist), Capital Citizens' Council (CCC - segregationist), Women's Emergency Committee (WEC - integrationist), Stop This Outrageous Purge (STOP - integrationist), and CROSS (Committee to Retain our Segregated Schools - segregationist) are the most narratively significant.

## Marlee's Letter Opener

For her thirteenth birthday, Marlee's mother gives her a silver letter opener, engraved with her name, because she (Marlee) has been getting so much more mail than usual. The letter opener plays a key role later in the narrative, when it first provides a means of escape when Marlee is trapped in the trunk of Red's car, and later when it provides proof of Red's involvement in the dynamiting of Pastor George's home.

## Act 10

In the narrative, the government of Arkansas introduces and passes Act 10, a law that calls for people in public service positions (i.e. teachers) to list and identify any organizations to which they belong. The idea, it seems, is to hunt out people who support integration and silence them. This is exactly what happens in the book, as Marlee's dad, who has supported integration since before the story begins, is fired from his job as a teacher after completing his list.

## The Dynamite

When she's being chased by JT and Red, Marlee stumbles across a box of dynamite that Red later plans to use against Liz's family. Marlee's quest to prove Red's intentions leads her to extreme choices and dangerous situations, with questions of Red's responsibility and of Marlee's honesty defining the book's narrative climax.

## Red's Car

Red's car appears frequently throughout the narrative. At first, its presence is relatively harmless, even though it's the setting for Marlee's overhearing of some of Red's more obvious and/or violent racist comments. Later, however, the car is an important element for some more serious moments of danger: Marlee's being locked inside and her subsequent escape; the dynamite attack on the home of Pastor George and Betty Jean; and the climactic moment in which the truth of Marlee's accusations of Red is revealed.



# Settings

## The USA

As a country, the United States has a centuries-old history of struggles with issues of race, and relations between the races. From the time of its inception (1776), a period in which slavery was still widely practiced, through the 1950's (the time during which the novel is set), a period in which the fight for equal rights began in earnest, through the present day, the USA and its population have struggled with ignorance, hatred, and violence that have resulted from / been triggered by the belief that the white (Caucasian / European) race is inherently, and by definition, superior.

## Little Rock, Arkansas

This is the city in which the narrative is set. Arkansas is regarded as one of the "Southern" states, those states that practiced slavery, and held onto the racist beliefs that led to / sustained the practice, for decades, even centuries. Several real-life, historical incidents took place in Arkansas at the time at which the novel is set that have been fictionalized in the pages of this book.

## The Late 1950's

This is the time at which the action of the novel is set. Real-life historical events took place in Little Rock in 1957/58 that arguably marked some of the most important events in the early days of the Civil Rights moment. The novel uses those events as the springboard for this work of historical fiction, which imagines what life must have been like for a (mostly) pro-integration white family and members of the "colored" community with which that family interacted.

## The Zoo

The Little Rock zoo is one of two places in the narrative where Marlee feels consistently safe and comfortable. She is particularly fond of visiting the lions, which for her are simultaneously comrades, comfort, and inspiration. Like Marlee's peace at her second "safe place" ("the rock crusher"), the peace and safety of the zoo are shaken up by an encounter with the angry, violent Red. Eventually, both locations again feel like safe, happy, comfortable places to be.

## The Rock Crusher

The rock crusher is the second of the two places where Marlee generally feels comfortable and safe (the first is the zoo). Like she does the zoo, Marlee firsts visit the



rock crusher in the company of her reassuring, supportive older sister, but as her relationship with Judy becomes more distant, she finds a similar degree of comfort by going with Liz.



# Themes and Motifs

## Coming of Age

A “coming of age” story is a narrative in which a young character, innocent in one aspect (or several) of the world, develops a more mature, a more adult understanding of / insight into how the world works. Such narratives are common and popular, and cover a wide variety of topics – children, after all, grow to awareness and knowledge about an almost infinite variety of things as they age.

There are many common elements in “coming of age” stories. Youthful, juvenile beliefs and/or illusions (about friendship, family, freedom, safety, feelings, priorities, values) tend to fall by the wayside, either by being violently destroyed or gently dispelled. The darker, more dangerous, more frightening aspects of being a human being tend to become apparent: experiences of hatred, violence, ignorance, selfishness, and many others tend to reveal just how unpleasant human beings / life in general can be. This awakening from the safe innocence, or the innocent safety, of childhood, can often prove traumatic for protagonists in “coming of age” stories. Many, if not most, of these experiences take place for Marlee, in varying ways and to varying degrees, over the course of the story.

But very often, even when the darker side of humanity / life is being revealed, deeper and stronger aspects of the lighter, more affirming side are also revealed. Young characters in “coming of age” narratives may discover unpleasant truths about the world, other people, and even themselves: but they also tend to discover strengths they didn't know they had, strengths they can call into use in order to resist, combat, or transcend the challenges they encounter. This, in fact, is often a template or model for a “coming of age” story: a character is initially hurt or damaged by discoveries of weakness or suffering or inhumanity, but discovers within the reserves of courage, belief, and strength necessary to move more confidently, if more vulnerably, into adulthood.

This template / model is clearly at work in the narrative and thematic foundations of “The Lions of Little Rock”, as protagonist Marlee comes of in relation to the specific subject / experience of American race relations, learning about its darker sides and, at the same time, celebrating the transcendent power of reaching out for connections beyond those darkneses. It's important to note, however, that Marlee's maturation actually happens on many levels, and in many different ways – three main ways are outlined below, and make up the book's sub-, or secondary, themes. Ultimately, as the result of all these experience, and like (many? most?) characters in similarly themed narratives, comes to know both herself and the world better in spite of the painful, frightening discoveries she makes - or, more accurately, because of them.



## Finding Your Voice

The primary manifestation of this initial aspect of “coming of age” is in Marlee herself. As noted below and throughout the narrative, Marlee is afraid of speaking – of revealing herself, of being honest, and of standing up for what she believes is right and true. Over the course of the narrative, and initially inspired by the opinionated Liz (who has in many ways found her voice, almost to a fault), Marlee comes to understand that she does in fact have something worth saying, that she has the courage to say it, and that she has reasons to say it. She discovers that her voice is a fundamental aspect of her emerging, maturing identity; tests it; and finds that speaking up has its rewards. “Finding her voice” is arguably the most significant part of her “coming of age”.

This theme has other manifestations as well – specifically, in other characters who find their voice. Liz, as noted, starts out having found her voice, but over the course of the narrative discovers the most effective way of using it. David, Betty Jean, Mother, Judy, Miss Winthrop, and other characters all find their voices emerging in similar ways, voices that are connected to a new awareness of identity, truth, and justice.

Perhaps the expression of this theme with the broadest impact – that is, beyond the individual experience – is foreshadowed and/or referenced by Marlee’s Dad, when he actually uses the concept of “finding a voice” to describe the need, will, and actions of an entire community – the community of people who, like him, believe in integration and need to “find a voice” to speak together in support of their beliefs and values. There is, of course, a darker side to this: the segregationist, anti-integration side of the argument also finds its voice as the result of the narrative, but as the events of the story suggest, voices raised in an attempt to suppress freedom (such as the book’s segregationist voices) are bound to be shouted down.

## Facing Your Fears / Finding Courage

The second way in which Marlee’s coming of age manifests in the novel is the way in which she finds the courage to face her fears.

Marlee begins the narrative with a lot of fears. The most noteworthy, and the most debilitating / inhibiting, is her fear of speaking up: she is known by friends and family as being mostly silent. A related fear is of alienating, or losing, what few friends she has – specifically, Sally. Marlee tends to fear that if she speaks up, if she reveals the truth of how she feels about Sally, then Sally won’t be her friend anymore (Judy, who doesn’t care for Sally or her style of friendship, would probably say no big loss). At the core of Marlee’s fears is the fear of being rejected, of being bullied or hurt by being wrong, or disliked – all fears which are arguably, and to one degree or another, experienced by just about every other young person of Marlee’s age.

Over the course of the narrative, however, initially inspired by Liz and supported by reminders from the black feather and the lions, Marlee faces these and other fears as well. She finds a way to speak out, to speak publicly, and to speak her mind – as noted





above, “finding your voice” is the first of the three main ways in which the “coming of age” element is explored. What’s important to note, however, is that once Marlee starts facing her fears, her actions and choices have a ripple effect, causing her to encourage other people to face their fears. This is primarily true of Liz, but it’s also true of Judy, David, Betty Jean, and even Marlee’s mother. Here again the black feather, the lions, and an inspiring verse play important roles, as Marlee shares the courage she has gained from them with those whom she cares about. Courage, it seems, is contagious – but only, the novel seems to suggest, when it’s connected to a strong personal belief in justice, in what is right, and in what is true.

## Facing Racism

The third major component of Marlee’s coming of age is her relationship with / awareness of racism. Marlee begins the narrative with what was arguably a typical view of “Negroes” for white children of the time and place in which the novel is set – that they are lesser human beings, and deserve to be treated as such. Granted, she is much less set in that perspective than some of the other characters, simply because her Dad is so strongly pro-integration (i.e. the integrating of the “colored” and “white” races): there is the strong sense, in fact, that Marlee’s initial racist beliefs and perspectives are more the result of ignorance (i.e. of the reality of what being “Negro” actually means in society) than actual hatred (such as that displayed by Red) and / or indifference (such as that displayed by Sally).

As the result of her growing friendship with Liz, however, and of her subsequently developing relationships with Betty Jean, Pastor George, Miss Winthrop, and other characters, Marlee’s ignorance begins to be eroded by knowledge and awareness of what Negroes, and Negroes who try to pass as white, are subjected to – hatred, rejection, and violence. Marlee’s personal journey in this area is portrayed as representing and/or being part of the journey of society as a whole, as groups such as the WEC and others strive to expand the awareness of entire communities in the same way as Marlee’s individual awareness is expanded.

As Marlee’s knowledge increases, so does her courage and sense of commitment to ending the impact of racism on her friends and on her family, but also on people whom she doesn’t actually know. Fighting racism becomes, for her, an act in pursuit of justice, fairness, and of what she’s come to know as truth.

## The Nature of Friendship

There are several different sorts of friendship in the narrative – between siblings (Marlee and Judy), between student and teacher (Marlee and Mr. Harding / Miss Winthrop), between employer (or the employer’s child) and employee (Marlee and Betty Jean). The most significant forms of friendship, in terms of both narrative and theme, are the friendships between Marlee and her classmates, and here again there are several sorts.



The first of these classmate friendships to be explored is that between Marlee and Sally, which is almost immediately revealed to be one sided: Sally, as Marlee fully knows, tends to be selfish, superficial, and demanding. This vividly portrayed “friendship” is almost immediately contrasted with what the novel seems to suggest is a much better kind of friendship – between Marlee and Liz, which is mutually inspiring, mutually transformational, mutually affectionate, and mutually respectful. Marlee and Liz challenge each other, awaken each other to new ways of thinking and feeling, develop attachments to / intimacy with each other, and take risks to sustain all these elements – all of which, again, seem to be held up as examples of what friendships can / should be.

One of the many ways in which the Marlee / Liz friendship is transformative, and another way in which this theme is explored, is the friendship that develops between Marlee and Little Jimmy. The latter is initially portrayed in Marlee’s narrative as forgettable and almost unnoticeable, but as the result of how Liz challenges Marlee to think differently about herself and the people around her, she (Marlee) starts to develop awareness of who Little Jimmy really is, and as a result, begins to develop a friendship with him as well. Perhaps that’s the core of the book’s thematic interest in friendship – the suggestion that the truest, best, healthiest friendships start from knowing, and wanting to know, the truths of another.

# Styles

## Point of View

The story is told from the first person, past tense point of view – specifically, that of narrator Marlee. There are hints in the book’s first chapter that Marlee is telling the story of her thirteenth year from an older perspective: that is, the older Marlee is recounting what happened when she was younger. Here there are two important points to note. The first is that there is no reference to just how old “older” Marlee actually is. The second point to note is that there are no interjections from “older Marlee” anywhere in the narrative – no comments, no analysis, no interpretations. The story is told as “young” Marlee experienced it and thought about it, an authorial choice that draws the reader closer to Marlee’s experiences.

What’s particularly interesting about this book is how the author integrates the character’s identity with the narrative’s point of view: the way in which who Marlee is defines what she says, why she says it, and how she says it. Her point of view, at the beginning of the narrative, is that of a white girl who has degrees of both privilege and ignorance simply because her skin pigmentation is what it is. It is also the voice of a child of the time – specifically, the late 1950’s, when privileged white children like Marlee were, for the most part, brought up in an atmosphere of isolation from non-whites, belief that non-whites were inferior, and the further belief that the mixing of the races was dangerous and ill-advised. This is her mother’s point of view, and for the most part the point of view of the society of the time. As Marlee starts to question herself and her situation, however, her perspective and point of view shift, to the point where the book’s point of view evolves along with the character, ideas, and ultimately the identity of the protagonist / narrator.

## Language and Meaning

The first point to note about the book’s overall use of language is that its vocabulary and style feel right and appropriate for the central character and narrator – 13-year-old Marlee. The word usage is not overly intellectual or clever, yet includes idiosyncratic, personal touches (i.e. references to numbers) that make the identity of the speaker / narrator clear and consistent. It should be noted that at the beginning of the novel, Marlee’s comments suggest that she is writing from a more mature perspective, but the novel never actually makes clear what level of maturity she’s writing at: there is the sense that the older perspective is less important to the author than that of the narrator’s thirteen year old self.

The second point to note about the book’s use of language is its sense of historical accuracy, which not only includes its textual references to actual events, situations (i.e. the basic premise of the novel – the fight over integration in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1958), and people. Historical accuracy also, and notably, extends to the terms used to



describe the races – specifically, the use of the terms “Negro” and “colored” to describe characters who would, in more contemporary settings, be referred to as “black” or “African-American”. There is even the occasional use of the word “nigger”, with all its implications of racial inferiority, used as almost a curse word when said by characters like JT and Red. The use of these words, as well as the use of actual names of organizations on either side of the integration / segregation debate, lend the novel and its story a sense of veracity, or historically accurate truth that is essential for understanding the characters and their situation.

## Structure

The novel’s structure is fairly straightforward – linear in nature, its plotting and narrative line defined by the basic cause-and-effect / action-reaction principle; a character has an experience, takes action as a result of that experience, something happens as a result of that action, the character reacts to that something, and so on down the line from beginning to end. As a result of the actions, reactions, and choices of the various characters, the narrative follows the traditional pattern of beginning / set-up / normal ... middle / conflict / challenge ... end / conclusion / new normal, the turning point into the end being defined by the work’s climax – in this case, Marlee’s confrontation with Red, JT, and their parents.

A key point to note about how that structure is executed has to do with the length of the book’s chapters: they are generally very short, each one coming in at only a few pages. In some cases, they are as short as three, in other cases they are as long as eight or nine, but in general, the novel moves from incident to incident in a manner that almost isolates those incidents from one another. There is sometimes less of a sense of flow, of relationship between the incidents, than there might be if the chapters were longer. The point is not made to suggest that this is a narrative choice that doesn’t work: on the contrary, it gives the sense of a very full sequence of events, a sense that every event was / is important. But it also gives the sense of the work being episodic, a term generally used to describe narratives (i.e. episodes of a television series) in which chapters tend to feel like self-contained incidents, rather than as part of a complete whole.



## Quotes

I guess I've learned it's not enough to just think things. You have to say them too. Because all the words in the world won't do much good if they're just rattling around in your head.

-- Narrator (Marlee) (Page 1 paragraph Page 1)

**Importance:** This quote is important for two interrelated reasons: it expresses one of the novel's central themes (i.e. "finding your voice") and also defines a key element of Marlee's journey of transformation over the course of the narrative and its sequence of events.

There are worse things in life than sitting alone. Like leprosy. Or losing a limb. Or maybe getting your period in the middle of gym when you're wearing white shorts and the teacher is a man and you left all your sanitary napkins at home. Not that that's ever happened to me.

-- Narrator (Marlee) (Page 14 paragraph Page 14)

**Importance:** With one of her rare flashes of ironic humor, Marlee talks herself into not feeling badly about being isolated from her classmates.

... sometimes, at night, when I hear the lions roaring and they're really going at it, just growling and yowling, and roaring like a jet engine, sometimes I wish I could be like them, that I could just yell out whatever I was thinking or feeling and not care one whit who heard. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I can almost convince myself that I'm going to do it ... but by the time I wake up in the morning, the lions are always silent, and so am I.

-- Narrator (Marlee) (Chapter 4 paragraph Page 20)

**Importance:** This is the first clear reference in the novel to how Marlee's experiences and those of the lions parallel each other.

My sister pressed her handkerchief into my thumb. I would have a scar, but I didn't care. One final drop of blood oozed out and sat on my fingertip like a jewel, a secret given to me by my sister.

-- Narrator (Marlee) (Chapter 12 paragraph Page 60)

**Importance:** This quote metaphorically represents the closeness and bond between Marlee and Judy, a closeness that echoes with Marlee's longing for closeness and friendship that in many ways motivates her friendship with Liz.

It's called passing ... some Negroes who are really light skinned and have straight hair try it." "Why?" "Better schooling. More Opportunities. Maybe they're just tired of being seen as second best ... it's a hard life ... you have to give up seeing family and friends. Stop going [to] the places you used to go. And you have to lie – every day – to everyone you meet ... I hope you never have a secret like that, Marlee. A secret so big your whole



life depends on it.

-- Betty Jean (Marlee) (Chapter 14 paragraph Page 68)

**Importance:** With this quote, housekeeper Betty Jean explains exactly what it means to "pass" as white, both in physical and in emotional terms. As a result of this explanation, Marlee learns more about Liz, her situation, and the situation of "Negroes" in general.

Parents were not supposed to cry. They weren't supposed to fight, either. And sisters weren't supposed to be sent away. And if your friend was white, she should stay white, and not suddenly turn out to be a Negro.

-- Narrator (Marlee) (Chapter 18 paragraph Page 89)

**Importance:** Here Marlee summarizes the list of truths she is coming to discover as she matures / "comes of age".

1 Peter 3:14 – But even if you do suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled.

-- The Bible (Chapter 20 paragraph Page 99)

**Importance:** This is the quote from the Bible that support Marlee in finding her courage to do what she believes is right, courage that through the passing on of the verse, she passes on to other people.

Matthew 19:14 – Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the Kingdom of Heaven.

-- The Bible (Chapter 29 paragraph Page 145)

**Importance:** This is the quote that Marlee's church uses as the theme for their float in the Christmas parade. It also has a significant relation to the actions of Marlee and Liz throughout the narrative.

The view was beautiful. In one direction, I could see the large rock we liked to sit on, and in the other, the rolling Arkansas hills. The late-afternoon sun turned all the new light green leaves to gold, like King Midas had been walking through the forest ... we stayed in the tree a long time, watching the leaves and the squirrels and listening to the birds. Together.

-- Narrator (Marlee) (Chapter 36 paragraph Page 185)

**Importance:** This quote, while specifically focused on Marlee's experience at the top of a tree she has found the courage to climb, can also be seen as a poetic, metaphoric representation of the joy and freedom that can be experienced if, as the novel thematically suggests, one finds the courage to face one's fears.

When my daughter wouldn't talk in school, Mrs. Wood was the one who reassured me that Marlee would be okay. She saw that Marlee was brave and perceptive and smart, and she made me see it too. Mrs. Wood is the best educator I've ever known, and the idea that she should be fired for anything she believes or does on her own time is



absolutely ridiculous.

-- Mother (Chapter 42 paragraph Page 217)

**Importance:** This quote functions on two levels: as the core of Mother's explanation of why she is now supporting the integrationist movement, and as a trigger for Marlee to recognize that Mother really does love, respect, and trust her.

Those Negro students who went to Central last year ... the Little Rock Nine. They were in danger, But they didn't run away. They were brave. They kept going to school, even though it was scary. Even though their parents must have been worried about them. They kept going, because they believed in something. Believed they had a responsibility to make things better. Believed they could make things better, even though they were still just kids. I think I'd like to be like them.

-- Marlee (Chapter 43 paragraph Page 219)

**Importance:** Here Marlee sums up her reasons / motivations for making the moral choices she does and taking the actions she does in support of both her friendship with Liz and the larger issue of integration.

... I got quiet again. Like a turtle, I pulled back into my shell, conserving my courage and my words until I really needed them. At least that's what I told myself. I hoped it wasn't just an excuse for being quiet and afraid.

-- Narrator (Marlee) (Chapter 50 paragraph Page 255)

**Importance:** In this quote, Marlee reveals the struggle she goes through to determine when / how to use her newly found voice.

I knew I should be scared too. We could have been killed. But all I could think was 'The dynamite is gone. Red doesn't have any more.' And no-one was hurt.

-- Narrator (Marlee) (Chapter 51 paragraph Page 262)

**Importance:** This quote sums up the relief Marlee feels, perhaps strangely but truthfully, after the bombing of Pastor George and Betty Jean's home.

Liz was right. Summing people up as a cola or a coffee wasn't really fair. Most people were a whole refrigerator full of different drinks. Trying to force them into one cup or one glass meant I never really got to know them. But ... as long as there were people like Red in town, it was more important than ever for [Liz and me] to be friends, to show all the others who were too afraid that it was possible.

-- Narrator (Marlee) (Chapter 53 paragraph Page 271)

**Importance:** With this quote, Marlee indicates that she has developed a more mature understanding of the complications of the situation(s) in which she and Liz find themselves - it is another example of how, over the course of the narrative, she has come of age.



There, on our bench, sat a tall girl with black hair and skin the same color as mine. She was clutching an old black feather in her hands.

-- Narrator (Marlee) (Chapter 57 paragraph Page 288)

**Importance:** This quote is significant for several reasons: in its reference to the girls' common skin tone, it defines them both as human beings and friends in spite of the racism that has tried to keep them apart; and it also shows Liz, in the clutching of the black feather, as both needing and drawing on courage and facing fears in the same way as Marlee and other characters have done.