

Moo: A Novel Study Guide

Moo: A Novel by Sharon Creech

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Plot Summary

The following version of *Moo* was used to create this guide: Creech, Sharon. *Moo*. Harper Collins Children's Books. New York, 2016.

Moo, a young adult novel by Sharon Creech, is a heartwarming story of a family's adventure as they move from the city to a coastal Maine town. Twelve-year-old Reena, her seven-year-old brother Luke and their parents make a spontaneous decision to change the course of their lives, leave their city home and start a new life somewhere completely different. They settle on Maine and within weeks make the big move.

With the whole summer ahead of them, Reena and Luke begin to explore their new town which is especially easy given the freedom to bike on the safe, wide country roads that span out from their little harbor town. Early on, while running an errand for their mother, they meet Mrs. Falala and do not have a good first impression of the elderly woman. On a second visit, the children do not make a good impression themselves, and Mrs. Falala believes that they are rude. Through an arrangement made by their parents, the children are expected to work on Mrs. Falala's farm in an attempt to reconcile the two parties. During days of mucking out stalls, hauling water and feeding animals, the children and Mrs. Falala get to know each other and develop a mutual respect for one another.

Mrs. Falala begins to train Reena to show her cow, Zora, at the fair. Zora is a Belted Galloway and happens to be a stubborn, ornery cow. Reena learns to care for, train and gain the cow's trust. She is helped by some new teenage friends who work at nearby Birchmere Farm. Beat and Zep teach Luke and Reena everything they need to know about caring for the cows. When Reena becomes concerned that Zora is lonely by herself at Mrs. Falala's, Zep supports her in getting a friend for Zora. He brings Yolanda to the farm and visits every day, showing Reena what she needs to know to enter Zora for judging at the fair. Mrs. Falala becomes confident that Reena will do well in the judging ring and gives her a show stick, a metal rod that is used to calm and guide the cows during judging. She has used the stick for years and passes it on to Reena in hopes that she will carry on the tradition of showing championship cows.

Luke and Mrs. Falala also develop a special relationship over the summer. He teaches the elderly woman how to draw, something that she has always wanted to learn, but she had always been afraid to try. Luke has always been afraid of getting too physically close to people, but he learns to sit next to Mrs. Falala and quietly draw. What begins as a mutual dislike grows into a friendship and both of them grow personally. Mrs. Falala fulfills a life long dream and Luke learns to be less fearful of getting close to people.

Following Reena's successful first participation at the fair, a sad turn of events threatens to upset the children's new found happiness. Mrs. Falala suddenly passes away and the future of her farm and the animals is uncertain. Although the old woman has left the animals to the children in her will, without a farm of their own, they are unable to provide

a home for them. Reena's quick thinking and "give-it-a-try" attitude ensures that Zora and the other farm animals will have loving care for the rest of their lives.



"That Zora" - "Beat and Zep"

Summary

The narrator, 12-year-old Reena, begins by stating that Zora is a stubborn, ornery cow and that nobody wanted anything to do with her. But before talking about Zora in detail, Reena tells a bit of her own story. First she described her life living among all the sights and sounds of a busy city, battling traffic, going to museums and the zoo. One day in the car as the family was taking her father to a job interview, Reena's parents began to discuss their future. They were not really interested in staying in the city and thought it might be good to move out of it, but they were not sure where. Suddenly, Reena suggested Maine. The idea had popped into her head because she had recently read three books about Maine and it seemed like a nice place with rocky beaches and lighthouses.

The family packed up their closets and cupboards and the garage storage and told the landlord they would be leaving. They had a yard sale and gave lots of things away to the Salvation Army. Their friends thought they were crazy to just pack up and move to Maine. Everyone told them it was cold there. But they also told them there were lobsters, blueberries and beautiful beaches. Reena's little brother, Luke, wondered about moving. He was always drawing pictures of superheros, castles, and villains in a yellow notebook that he carried everywhere. Now he drew a picture of a dragon flying through the sky carrying in its talons a house, a car and beds. The family's friends reacted in different ways to their leaving. At first they were all excited, but then they became distant and did not bother with them much anymore. When Luke told his friend Toonie, she punched him in the nose and called him a "doofy head."

The drive to Maine was exciting. The family painted "Moving to Maine" on their car window. People honked their horns and waved. They took a picture under the "Welcome to Maine" sign. They stopped for lunch at a diner and breathed in the salty air. Dad stepped in dog poop, but they made it. The harbor town was beautiful with jagged rocks, sloping mountains and bobbing boats in the water. Luke drew pictures of the mountains and boats below. The old house the family rented was nearby.

While their parents began to unpack, Reena and Luke rode their bikes through the town and explored their new surroundings. One day while riding, Luke saw Oreo cows. A girl working in the field nearby told them the black and white cows were known as Belted Galloways. They had huge heads and very deep, loud moos. The cows' home was called Birchmere Farm. The children rode past the farm almost every day and watched the animals. They saw several teenagers working with them, filling feed bins and water buckets and harnessing cows. Luke's pictures of heroes began to look like farmers conquering giant cows.

Reena and Luke discovered an unusual house at the end of Twitch Street. It belonged to Mrs. Falala. Some of the people in town said she owned an alligator and a bear;



some said she was just old; and some said weird things happened around her house. One day, Dad took Luke and Reena to the house to meet Mrs. Falala and he told them to be respectful to her no matter they saw or heard. Delicate flute music was heard as they climbed the steps to the porch of the vine-covered house. They were greeted by a hissing cat who was then chased by a large squealing black hog. A squawking parrot also announced their presence. Battling the hog and cat, the trio knocked on the back door. Mrs. Falala's face appeared in the window and then she reached out and pulled Luke inside, along with the others. Dad handed Mrs. Falala some books they had brought for her. He had been instructed by his wife to deliver the books to the old woman whom she had just met at the doctor's office. Mrs. Falala looked at the books and declared them as "wrong," and shoved them back at Dad.

As the family left, they noticed a large flock of seagulls perched on the rooftop of the house as the flute music began to come from the attic window again. Reena also noticed a little blue mark on Luke's arm where Mrs. Falala had grabbed him. Reena then explains that Luke did not like to be touched. Even as a young child, he told people, "don't touch me." He had learned to stop yelling it at people, but now if people tried to touch him or got too close, he ran away and called them "nutto head" or "frog brain." Luke did not yell when Mrs. Falala grabbed him, but he pulled himself away quickly. In his notebook that night he drew a figure with a snake-like braid surrounded by a posse of hogs and cats.

In the final chapter of this section, Reena watched two of the teenagers that work at Birchmere Farm as they put harnesses on the cows. The teenagers called back and forth to each other and Reena learned that their names were Beat and Zep. Those names made her smile. When she realized that they saw her watching them, she rode off embarrassed.

Analysis

As the story of Zora and Reena begins, the author introduces the main characters very quickly. Reena, the main human character and narrator, first talks about Zora the cow, and describes her as ornery and stubborn. She then goes on to describe herself, her family and their life in a large city. She does not name the city, because it does not really matter where it is exactly. It is only important to know about the nature of the city and what it is like to live in a busy and loud environment, filled with so many places to visit and things to do. Reena describes all the sights and sounds - the traffic, the buses, the honking cars, the zooming subway, the wailing sirens, the roaring animals at the zoo, the colors of the people and the tall buildings. In "But First, Before Zora," the author does interesting things with the text, writing the city's description in one long sentence that covers three pages and lasts for the entire chapter. But instead of sounding like a run-on sentence, the words form a type of poetry that uses repetitive word phrases and onomatopoeia to make the description come to life. For example, the family goes "zzzooooooooooooommmmm on the subway" (3). The word zooming stretched out creates the sense of a subway car moving past someone standing on the platform. The word "subway" is also dropped down onto a line all its own to emphasize that a subway



is underground. These descriptive words and poetic formatting continue throughout the novel.

As the story continues, the family makes a spontaneous decision to move to Maine. Reena's mother makes the suggestion that the family move somewhere out of the city, and Reena suddenly suggests Maine. Reena later comments that the only reason she thought of Maine was that she had recently read three books about the state and it seemed like a very beautiful and interesting place. The pictures she had seen stuck in her mind so the idea simply popped out. Here the author introduces one of the novel's themes and addresses the issues surrounding moving and how people are personally affected, especially when they move to a totally different place. She looks at what has to be done in order to move all your belongings, saying goodbye to friends, and thinking about what life will be like in a new environment. The family experiences some loss of friendships as people seem to stop wanting to have much to do with them, perhaps because they will no longer be a part of the community. This saddens Reena and her mother. One of Reena's friends says that now Reena will get all "Maine-y" (18). Even though she does not know what that means, she understands that the comment was not meant to be positive. She wonders what this move will mean for her and as the story continues she discovers what it is to be "Maine-y." Luke also experiences the pain of separating from friends when his friend Toonie punches him on the nose and calls him a "stupid doofy head," (19) expressing her own sadness, and maybe anger, that her good friend is leaving her. Even the father questions what they are doing as he considers the possibility that maybe they were all "doofy heads," (19) since this move is so sudden and unplanned.

The family arrives in Maine and begins to settle in. Reena and Luke are excited that here they are allowed to wander around the town freely. They discover that the open country and uncrowded streets make Maine a safer place for them. The author uses a beautiful simile of a tree to describe how the roads spread out from the center of the small town. "But here in this little town by the sea there were wide sidewalks and quiet, curving lanes spreading like tree limbs from the trunk of the town center and you could ride and ride the whole day long" (25). It is on one of these excursions that Luke and Reena discover Mrs. Falala's house and the very interesting Birchmere Farm. The children get their first up close look at cows and come face-to-face with their huge slobbering heads. They are a bit scared by the size of the large animals. They are also a bit unsure of what to think of Mrs. Falala. They have heard some strange stories, so they are unsure of what to expect when their Father takes them to her house to deliver some books that the Mother has picked up at the library as a neighborly act of kindness toward the elderly woman. The author makes an interesting choice in giving the old woman a musical name. It seems that she should be a happy, friendly woman with such a flowing name. But, Reena points out the correct pronunciation as "Fuh-LA-la" which makes it unusual, much like the woman herself. She also comments that her voice is at times "full of honey," (38) even when her actions do not appear to be that way. It is these initial impressions that make the kids wary of Mrs. Falala as they begin their relationship with her. They do wonder however about the flute music that they hear coming from the attic window. The beautiful sound does seem to fit with the name. Perhaps Mrs. Falala is more than an old, abrupt woman. This will become another



theme throughout the book; it is important to take the time to get to know people, because they may not be what they initially seem.

Based on the first scary meetings with Mrs. Falala however, Luke is deeply affected. His drawings of superheroes and villains take on new forms. Now when he draws in his yellow notebook he begins to add features that resemble Mrs. Falala. One particular villain takes on her snake-like braid, hands with a claw-like grasp and is followed by a hoard of huge pigs and frightening cats. This notebook is a key part of the story for a few reasons. Here, it serves to give the reader insight to Luke's personality. He appears to be a bit insecure around people, particularly since Reena says that he does not like to be touched by people or even get too close to them. In his notebook, Luke is able to express how he feels about people. His drawing helps him to deal with difficult emotions and situations and it is a good way for his family to see just how he is feeling.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Reena's family decide to move to Maine?

Discussion Question 2

How do the pictures in Luke's notebook change as he experiences new things? What do his drawing suggest?

Discussion Question 3

Does Mrs. Falala's personality match her name? Why does the author give her such an interesting name?

Vocabulary

harlequin, trawling, ogling, scrabbles, complexity, tromped, gnarled, lumbered, posse, lanky



Employment - Zora

Summary

As this section begins, Reena mentions that her parents had sent out applications for new jobs in the towns near where they chose to settle along the coast. Her mother was able to find work as an English teacher at a local private school. Reena's father was thinking about trying a new line of work - something completely different but had not landed a job yet. He said that they would be fine financially and joked that they could always eat the kids if they did not have food. Luke thought he was serious.

Luke and Reena were out riding their bikes and stopped by Birchmere Farm, as they often did to watch the cows. They wondered what the cows were saying when they mooed. They also wondered why three of them were wearing halters and tied to the fence so that their necks were stretched out and held upward. Zep came up behind them and told them that they were being trained to be show cows and that they needed to strengthen their muscles and hold their heads up to show well. Reena wanted Zep to stay longer and talk with them, but she did not really know what to say to him. There is then a short poem inserted in the text entitled, "Rocks," which is all about the many rocks on the Maine coast.

Next, Reena and Luke were sent by their parents to Twitch St. to deliver more books to Mrs. Falala. They were scared to go on their own because the first encounter did not go well. The father said they could handle it and sent them on their way, reminding them to be respectful. When they arrived they did not see any of the animals outside, but they did hear flute music coming from the attic window. Then, they saw a flock of seagulls lined up on the rooftop pointing their beaks downward at a large black snake slithering along the gutter and hanging over the edge of the roof.

Mrs. Falala opened the door and pulled them inside. The children handed her another stack of books on art that their mother had gotten out of the library for her. The mother had met Mrs. Falala at the doctor's office and learned that she was interested in art, but did not know how to use the library. The old woman looked at the books and declared them to be better than the previous batch. She then looked at Luke who was standing with his thumb in his mouth. She told him to stop it otherwise he would get "horse teeth," and snapped at his thumb. Luke told her not to touch him. She repeated, "Horse teeth," and again tried to grab his thumb away. Reena then yelled at Mrs. Falala to leave Luke alone. Mrs. Falala said they were rude and told them to get out of her house. They gladly left and quickly rode away on their bikes. Luke was shaking and terribly upset. He called Mrs. Falala a "kookoo head" and a "nutto." Reena agreed with him.

When the children arrived home, Luke buried his head on his mother's shoulder. Reena told their parents the story. Mrs. Falala had already called their house and told her version of the story. Reena realized that even though Mrs. Falala had scared Luke and was grabbing at him, her tone of voice was disrespectful to the elderly woman. She told



her mother that she should go see Mrs. Falala and see for herself how difficult the woman could be. She came home and declared Mrs. Falala to be very charming and that she had worked out an arrangement with her for the kids to be helpful. Luke and Reena were expected to go to Mrs. Falala's house and help her three mornings a week with some work around the farm.

Reena's parents took her and Luke on the first day. After they had made an official apology to Mrs. Falala for being disrespectful, they began to do some chores. They started with shoveling cow dung and did many other tasks such as filling feed bins and water troughs. Mrs. Falala also introduced them to her cow, Zora. She was a black and white Galloway, although when Reena and Luke first saw her she seemed nothing more than a big black lump. The children were somewhat scared of her at first. When asked to put a halter on Zora and bring her into the barn the children did not want Mrs. Falala to get the better of them, so they tried their very best. Luke got the halter on Zora, much to Reena's amazement but Zora would not move an inch for her. Instead, she ended up sitting on the ground covered in mud.

Analysis

This grouping of chapters begins to get into the heart of the family's life in Maine as they settle into a summertime routine and get to know the area. The children enjoy riding their bikes and visiting Birchmere Farm to watch the cows. They wonder what the cows think about standing around all day. Reena also is interested in Zep. When he comes up to talk to them one day, she wishes that she had more to say so that he would stay longer and talk with them. But she is nervous around him and discovers that she cannot find any words to say. This is a very subtle theme that the author inserts in just two or three places throughout the book. It is often during these pre-teen years that kids begin to "like" each other, so it is natural that Reena would be interested in a new boy. Although not a major part of the novel, the author does lightly touch on the idea and includes it as part of the process of growing up and meeting new people.

The author then does a very interesting thing in the text. Suddenly, a poem entitled "Rocks" is inserted into the story. Until this point in the novel, the text is primarily prose, although often not the typical style in most novels. Chapters are very short and sentences are strung out and laid out on the page in a poetry-like format. The meaning and feeling of many descriptive words is emphasized with the use of highlighting, bolded, stretched out, and curved text. While a poem describing the amount, color and quality of the many rocks found on Maine's coast may not seem to have anything to do with Reena's story, it actually fits in very significantly. Reena had previously described her city home in great detail, so it is only natural that she should notice her new surroundings and think about how wonderful and different they are. She is also taking in her new home environment and appreciating her surroundings in new ways and appreciating the energy that they seem to generate. The poem also creates a word picture for readers who are able to see and feel what Reena experiences as she discovers the natural beauty of the Maine coast.



The next few chapters focus on two of the major themes in the book, the ideas of being respectful to others and passing judgments when meeting new people. First, Reena and Luke do not have a good impression of Mrs. Falala. They are perhaps influenced by some of the stories they have heard from people around town. However, the outside of Mrs. Falala's house does not help matters. Naturally, most people would be concerned about entering someone's home when there was a crazy cat chasing a huge pig around the yard and a large black snake slithering across the porch roof. Mrs. Falala's swishy, horse-tail-like braid, bony arms and choppy accent make her appear strange and unusual as well. Her manner with the children is in fact, not very polite. She declares the first pile of books that are brought for her as "wrong" and pushes them back. The second pile she orders to be "put on table" and declares them "better...not best" (66-67). The family is bringing the books as an act of helpfulness and kindness to the elderly woman. Reena's mother had learned that Mrs. Falala was interested in art and wanted to get books from the library, but did not know how to use it. In an act of neighborly kindness, the mother checks out books from the library and sends her children to deliver them. Mrs. Falala does not appear to be thankful or even gracious in any way.

It is understandable that Reena and Luke are put off by her behavior. When Mrs. Falala chastises Luke for sucking on his thumb, an act of comfort for children in stressful situations, the children's self-restraint is lost. Luke screams, "Don't touch me," and Reena yells for the old woman to leave her brother alone (67-68). Luke has already been shown by the author to be a child who has sensitive feelings and Reena is very aware of this and protective of her little brother. It is easy to sympathize with the children as they experience the strange and harsh behavior of the elderly Mrs. Falala. However, when the children return home and hash out the event with their parents, Reena sees that even though Mrs. Falala was scary and rude to the children, her own behavior was disrespectful to this older person. It is apparent that the parents have taught their children to always be respectful to others and someone else's poor behavior does not make it okay to act poorly yourself. As a result, the children are expected to apologize to the woman and then help her by doing some work around her farm.

As just discussed, the children's first impression of Mrs. Falala is not very good. Luke has called her a "kookoo head" and a "nutto" (70). The idea of having to work for the woman three days a week is not their idea of summer fun. This section lays the groundwork for developing a second important theme in the book; it is not good to judge a person by a first impression, but instead take the time to get to know someone. When first meeting someone the impression they leave may not be very good, but in time as we get to know them, the bad impression might be replaced by a very different - and more positive - one. The children are at first frightened by Mrs. Falala. Her crazy animals, bony arms, accent and rude behavior put them off and they do not want to be alone with her. But as they help around the farm, trying to be respectful to the elderly woman, the children begin to soften slightly to Mrs. Falala. She has told them that on day two they would see the cow. The children work for sometime but do not see a cow anywhere. Luke asks Mrs. Falala about it and she plays around with him a bit and says, "Cow, You think there eez a cow?" (94). Luke reminds her that she said on this day they would see the cow. Reena speaks up, "He's not being disrespectful, Mrs. Falala, He's just asking" (94). The children are learning how to deal with the woman's odd way of



speaking to them and try very hard to work with her in a positive way. They go on to meet Zora and poke back and forth with Mrs. Falala in a playful and teasing sort of way in which Mrs. Falala teases the children that they are afraid of a cow and the children call the cow "lumpy" (95-96). The relationship between the children and Mrs. Falala continues to develop along these lines and softens as the novel continues.

Discussion Question 1

Is Mrs. Falala really a scary, mean person or is she just a bit rough around the edges? Is there any evidence of her being a nice person?

Discussion Question 2

Were Reena and Luke disrespectful to Mrs. Falala, or was their response to her actions toward Luke acceptable?

Discussion Question 3

What does the text say about how Reena and Luke respect and honor their parents?

Vocabulary

cobbled, unison, halters, heifers, gangly, pocked, perspective, zeroing, prickly, finito, faze, scrabbly, optimism

Mrs. Falala's Plan - Rain Day

Summary

The day after the children achieved some success with putting a halter on Zora and getting acquainted with her, Mrs. Falala told them of her plan. She believed that with enough training and practice the children would be able to show Zora at the fair. Reena and Luke had no idea about fairs so Mrs. Falala explained to them that at a fair people show all their farm animals in front of judges who pick the best one. Then she told them to go out into the pasture and bring Zora back into the barn. They were not able to move Zora and came back empty-handed. Luke was then knocked over by Paulie the pig who went rushing past him. His drawing notebook was knocked out of his bag, and Mrs. Falala saw it. She was very interested in the pictures and wanted to know how Luke was able to draw the pictures so well. Then the children noticed the large black snake sliding across the barn roof and were told that her name was Edna and she takes care of eating all the mice on the farm.

On their day off, Reena and Luke again rode their bikes around town and stopped by Birchmere Farm to talk with Beat and Zep. They told them that were helping Mrs. Falala with her farm and Zora. Beat and Zep looked at each other as if they knew all about what it was like to help Mrs. Falala. Reena also told them that Mrs. Falala wanted them to show Zora at the fair, but that they did not know anything about cows or how to show one. Beat and Zep said they would teach the kids about the cows and what to do to train them.

One day, Mrs. Falala surprised the children with some farm clothing: overalls, denim shirts, rubber boots and thick work gloves. Up until now they were getting covered in mud, but the sturdy work clothes were meant to get dirty. Reena and Luke were glad to have the clothes and felt like real farmhands, just like Beat and Zep. They were, however, suspicious of why Mrs. Falala had done such a nice thing. They were told to leave the clothes in the barn at the end of each day, but they wanted to take them along home to use at Birchmere Farm. They told Mrs. Falala that they went there on their off days to learn more. Luke then showed Mrs. Falala his notebook of drawings of all the cows and the farm. She went into her house and brought out a white tablet. She sat on a hay bale and commanded Luke to show her how to draw. She wanted to learn from him by watching what he did.

Meanwhile, Reena went into the pasture to visit Zora. She walked up to her and spoke softly and stroked her fur for a long time. Then she walked away. Zora followed her all the way back to the barn and Reena was very excited. All the time, Luke was drawing for Mrs. Falala. He then told her to try to draw, but she said no because she had never drawn anything before. Reena could not imagine that someone could live their whole life without ever drawing anything. The next time the children came to see Zora, she was very unfriendly. She butted her huge head at them and knocked them both to the ground. She moored angrily at them. The children gave up on trying to approach her that



day. Reena mucked out Zora's stall and Luke and Mrs. Falala drew pictures of cows. Luke drew animals that seemed to move on the page. Mrs. Falala's cow head took her three days to draw and it looked stiff - almost dead.

The next two chapters are again poem-like and short in length. They are descriptive bits of life in the Maine countryside. Reena loved the colorful flowers and the state of Maine but she did not like the little black bugs that swarmed all around them. The bugs attacked her everywhere and bit, leaving red welts and itchy skin. A few pages later a third poetry-like chapter appears. "Fog" describes an early morning visit to the harbor as the family watched a heavy fog slowly lift off the water and unveil all the boats and buoys in the harbor. It was a new and beautiful experience for everyone.

Reena continued to learn how to care for Zora but also learned that sometimes it is difficult and unpleasant. One day while brushing her, Zora splashed urine on Reena's boots, wiped slobber all over her arm and accidentally kicked her when she was aiming for Paulie the pig. Reena also realized one day that Zora was lonely. Even though there were other animals around, there were no other cows to keep Zora company. Reena told Mrs. Falala this, but she did not agree, because she felt she and the other animals were enough. Reena came up with a plan to move Zora to Birchmere Farm where she could enjoy the company of other cows and where Beat and Zep could teach her how to train Zora to show at the fair. Mr. Birchmere told Reena that Zora came from a long line of champion cows. Reena told Mrs. Falala of her idea, but once again the old woman did not like it. She wanted Zora to stay at her farm with her. She told Reena to go to the back of the barn to look at the photographs of the champion cows but did not answer Reena's question about the woman in the photos holding the blue ribbons.

Zep offered to bring one of the Birchmere Farm cows over to Mrs. Falala's farm to keep Zora company there. Reena and Luke were very excited. At first Mrs. Falala did not like the idea because of the extra work and expense involved, but she agreed to allow Yolanda to visit for a week or two. When Yolanda met Zora, the two cows just stood next to each other. All the other animals came to meet her as well. Zora chased them all away and just stood quietly next to Yolanda. Every day Zep came to work with Reena to train her and Zora for the show at the fair. The work was hard, but she liked it. While they worked, Luke and Mrs. Falala sat on a hay bale and drew pictures. Luke liked that too. He was no longer afraid of Mrs. Falala and they often talked together. Luke also liked taking care of the cows. The two children loved being in the barn, especially one particular day when they laid in the straw, backs against the soft, warm cows while the rain poured down outside.

Analysis

As Reena, Luke and Mrs. Falala continue to get to know each other they find little ways to connect on a deeper level and appreciate things about each other. As they do, another important theme develops in the text. All three characters are brave enough to try something new, and, as a result, they are all surprised by the positive results. Mrs. Falala has decided that Reena will be able to learn what she needs to know in order to



show Zora at the fair. Zora is known throughout the town to be a stubborn and temperamental animal (119, 158), but Mrs. Falala believes that Reena will be able to handle her. Reena, however, has never even been around a cow before, let alone one weighing about 800 pounds. But Reena is also a determined person. She will stand her ground and is willing to work hard and learn. She and Luke eagerly go to Birchmere Farm to learn all they can from Beat and Zep about how to care for the animals, and they take what they learn and use it to care for Zora. Reena is also wanting to learn how to show Zora. She is a bit nervous about having to show her in front of a judge and a large crowd, but is determined to do it. She says to Zep, "I can handle it, Zep. And even if I couldn't, I wasn't going to admit it to him" (174). She works hard and makes progress with Zora. She also gets physically stronger and gains confidence in her ability. As she says, "The training was harder than I expected...But the surprising thing to me was that I liked doing it. I liked the hard work. I liked seeing Zora respond a little more each day, and I liked feeling stronger" (176). Instead of thinking Mrs. Falala's idea is crazy or trying to get out of even being at the farm, Reena tries something new and is surprised by the outcome. She is experiencing and learning so many new things - and loving every minute of it. So much so that on a rainy day she is completely content to sit in a barn leaning against the warm cows. "And I thought I could stay all day right there cradled by cows" (180). For Reena, this is a long way off from the hustle and bustle of busy city life.

Mrs. Falala also steps out and tries something new and is able to finally learn something she has wanted to know how to do for years. When she sees Luke's drawings and brings out her own blank, white tablet, it becomes clear that her interest in art is all about wanting to learn how to draw. It has always interested her, but she has surprisingly never even tried. Reena is amazed that someone could live their whole life without ever even drawing a simple stick figure (131). Mrs. Falala tells Luke to show her how to draw, and the two sit side by side on a hay bale drawing for hours while Reena works or trains with Zora. Her drawing is very slow and stiff at first, but she works at it and is determined to get better. Having a drawing buddy is an encouragement to her and Luke's presence helps her to take the first steps of trying. Her gruff manner is softening as well. Early on she sat on the hay bales and "barked" orders at the children, but now her tone is softer.

This softening has taken place in Luke as well. After his first encounter with Mrs. Falala, Luke was very scared of her and, as with most strangers, he did not want to be anywhere near her. But as he has gotten to know her, he has found that he likes the old woman. He is able to sit next to her and talk with her as they draw. Drawing is his passion, and sharing it with someone has opened him up as a person and made him less fearful. Even though she still has bony hands and a strange accent, he appreciates Mrs. Falala for who she is and her interest in him and his artwork. Because he was willing to teach her how to draw, he was able to move forward in allowing other people to get close him.

An important part of this section deals with Reena's belief that Zora is lonely and her desire to make Zora happy. Reena feels that Zora is hanging her head low and being somewhat mopey. She brings this to Mrs. Falala's attention, but the old woman



dismisses her concern saying that Zora has all the company she needs since she, Paulie the pig, Edna snake, China the cat and Crockett the parrot are all her friends. But Reena insists that Zora needs a cow friend and pursues finding a way to get Zora the friend she needs. Every time Reena presents a new suggestion, Mrs. Falala puts it down and walks away into the house. It seems that Mrs. Falala is lonely as well and does not want one of her animal friends to leave her. Fortunately, when she sees the children's commitment to Zora she agrees that Yolanda can come stay at the farm for a few weeks. It appears that she has grown to enjoy the company of the children too and is happy that they will all be at the farm together.

There are also three poems in this section; they contrast in style to the rest of the text, but add a lot to the emotion and understanding of the the characters, especially Reena. While it may seem that these poems interrupt the flow of the story, they add a great deal to the story. The author uses them to reflect on Reena's emotions and how she feels about her move to Maine. In "Color," Reena talks about the beautiful variety of color in the wildflowers that grow along the roadsides. She and Luke ride their bikes everyday past the lupine and buttercup fields and it brings joy to her heart. She loves the scenery and exclaims that she loves Maine. But, she also does not love the tiny little black bugs that attack them daily. The insects are so small and they get everywhere, creating itchy skin and red welts from scratching. These two poems create a nice contrast to show some of the new things that the family is experiencing, some of them wonderful and some of them annoying. It is a beautiful new place, but like anywhere, it is not perfect.

A third poem, "Fog," sums up Reena's emotional reaction to her new life in Maine. The family has gone to the beach down at the harbor very early one morning and a heavy fog is covering everything. As it slowly lifts, first the water then the hulls of the boats, then the sails are revealed bit by bit. It is a magical unveiling of the calm, colorful harbor as it comes to life. Reena's mother comments that she has never seen anything like it. Reena feels that she has never seen anything like much of what she is now seeing here in Maine. Everything is so new - the town, the farms, the flowers, the cows, and even Mrs. Falala and her daily work with Zora. Everything is so very different from the life she previously lived. Reena is overwhelmed and sometimes closes her eyes and pauses inside herself in order to be able to take it all in and process the many changes she is experiencing. It is very fitting that the author chooses to express this in poetry. Like Maine itself, poetry is a unique and beautiful form of writing. Each poem sits apart from the narrative text, making its own special statement about the family's discovery of their new home.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Reena think that Zora is lonely? On what does she base her ideas?

Discussion Question 2

What does working with Zora show about Reena's personality and character?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Mrs. Falala not talk about her past with showing the Grand Champion cows?

Vocabulary

ushered, swiveling, profusely, ventured, satchel, riot, exchanged, suede, extravagant, foul, suspicious, groomed, belligerent, welts, moored, heifers, coaxing, fatigue



Sad Zep - Rides

Summary

One morning Zep arrived at Mrs. Falala's barn looking very sad and it was obvious that he had been crying. He told Reena and Luke that one of the cows at Birchmere Farm died during the night. The animal probably died from some kind of respiratory problem, but they were not sure. Reena and Luke were immediately concerned for Yolanda and Zora, but Zep told them that the cows would be fine. He then told the children that some cows live long lives, but that most of the animals that are raised on the farm are sold and turned into hamburger. This upset them very much.

At dinner that night, Luke and Reena could barely eat. They discussed their meal - chicken noodle soup - and Luke suddenly realized that the meat in it came from a once living chicken. Reena suggested that the family become vegetarian. The parents considered the idea and pointed out that the decision would also mean no more steaks, pot roast, chili or tacos. Luke said he really liked tacos. And then there was bacon; it came from a pig, just like Paulie.

The next day, Reena and Luke asked Mrs. Falala lots of questions about what would happen to Zora one day. Would she become hamburger too? At first, Mrs. Falala teased Luke and told him that she would chop Zora up into little pieces and make lots of hamburgers, but then realized how upset he was and assured him that she would never do such a thing to Zora. She again teased about Paulie when Luke asked about the pig, but she again reassured him that the pig was safe. Next however, the children questioned Zep about the other cows at Birchmere Farm; what would happen to all of them. He explained that Yolanda would be kept for breeding more cows, but that calves born without the white belt of a typically Galloway and most of the steers would be sold for beef. He went on to explain that those were just the facts of being a farmer, raising the cows to be sold to feed people. He wanted to be a good farmer and he was going to love the cows and take care of them the best way he knew for as long as they were with him. After that, Reena and Luke considered his words and did not ask about the subject anymore.

Another morning Mrs. Falala handed Reena a long metal rod and told her she would need this "showstick" for the fair. Mrs. Falala went on to demonstrate how to use the stick with Zora, gently rubbing it on her chest and under her belly to calm her and to get her to position her legs certain ways. Reena was sent off to practice with the stick herself. Zep soon declared beauty day for the cows so that they would look good for the fair. The kids lathered and scrubbed the cows, combed their fur and polished the hooves. They looked great - until Zora went and plopped down in a mud puddle.

On the day of the fair, the family went very early to Mrs. Falala's farm and met Mr. Birch from Birchmere Farm. He put Yolanda and Zora into his large van to transport them to the fair. The family got in their car ready to follow the van. Reena suddenly asked if



anyone had seen Mrs. Falala and if she was going to join them. The lights were off in her house, so everyone guessed that she was still sleeping and would not be coming with them. Inserted next is a brief poem detailing all the amazing sights and sounds of the fair as the family arrived.

Once inside the animal area at the fairgrounds, the children again groomed the cows to get them ready for showing. Beat and Zep were up first in the older teen category for showing their animals. As they entered the show ring, Mr. Birch explained everything that went on to Reena and Luke. First the animals and handlers walked around the ring and then they lined up for judging. The judges examined the stance of each cow and questioned the handlers about the animals. Reena became worried that she did not know enough about Zora to answer all the questions. Mr. Birch helped her to feel calmer. Then the judge announced the winners and Zep received a third place award for showmanship. He looked over at Reena and nodded.

Next, it was time for Reena and Zora to enter the ring. Zora walked very calmly and waited in line with Reena, but when it was time to enter the ring at the gate, she bolted and took off through the show tent. Reena, Zep, Beat and Mr. Birch all chased her. When they finally caught her the showmanship part of the competition was over and Reena and Zora had missed it. Zep encouraged Reena to go ahead and try to compete with Zora in the breed part of the competition. Luke talked to Zora and told her that she knew how to be good. Reena's parents were surprised that Reena had learned so much about how to handle cows. Reena and Zora entered the ring again for the breed round and did very well standing properly and answering the judges questions. The judge told Reena that she had a good relationship with Zora and good control which made her very happy. They placed fourth in the competition. Reena's family was all very proud of her and so was Zep. She was a bit sad that Mrs. Falala was not there to watch, but thought maybe she would have been disappointed in Reena because Zora bolted the first time. Zep and Mr. Birch offered to take the cows back to the farm and get them settled in their stalls so that the family could stay at the fair and enjoy the rides. On the way home, they decided to wait until morning to tell Mrs. Falala about their exciting day.

Analysis

In this section, the author introduces a new theme of novel. For the first time, Reena and Luke come face-to-face in a personal way with the realization that the meat they eat comes from living animals and they are forced to decide if they will continue to eat meat or become vegetarians. When Zep tells them that most of the cows at Birchmere Farm are raised to be sold for beef, the children are devastated. They have been learning all about the animals and have come to love caring for and feeding them. For them, Zora is really an over-sized pet, and it is unthinkable that she could be chopped up into hamburgers. Their realization is deepened as they discuss the matter with their parents over dinner that night. It is not just hamburger from cows, but chicken soup, tacos, pot roast and bacon from pigs that would be affected by the family's decision to not eat meat. Each person mentions some food that they really enjoy and would have to give



up and they are not sure they want to make that sacrifice. The question is left hanging in the air, and the reader does not really know what they decide.

The next day, Zep assures Reena and Luke that some animals are kept for breeding and some for showing, and he helps them to see that the reality is that "people eat meat" (195). Zep has wrestled with this fact on his own and has come to terms with it. As he tells Reena and Luke, "It's a hard thing to adjust to, I realize. But I'm going to be a farmer and raise the best beef cows in Maine. I love cows, and I'm going to treat them good as long as I can" (195). Because he loves the animals, he will take great care of them and give them as good a life as possible until it is time for them to serve the purpose for which they have been raised. He does not force his ideas on the kids, he just shares with them his view on it, but he does lay out the facts, plain and simple. Reena and Luke spend a lot of time that day considering his words. The author does not bring their thoughts to a conclusion though, as Reena never mentions anything about eating meat or becoming a vegetarian again in the story. It is possible that the author does not reveal their decision because a decision of this nature is a personal one. The answer or decision on whether or not to consume meat will be different for each person and no one can decide for someone else.

Another significant, but simple, event takes place as Mrs. Falala passes the baton to Reena as the one who will succeed her in showing her champion cows. As Reena continues to prepare for showing Zora at the fair, Mrs. Falala hands Reena her show stick, a metal rod that is used to guide and calm the cows. On the surface it may seem like she is just giving Reena more of the equipment that she needs to do the job well, but this stick was Mrs. Falala's and she has a long history of showing championship animals. Reena has previously seen photographs in the barn of a woman standing next to a cow and holding a blue ribbon. She wondered "if maybe they were all the same person, growing older" (161). Mrs. Falala is no longer able to move about and show Zora herself, but she is eager to have Reena take her place. Giving her the show stick is symbolic in the same way a runner passes the baton to the next runner on the leg of a long race; Mrs. Falala is tired out, but Reena is young and ready to go forward.

Returning to a previous theme and developing it further, the author continues to show how the children have grown personally because they were willing to try something new. With the new responsibilities of caring for the animals on the farm and learning all the skills necessary to show Zora, Reena realizes that she has changed dramatically. Her parents are astonished and surprised on fair day that both Reena and Luke have learned so much about handling cows. Reena herself recognizes how far she has come and how she has developed. "I had a quick glimpse of me in my room in our old apartment back in the city, an inside girl and now here I was an outside girl, a cow girl" (222). Before she moved to Maine, she wondered, "was there room inside for the sights and sounds and smells of Maine? Would I know what to do and how to be in Maine?" (17). Reena has transitioned well. She left a familiar place and kept an open mind about what her future held. Because she was willing to try something new, something very different, she discovers new things about herself and something that she loves to do. The author also touches lightly on another way in which Reena is growing up. She has previously hinted at Reena's romantic interest in Zep and subtly picks up on it again in



this section. Reena watches Zep closely while he is in the show ring and the two acknowledge his success with a nod toward each other. Zep also leans in close to Reena after she competes and tells her she did "riot good" (228). The author never tells the reader that the two like each other, but just uses these simple incidents to illustrate their fondness for each other.

Luke also has grown and matured. When he first arrived in Maine and at Mrs. Falala's house, he was a boy who was afraid of meeting new people and did not want them to get too close to him. But after opening up and getting to know Mrs. Falala, Luke is no longer afraid of her. Luke's drawing in the notebook was previously a way for him to express his emotions and fears, but the drawing gradually has become a way to connect with Mrs. Falala. His skill as an artist has softened the old woman and it becomes a way for the two to share something they both enjoy. Luke is even willing to stand up for Reena if Mrs. Falala says anything bad about Zora coming in only fourth place. "...I will tell Mrs. Falala that if she says anything mean" (231). He has learned to communicate his feelings while being respectful and he is secure in the relationship he has with the older woman. It is interesting, however, that despite the progress that has been made between the children and Mrs. Falala, they are still hesitant to tell her about what happened at the fair. Reena is afraid that she will have disappointed the old woman because Zora bolted before the first round and because they only came in fourth place. Reena is happy with her success, but she is worried that Mrs. Falala will not be pleased. Therefore, Reena waits until the next day to tell her, not wanting to spoil her own good mood.

The author also includes another poem in this section in which Reena describes the wonder and excitement of arriving at the fairgrounds. All the sights, sounds, and smells are presented with descriptive language and poetic form. As with all of the poems in the novel, this chapter is used to describe another piece of life in Maine. The focus is on descriptive language that embraces all the senses and is not at all about plot or moving the story and characters forward. It does lay a groundwork for the new setting in this part of the story, but it could stand on its own as a word picture of a country fair. As before, choosing to insert these poems, sets the emotions of "taking in" Maine apart from the story line and help to highlight Maine as a special place.

Discussion Question 1

Why might the author leave it unclear if the children and their parents decide to follow through with becoming vegetarians?

Discussion Question 2

What does the author reveal in this section ("Sad Zep" - "Rides") to be the biggest personal change in Reena?



Discussion Question 3

Why does the family wait until morning to tell Mrs. Falala about what happened at the fair?

Vocabulary

respiratory, breeding, mutual, innocence, sympathy, agitated, bombarding, haven, novice, defiant, civilized, lineage, escapade, unanimous



Phone Call - Six Months Later

Summary

The final section begins as the family received an early morning phone call from a man named Mr. Colley. He asked Reena and Luke's parents to meet him at Mrs. Falala's house and to leave the children at home. While the children waited at home, they found things to do to occupy their time. Luke pulled out his notebook and showed Reena a crumpled piece of paper that had a picture of a cow on it. It was not a very good drawing, and Reena was surprised that Luke would draw something like that. He told her that it was Mrs. Falala's first attempt at drawing a cow. She did not like it, so she crumpled it up and through it away, but Luke retrieved it and kept it in his notebook. Then he showed Reena a beautiful drawing of Zora. Reena was glad that Luke was drawing things besides zombies and dragons. He told her that it was not his drawing, but one that Mrs. Falala had just completed the week before. Her drawing skill had improved greatly. Luke went on to talk about all the drawings that Mrs. Falala created of her animals, the barn, the house, the fenced pasture and her attic window. Reena then asked Luke if he ever heard flute music coming from the attic. He said yes, and he had learned that Mrs. Falala was the one who played the flute. She often drew pictures of the window with musical notes, flowers, stars and ribbons floating out of the window and Luke had asked her why she drew those symbols. She told him that the attic was her special place for remembering and sometimes the room got too full to hold all the memories so they just floated out the window along with the music. Most days she drew flowers and ribbons, but Luke remembered one day when she drew spiders, bats and lightening bolts coming out the window. He said she had been in a bad mood that day. Reena realized then just how much they still did not know about Mrs. Falala.

After a very long time of waiting and speculating about what might possibly have happened to Mrs. Falala, the parents finally arrived back home. They told the kids that Mrs. Falala was missing. Mr. Colley, Mrs. Falala's lawyer and next door neighbor, was supposed to meet with her the day before but she did not answer the door and he could not find her anywhere. The family went back to her farm so the children could take care of the animals and so they could also check the pasture to see if something had happened to Mrs. Falala out there. Reena spied the open attic window and asked if anyone had checked up in the attic. Mr. Colley said that he had not even thought to look up there. Luke insisted that they check, so Reena, Luke and Zep entered the house to check the top floor.

As they stepped into the attic room, they saw Mrs. Falala lying on a cot with her hands folded over a silver flute. Reena moved forward to wake her and touched her hand. She suddenly realized that the old woman had died. Zep left to tell everyone outside that they had found Mrs. Falala. While Reena and Luke waited for the others they looked around the attic. Tacked to the walls were dozens of pictures of the farm and all the animals and several pictures of Luke drawing and Reena working with Zora. Mrs. Falala had placed them in the order in which she drew them because from left to right the



pictures became progressively better. On her sketchpad were her two last drawings. One drawing was of Reena and Zora looking at each other, Reena with the show stick in her hands and lots of blue ribbons floating above them in the air. In the other picture, Reena and Luke were riding away on their bikes and all the farm animals were trotting after them. A tiny little old woman was in the bottom corner waving them all goodbye.

The family met with Mr. Colley who informed them that Mrs. Falala had been putting her affairs in order over the last month perhaps because she had sensed that she might be dying soon. He told them that she had not been feeling well lately and that she had fallen twice. They children had no idea of any of this. But lately, she was no longer worried about the animals because she felt she had found the right people to care for them. In her will, she had left all of her animals to the family. The dad said that they would not be able to care for them properly since they did not have a farm. Mr. Colley suggested that they buy Mrs. Falala's place, but again Dad said that was not possible. They did not have enough money and he still did not have a new job. Everyone was very sad. They cried over losing Mrs. Falala and they cried that they would lose the animals too.

The next day, Reena had an idea. She and Luke went to find Mr. Colley. He was at Mrs. Falala's looking over papers. He asked them to please take care of the animals until he could find someone to take them permanently. They agreed and then Reena quietly made her suggestion. She gave Mr. Colley the idea that maybe it would be nice to buy Mrs. Falala's house himself so that he could add to his own property and enjoy the nice pasture view and get a pond on his property as well. The next day Mr. Colley called the children's dad and made him a proposal.

In the final chapter, Reena talks about the family's life during the six months that passed since Mrs. Falala's death. Mr. Colley bought the property and hired Reena's dad as a live-in caretaker. The children continued to take care of all the animals, including Yolanda. Zep came every day to visit, and Dad joked that he was not sure if he came to visit Reena or the cow. The kids started at their new school, made new friends, and were completely enjoying life in their new Maine home and especially with their stubborn, ornery Zora.

Analysis

In the final chapters of the novel, the author concludes by showing the positive result of getting to know others fully, of trying new things and facing the certainty of death, both of which are primary themes within the book. The morning following the fair the parents are called away to Mrs. Falala's house. While Reena and Luke wait at home, Reena discovers many more things about Mrs. Falala. Luke shows her some of the old woman's drawings and he talks about all the different kinds of things she draws. He also informs Reena that it is Mrs. Falala who plays the flute up in the attic room. Reena learns about the remembering room and all the happy thoughts that fill the room to overflowing and are forced out the open window. She comments, "Mrs. Falala. So much we did not know about her" (248). She realizes that their first impression of prickly, rude



Mrs. Falala was not accurate. Not only from everything they have experienced with her over the past several weeks, but from the things Reena is just now learning from Luke, she can see a much softer, kinder and gentler side of the woman. There is much more to know about her though, such as what all those memories she talks about are actually about. Reena knows Mrs. Falala had been married and had lived all over the world, but what were some of those stories? There is so much more to learn about this complicated person. With this simple statement, the author shows that people are indeed complicated and there is always something new that can be learned when getting to know someone. Certainly, first impressions can be changed.

As the children wait, the author handles the passage of time in an interesting way. Reena and Luke are very concerned about what is going on and it seems to take forever for the parents to return. The waiting takes place over four chapters. Even though they are very short, the waiting is still drawn out. This helps draw out the waiting for the reader as well. The text is also manipulated in special ways in order to illustrate how Reena feels about waiting for answers. Time is portrayed as a dripping slowly and the word is spread out letter by letter vertically down the page. The reader can almost picture a water drop hanging from a faucet, slowly filling to capacity before releasing and falling down, all to have the next drop start the cycle all over again.

When the children return to Mrs. Falala's farm and discover that she has passed away up in her attic, they see the impact they have had on Mrs. Falala's life. The walls are covered with her drawings. The elderly woman had wanted to learn to draw but had never attempted it. Luke's willingness to teach her makes a deep impact on her happiness during her final weeks of life, and the two artists mutually affect each other for the better. Mrs. Falala achieves a life long goal and Luke learns to not be so fearful of new people. The family is glad to have met Mrs. Falala and when they move into her house at the novel's end they leave her attic intact. As the remembering room, it seems only fitting that the room serves as a place to remember all the goodness that their old friend has brought into their lives.

The author also addresses Mrs. Falala's perspective as she nears death. Unknown to the children, Mrs. Falala has apparently been feeling weak for several months, perhaps some of the reason she is grumpy at times. She has fallen twice and senses that her old age is overtaking her. She has been making arrangements with Mr. Colley concerning her "affairs." She has been most concerned about what will become of her beloved animals. When she meets Reena and Luke and sees their love for Zora and their care of the other animals as well, she begins to rest easy. She puts it in her will that the children should be given the animals. Mrs. Falala certainly knows that she will pass away sometime soon, and as a beautiful parting gift to the children, she draws them a farewell picture where she waves goodbye to them and the animals. It is a confirmation that she has grown to trust and love them and feels confident of their ability to carry on in her place. She is at peace with welcoming death.

The children once again take time to process the meaning of Mrs. Falala's passing. Only once they are home do they cry over losing her. Their sadness is doubled because they have been so touched that Mrs. Falala gifted the animals to them. But without a



farm, they will lose Zora and the others as well. Reena, however, has learned to step forward to try new things and pursue new ideas. By approaching Mr. Colley with a plan, she finds a solution that benefits everyone and keeps Mrs. Falala's memory alive.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the author spend so much time discussing how slowly time is passing when they children are waiting to hear what had happened to Mrs. Falala?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Mrs. Falala able to pass away peacefully?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the author chose to have the family leave the attic room just as Mrs. Falala left it?

Vocabulary

speculation, summoned, pneumonia, flippant, apparently, agitated, petulantly, renderings, primitive, proposal



Characters

Reena

Reena is a 12-year, two-month old girl who loves to express herself. She moves from the city to Maine with her family and goes from being an "indoor" girl to being an "outdoor girl." With her brother Luke she explores the small town where they live and becomes friends with an old woman and a teenage farm hand who teach them many things about handling animals. Reena learns especially how to groom and train Zora the cow for showing at the fair. She learns many new things, considers new ideas and gains confidence in her ability to take charge and pursue her desires. One thing she also discovers that she likes is Zep, the farm-boy who helps her learn how to train Zora.

Luke

Luke is Reena's younger brother. He is seven years old. Luke does not like people to touch him and gets very upset if they do. He also is a talented artist and is always drawing in a yellow notebook that he carries everywhere. Often his drawings reflect his experiences of the day and they take on a life of their own. He goes with Reena everyday to Mrs. Falala's farm to help take care of Zora. He also teaches Mrs. Falala how to draw.

Mrs. Falala

Despite a musical sounding last name, Mrs. Falala is rather unusual, even scary to the kids at first. Mrs. Falala lives in a crooked, vine-covered house with a cat, a pig, a snake, a parrot and one very large cow named Zora. She has a long white braid of hair that hangs down her back and she speaks with an accent.

At first she is very abrupt with Reena and Luke, and the children think she is a mean old lady. But over time and with respect and patience, Reena and Luke come to like her. She teaches them how to gain Zora's trust, and how to care and train her to show at the fair.

Mrs. Falala also plays a silver flute and the children often hear the music coming out of the upstairs attic window as they leave the farm. At the story's end the old woman gives Reena and Luke and their family a very special gift.

Zora

Zora is a Belted Galloway cow. She is black on both ends and has a large white band around the middle. Zora comes from a long line of champion cows who have placed well at fairs for many years. Her ancestors won ribbons when Mrs. Falala was showing



at fairs many years earlier. Zora is young and has not had any training when the story begins. She is stubborn and ornery and quite messy. As Reena begins to gain her trust and care for her, she realizes that Zora is lonely and arranges for another cow to visit and spend time with her at Mrs. Falala's farm. Zora's first experience in a fair ring has mixed results but she becomes an animal that is very much loved by Reena and her family.

Dad/Reena's Father

Reena's father used to be a reporter for the city newspaper, but lost his job when the paper closed. He has always thought that he would like to try a different profession, so he looks for different work when the family moves to Maine. One of his biggest rules is "Be respectful." He encourages the children to give Mrs. Falala a chance and to work for her. He is very proud of his kids and ends up with a new line of work in an unexpected way.

Mom/Reena's Mother

Mother used to work for a newspaper, but lost her job when the paper went out of business. She is the one who suggests that the family make some kind of change in their life, both in careers and where they live. When the family moves to Maine, she gets a job teaching in the local private school. She is also the first family member to meet Mrs. Falala and tries to help her by getting art books out of the library since the old woman does not know how to use the library. She also arranges for the children to work for Mrs. Falala.

Zep

A tall, lanky, redheaded boy, Zep is very much at home working with the cows at Birchmere Farm. He wants to be a farmer when he is older and raise his own herd. He works hard at caring for the cows and teaches Reena to train Zora. He shows his own cow at the fair and places well. He keeps coming around the family's farm even after the fair possibly because he likes Reena.

Beat

Beat is a strong girl who works with the cows at Birchmere Farm. She is very friendly to Reena and Luke and helps them to learn about caring for the cows.

Mr. Colley

Mr. Colley is Mrs. Falala's neighbor and her lawyer. He calls the family first to let them know that the old woman has gone missing. He was supposed to meet with her one



night but she did not appear to be at home. He searches for her but cannot find her. Once she is found dead later that day, he explains to Reena's family the provisions in her will that instruct that all her animals be left to the family. Reena and Luke make a plan with him that saves the animals and provides a job for their father.

Mr. Birch

The owner of Birchmere Farm, Mr. Birch is very accommodating and friendly to Reena and Mrs. Falala. He is always happy to help out a fellow farmer. He brings Yolanda over in his trailer and allows her to stay and keep Zora company. He also transports Zora to the fair with the other animals.



Symbols and Symbolism

Luke's yellow notebook

The yellow notebook symbolizes security for Luke. He carries his notebook everywhere. He does not really feel comfortable around strangers and does not like people getting too close to him. In his notebook, Luke is able to express his anxiety as he draws action figures, monsters and heroes. Many of his new experiences find their way into his drawings. For example, when Luke has his first terrifying encounter with Mrs. Falala, his monster figures begin to take on some of her physical qualities like her long, snake-like braid and the bony, claw-like fingers that grabbed him earlier in the day. Rather than keep his anxiety inside, Luke is able to express himself through his drawing. Although it may have simply been a color preference on the author's part, the color yellow is a symbol of the sun and typically represents things that are positive and happy.

The show stick

The show stick that Mrs. Falala passes on to Reena represents the passing of the baton concerning the showing of Mrs. Falala's championship cows. For many years, Mrs. Falala has shown her cows and won many blue ribbons at the fairs. She is growing too old to continue, but has found a replacement to carry on for her in Reena. After the many weeks of training and preparing, Mrs. Falala gives Reena the show stick and shows her how to use. She is turning this part of her life over to a younger generation to carry on. Most likely she has used this stick while winning at many shows, and she is confident that Reena will do the same.

Mrs. Falala's braid

Mrs. Falala's long braid comes to symbolize her connection with Zora, and it becomes a comfortable sight to Reena and Luke. However, at first, the braid is something to be feared. Luke depicts it as snake-like following his scary encounter with the black snake Edna and Mrs. Falala on one of their early visits to her house. When he draws his villains in his notebook that night, one of them has long snake-like hair similar to Mrs. Falala's braid. But as the children get to know her, the braid becomes more of a comforting representation to them. As the old woman walks her braid swishes back and forth much like Zora's tail swings back and forth. The braid makes a connection between the old woman and her beloved cow, especially in Reena and Luke's minds as they often watch her walking away with her "tail" swinging behind her.

Fog in the Harbor

The fog in the town's coastal harbor represents the slow unveiling of the wonderful new life the family experiences having made the move to Maine. In a fog it is very difficult to



see anything or to know how to navigate in the water. In the early days of their big move, it must have felt like everything would be hard to understand or adjust to in their new home. But as the days moved on and as the symbolic fog lifted, the family, and especially the children, are able to find their way around easily and discover their wonderful new world. Everything around them is filled with color and beauty and is a brand new experience; they keep on discovering new things to learn.

The Poems

The poems in the novel are Reena's outlet for emotional expression. In these brief, descriptive pieces, Reena expresses how she feels about Maine itself. She loves the flowers; she hates the bugs; she is amazed by something as simple as rocks; and she finds comfort with cows on a rainy day. The poems help the reader to understand Reena's feelings apart from the plot. She does not need to tell the reader how she feels in the narrative because she expresses herself in the poetry.

Zora

Zora is an ornery cow and ultimately she represents Mrs. Falala. While Zora is described as stubborn and moody, Mrs. Falala is delicately described as prickly and set in her ways. She and the children have a rough beginning, as they think she is mean and rude. Throughout the story Reena learns to get along with Zora. She gains her trust, cares for her physical needs and gives her attention and affection. In the same way, the children learn to get along with Mrs. Falala. They help with the chores on the farm, gain her respect and spend time with her and keep her company. The woman that they once disliked very much becomes a good friend, just as Zora becomes a beloved pet.

Maine

Maine is a symbol of following one's dreams and daring to try something new. Reena's family decides they are not entirely happy living in a city, so rather abruptly they decide to move to Maine - a place they chose primarily because of how different it is from city life. When characters are timid about trying something new throughout the novel, they find courage by encouraging one another that it is a "Maine-y" thing to do.



Settings

A city

The story begins in the city. It is unnamed, but it is described in great detail. It contains monuments and lots of different people, traffic, insects, animals, parks and museums and most especially lots of noise. The family lives in an apartment where the rooms are small and dark. Sometimes it can be a dangerous place too. This is the environment that Reena and her family are familiar with as they go about their daily lives.

A small coastal town in Maine

The family arrives in Maine in the small town where they have rented a house. It is on the coast and is visited by tourists in the summer. The harbor is filled with small boats that bob up and down on the water against the backdrop of gentle green mountains that dip down to the water's edge. The streets branch out from the center of town and provide a safe place for Reena and Luke to ride bikes. Farms lay on the outskirts of the town and Reena and Luke enjoy visiting these places. Reena comes to love this place - the flowers, the water, the harbor and boats, the rocks, the mountains, the farms and especially the cow Zora.

The house at the end of Twitch Street

At the end of Twitch Street is a tall, vine-covered house that leans a bit. There is a small attic window at the top that is always cracked open and flute music often drifts out of it. In the yard, there are several animals: a pig that frequently chases a cat, a parrot that sits on the front porch and a snake that cruises the roof and gutters looking for mice. A barn is on the property and in the back there is a fenced-in field that contains Zora, a large Belted Galloway cow.

Birchmere Farm

This farm is owned by Mr. Birchmere, a local farmer. He has several teenage helpers who feed and care for the cows and animals. The farm is beautiful with rolling green hills when the weather is nice, but after a rainstorm, the ground is muddy and messy. The farm raises Belted Galloway cows for breeding, showing and primarily for selling for beef.

The Fair

The grounds of the fair are filled with lots of people and noisy animals. There are many stalls where the animals are kept while they are groomed and wait to be exhibited. A



large show ring is where the animals are exhibited in front of the judges. There are also food stands and many rides available for fair goers. Reena and her family love the atmosphere of this country fair and take extra time after Zora is finished her competition to enjoy the sights, sounds and tastes of the fair.



Themes and Motifs

Respecting Others

The author shows readers that all people can show respect, and all people deserve it. Showing respect to other people is extremely important in Reena's family and an attitude that requires hard work and practice for the children in the early portions of the novel.

As Reena, Luke and their father are heading over to meet Mrs. Falala for the first time, he instructs them that no matter what happens, they should be respectful. The family has heard a few things about the old woman from people in the town, so they are a bit wary. Following their first encounter the children are left wondering who it is that needs to learn to be nice. Luke, who does not like to be touched, was grabbed; they were knocked down by the crazy animals outside; and Mrs. Falala did not seem to be very gracious or appreciative of the effort to find books on art for her. During their second visit, Luke and Reena, however, are the ones to lose control. When Mrs. Falala tries to pull Luke's thumb away from his mouth and says he will get horse teeth, Luke yells, "Don't touch me!" (67). Reena's rushes to her brother's defense and yells for the old woman to stop it and to leave her brother alone. Mrs. Falala tells them they are rude and rushes them out of her house. Once they arrive home and talk with their parents, Reena realizes that even though it was alright to care about her brother, her tone with Mrs. Falala was disrespectful. She allowed her fear of the situation to put her on edge and so it was easy for her to lose her temper.

It is clear that the children have a respect for their parent's authority because they are obedient to their instructions about having to go work for Mrs. Falala. Initially they complain and try to get out of it, but when their mother says, "enough," they know that it is time to follow through (79). As the children begin to work for Mrs. Falala and they get to know each other, all of them learn to be respectful of each other. At first Mrs, Falala is like an army drill sergeant barking commands at them to do chores around the barn. When Luke asks where the she told them about the day before is, Reena speaks up and points out that "He's not being disrespectful, Mrs. Falala - he's just asking," (94).

As the children show an increased interest in learning about how to care for Zora, Mrs. Falala seems to trust them with more responsibility. She tells Reena that she will be able to show Zora at the fair. As she progresses in her skill and ability to handle Zora, Mrs. Falala gives Reena her own show stick, which is a sign that she has earned the old woman's respect as someone who can handle her animal well. Mrs. Falala also develops a deep respect for Luke and his ability as an artist. Apparently, she has wanted to learn to draw her whole life, but has never tried. When she sees Luke's notebook and drawings one day, she tells him to stay put and she marches off into her house. Luke wonders if he did something "dis-suspect --what's that word?" (124). He cannot even say the word correctly, but he knows it is important to treat people well and he is worried that he has done something wrong. When Mrs. Falala returns with a



sketchpad and asks him to teach her how to draw, he knows that everything is alright. As the two sit side-by-side drawing, Mrs. Falala's skill develops and the two artists talk. Where previously she had seen Luke as a rude boy, she now respects him as a talented young man.

Even near the end of the novel, when Mr. Colley calls the family home and tells the father to meet him at Mrs. Falala's but leave the children at home, the father asks if the children have been disrespectful. By this time, the relationship between the children and Mrs. Falala is a very good one, but the requirement to be honoring to others will always be a family priority.

The Benefits of Trying new Things

A primary theme in *Moo* is that great personal growth takes place if you step away from what is familiar and try new things. For Reena and her family the change is pretty dramatic since they move from a bustling city to a small, harbor town on the coast of Maine. Their move is sudden and they completely uproot themselves. The parents are the first to experience change since they start the process as they are searching for new jobs. With nothing to hold them down, they decide to move out of the city and try to find work somewhere else. Both parents were newspaper reporters and neither one really is interested in continuing in that line of work. The mother is excited to get a job as a teacher and the dad is able to find a job doing something completely different - working with animals and being outside. Neither one expected or planned to have these jobs, but deciding to make a major move has led them to new careers.

For Reena and Luke, the changes are a bit more personal. Reena has lived her whole 12 years in a busy, noisy, active city and it is what she knows. Moving to the country is very new for her, and she does not know what to expect or if she will like it. As she rides down the roads, past farms and the harbor, she takes in her new environment and appreciates it for its beauty. And although she is initially made to work for Mrs. Falala, Reena discovers that she really loves to do the hard work of caring for Zora on the farm. She never would have pictured herself being in a fair, grooming a cow and then leading it into a show ring for judging. But she has worked hard and learned so much. She is proud of herself and all that she has accomplished in such a short time. Reena loves their new life and is glad for the change.

Luke and Mrs. Falala also change in the short period of time in which they are together. When Luke first arrives in Maine, he is a boy who does not like people to touch him or even get too close to him. This was especially true the second time he meets Mrs. Falala. He even draws pictures that include scary characters with features that resemble Mrs. Falala. But after working for her on the farm and getting to know her, Luke softens. Mrs. Falala also softens up once she sees that Luke is a talented artist. As they sit together on a hay bale and draw pictures, both of them open up emotionally. Mrs. Falala tells Luke all sorts of things about her remembering room and playing flute, and Luke is no longer afraid to be near her. By the end of the novel, they have both



grown significantly - Mrs. Falala has accomplished a life long dream and Luke has matured emotionally by sharing his love of art.

Judging People without Knowing Them

Another primary theme throughout the novel is that initial impressions are often incorrect, so it is important to not pass judgement until you have taken the time to get to know someone. On first meeting both Mrs. Falala and Zora it is pretty difficult to not come away with a strong first impression. In many ways the two mirror one another. Zora is described as ornery and Mrs. Falala as prickly. The children are not impressed with either one. In fact, Luke calls her a "kookoo head" and a "nutto" (70). But through a "forced" arrangement Reena and Luke must take the time to get to know both Mrs. Falala and her cow. As they work together over many weeks during the summer, the children learn that Mrs. Falala is not really all that bad. She may be a bit unusual and have a funny way of speaking, but she loves her animals and treats them well. Reena even wants to please Mrs. Falala and do a good job at the fair so that the old woman will be pleased with her. She and Luke have come to truly care for and respect their elderly friend.

Mrs. Falala has also learned that her first impression of the children was incorrect. When Reena and Luke yell at her she declares them to be rude (68). She has never had children and perhaps did not understand that sometimes children are sensitive and need to be dealt with gently. But the children work hard for her and begins to trust them and appreciate them. She also appreciates that Luke is teaching her draw. In fact, Mrs. Falala has become so comfortable with the children, that she leaves all of her animals to them in her will.

The Certainty of Death

Although not an easy topic for young people, author Sharon Creech deals sensitively with facing the reality of death and the sorrow that is felt with the passing of a loved one. In the first of two instances, Zep comes to Mrs. Falala's farm one day and has obviously been crying. He tells Reena and Luke that one of the cows at Birchmere Farm has died from some sort of illness. He approaches Yolanda and Zora with a certain gentleness and affection because he is glad to see them alive and well. Their well-being gives him a sense of comfort in the middle of his sadness. Luke and Reena, however, become immediately concerned for the other cows and worried that they might get sick or have something happen to them.

It is also at this point that Zep gently tells them about the purpose of most of the cows at Birchmere. They are specifically raised to become food. They live for a time, but ultimately, they will have to die in order to provide food for people. While Zep is saddened by the sudden death of this particular cow, he accepts that death comes to everything and that it is a part of life. This revelation is jolting to the children. They had never considered this aspect of life before and they spend a great deal of time thinking



about it that day. They find a measure of comfort in knowing that Zora is a show cow and that Mrs. Falala has promised them that she will never be sold to become hamburger (192). Across several chapters, the author allows the children to experience shock, anger, fear and comfort and gives them time to process their feelings.

The second time the children face death is when they discover Mrs. Falala has passed away peacefully in her attic. Their response is very calm, perhaps because they know that old people eventually die or perhaps because Mrs. Falala appeared so peaceful lying on her cot. They had known that the attic was Mrs. Falala's special remembering room and that she loved to play her flute, so when they discover her with flute in hand, looking as if she is merely sleeping, the scene is not unsettling to them. They look around and see all her beautiful drawings and are especially touched by the ones she has drawn of them. It is only once they have returned home that the children weep for her passing. They are sad as well because they will not be able to accept Mrs. Falala's special gift to them, the privilege of caring for her animals. Without a farm on which to keep Zora, she will have to be sold to someone else. It is as if the impact of Mrs. Falala's death is doubled. Not only have they lost their new friend, but they will have to lose their animals friends too. But as often happens with death, new and positive things come out of grief. As Reena says, "It is strange how ideas can arrive out of drip sagging blue" (270). Reena's proposal for Mr. Colley prevents their being separated from the animals and honors Mrs. Falala's final wishes.

Eating Animals

The author also deals with the delicate and controversial topic of whether or not people should use animals for food, simply presenting the argument but not directly taking a stance. This is an idea that the children had not ever considered. Following the death of a cow on Birchmere Farm, Zep tells Reena and Luke most of the animals on the farm are raised strictly for the purpose of being sold for beef. This really shakes the children up emotionally. They never really thought about from where their food came. As they discuss things over dinner, they realize that it is far reaching; many of the foods they love come from animals. Reena suggests that perhaps the family should become vegetarian.

The author does not make any judgements about what is right or wrong, but does clearly present the viewpoint of a beef cow farmer. Zep is working hard and learning how to be a farmer for his livelihood. He tells Reena and Luke that it is simply a fact that people eat meat. Once you start caring for the cows and get to know the animals' personalities, he knows that it is hard to think about selling any one of them for meat. But he is planning on being a beef cow farmer, and that means caring for them and treating them well for as long as he can (195). Zep has come to terms with his beliefs and his career choice. Like the author, he does not push his ideas onto the children, but he does share what he thinks. The author leaves the choice up to the children and the reader never knows what decision they and the family ultimately make since the decision is a personal one.

Styles

Point of View

Moo is told from the point of view of the main character, Reena. She tells the story looking back over the past 10 months of her life, relating the major changes that have taken place for her family and especially within herself. The tone is very light and the author includes a great deal of conversation between the characters. While the perspective is Reena's, the narrative is in the third person because Reena's story is not only her own. The whole family is on a new adventure. Reena's brother, Luke, is by her side every day experiencing the town, the farm and Mrs. Falala. Therefore, Reena says, "we went to the farm," "she was waiting for us," and "our stares."

However, the author does switch to first person when Reena becomes introspective about her feelings concerning the move and her reactions to meeting new people and encountering new places and activities. In the beginning of the novel, she wonders if she will have room for all the new sights and sounds of Maine within herself; "Would I know what to do and how to be in Maine?" (17). At the end of the novel, she expresses her delight in all the new things that have happened to her in Maine; "It feels a long, long way from the city with subways and monuments...to this house on Twitch Street where we live with animals we love," (278). This personal expression is particularly true of the chapters that are poems. In text that takes on a poem format rather than narrative prose, Reena observes the rocks, the wildflowers and the foggy harbor. Everything is new and she expresses her personal delight in it all. It is fitting that the author uses this format, since Reena is a 12-year-old girl, and many young girls write poetry as a way of managing their feelings. Just as Luke uses his notebook and drawings to manage his feelings, Reena uses poetry to express herself.

Language and Meaning

Throughout the novel the author uses accents with two of the characters to add humor and cultural authenticity to the text. The most notable alteration of speech is with Mrs. Falala. Early on, Reena mentions that her mother learned that Mrs. Falala came from Italy. As such, she speaks with a decided accent and her English is not always correct. At times her word order is awkward, "You are wanting to see cow?" (94). She also mispronounces simple words like "is," as "Eez not lumpy!" (95). This attention to detail adds greatly to developing Mrs. Falala as a colorful character. While the accent and choppy speech is at first offsetting to the children, it is also sometimes humorous. For example, when the children ask if a fair is like a carnival, Mrs. Falala responds, "Carnival? No! A fair. They show the horses, the cows, the pigs, the goats, the bunnies, the chickens. The judges choose best cow and best chicken and best piggy, like that. A fair. You got it now?" (111). The accent adds interest to Mrs. Falala and makes her a heartwarming character.



Zep is the other character that has some speech variation, giving him a very "Maine-y" sound. Zep is a local boy and speaks with words and phrases common to the area. For example, "'Ayuh,' Zep agreed. 'Train you riot up,'" (120). "Ayuh" is a regional word used in Maine which means yeah, sure or you bet. "Riot" means right and follows the pattern of speech of many words in Maine slang where the jaw is dropped and the vowel sounds are dragged out. While there are several other characters in the story that are native Maine residents, the author chooses to only give Zep these unique speech patterns. Perhaps it is because he is a farmer and the speech makes him sound more like a country farm boy. It is also possible that Zep is highlighted in this way because Reena takes a special interest in him and it is likely that she has taken note of the way he speaks and focuses on his words in particular. It is very "Maine-y" and Reena is taken in by it.

Structure

Moo uses several structural techniques to make the book easy to read and to illustrate the text without the use of pictures. The most noticeable technique is the manipulation of individual words within the text. Sometimes words are spelled with added letters to emphasize a sound or motion. For example, people go zzzooooooooommmmming on the subway or they listen to the SCREEEEECHES of the animals at the zoo. Stretching out the letters in "zooming" creates the motion of a subway car and capitalizing the letters and emphasizing the "e" in screeches simulates the loud sound an animal at the zoo would actually make. As the reader pronounces these words, they can almost hear the sounds. Again, While the children wait for news about Mrs. Falala, Reena describes time as dripping slowly. The word dripping is written on the page with only five other words and it is printed down the page one letter per line, creating the image of a drop of water slowly falling down. Drawing out the word, helps the reader to almost feel how painfully slow the waiting becomes for the children. Creech uses these techniques throughout the novel, which adds a level of participation to the reading; readers can more closely identify with the sights and sounds of the places Reena is describing and empathize with her emotions.

A second structural technique is the use of short chapters, an average three pages in length. Chapters are not numbered, but given short titles, often only one or two words. These titles sum up the content of the chapter which usually centers around one simple idea. The two pages of "Prickly" is about how the children's mother did not realize that Mrs. Falala could be difficult to get along with, but the next two pages in "Charming," focus on her change of mind having visited the old woman herself. This structure also blends nicely with the insertion of several poems throughout the text. Brief poems such as "Rocks," "Color," and "Bugs" blend in with the rest of the narrative text, even though they do not contain any action that moves the plot itself forward. The poems do contribute to the story however in that they allow the reader to see into Reena's emotions as she expresses her enjoyment or frustration with her new home.

A third structural technique is the author's decision to not use conventional rules of punctuation for the prose chapters. Typically, conversations are marked with the use of

quotation marks surrounding the words that each character speaks. However, in *Moo*, all of the spoken words are italicized instead. Attribution tags are still used however, so it is still clear who is speaking. In the chapter "Meltdowns," the children do not want to go work at Mrs. Falala's house. As they argue with their mother, the dialogue comes so quickly between the children and their mother that the author uses another technique for the attribution. The dialogue is formatted the way a stage play would be written, with a colon following each character's name followed by their dialogue. For example, "Me: Did you see the snake? The hog? Did Mrs. Falala snap at you? Luke: Awful, horrible, nutto lady --" (78). While it is interesting that this is the only instance where Creech uses this format, it is fitting. The children are really worked up at this point and the stage play formatting fits with the high drama of the scene. Without all the Mom said, I said, Luke said attributions, the reader can more fully experience the emotional intensity of the scene.



Quotes

The truth is, she was ornery and stubborn, wouldn't listen to anybody, and selfish beyond selfish, and filthy, caked with mud and dust, and moody: you'd better watch it or she'd knock you flat.

-- Reena (That Zora paragraph 1)

Importance: Reena is talking about Zora. She has described how she felt about Zora the first few times she met the big cow. There was not much that she could say that was positive about the large, smelly and difficult to handle cow. She gives this description in the beginning of the story because over time her impression of Zora will change.

I wasn't sure what 'all Maine-y' meant, but whatever it was, they had decided it was undesirable.

-- Reena (Friend Withdrawal paragraph 3)

Importance: As the family tells their friends they are moving to Maine, they receive mixed reactions. Reena feels that her friends start to forget about her even before she leaves. One of them comments that she will become "Maine-y" and says it in such a way that it seems like a bad thing. Reena is not sure what to expect and what this means about how she might change as a part of the move. She continues to pick up on this phrase throughout the story.

That night in his yellow notebook Luke's drawings included a skeletal towering figure with a snake braid and sharp metal claws surrounded by a posse of enormous hogs and menacing cats.

-- Reena (Don't You Touch Me paragraph 14)

Importance: Luke and Reena's first encounter with Mrs. Falala is a bit rough. When they knock on her door, she grabs Luke's arm with her bony hand and pulls him inside her house. Luke does not like to be touched and he is terrified of the old woman. Her accent, strange manner and long white braid that swishes back and forth like a horse tail is frightening to the children. They have also had to battle the hog and the cat outside in the yard on their way to the back door. The whole experience was very unnerving. Since Luke draws about all of his experiences, meeting Mrs. Falala shows up in the notebook. He usually draws heroes, villains and monsters, so it is natural that following the afternoon's events the villain takes on Mrs. Falala's features and she is surrounded by a horde of scary pigs and cats, just like what happened earlier in the day. Luke uses his notebook to express his fears about the encounter.

The voice full of honey but the words...not.

-- Reena (Back to Twitch Street paragraph 13)

Importance: As the children go to Mrs. Falala's house for the second time, this time without a parent with them, they are still frightened by the animals outside the house. This time there is a large, black snake dangling over the edge of the roof. They are



suddenly, pulled into the house by Mrs. Falala. She asks them what they were staring at and what were they spying on. The tone of her voice sounded all syrupy and sweet, not harsh or unkind, but the words themselves were accusatory. Reena does not feel at all comfortable being questioned by Mrs. Falala.

You got all that out of sitting in a doctor's waiting room?" "Yes', Mom said. 'I'm a good asker of questions and a good listener to answers.

-- Reena and her Mom (The Books paragraph 4-5)

Importance: Reena is surprised that her mother was able to learn so much about Mrs. Falala from having just met her while sitting in the waiting room at the doctor's office. But her mother, being a former news reporter and inquisitive by nature, points out that if you ask people good questions and take time to listen to their answers, you can learn a lot about people. This touches on an important theme in the book - it is important to take the time to get to know people and not just make assumptions about them from first impressions.

He's not being disrespectful, Mrs. Falala, He's just asking --

-- Reena (Cow! paragraph 13)

Importance: Reena is learning to work with and better understand Mrs. Falala. She knows that Luke is not being disrespectful but simply asking about the cow since she had told them that they would meet the cow on this day. He had not seen any cow and was asking about it and reminding her of what she had told them the day before. Reena realizes that Mrs. Falala might interpret his words as a bit of a challenge to her and helps her to see that Luke is simply curious and not rude. She is learning to work with the older woman, trying to understand her way of speech and personality.

I stood there for some time, talking to her and stroking her head, and then I turned and walked away, saying, "See? I didn't want anything from you. I only came to visit.

-- Reena (The Outfits paragraph 43)

Importance: Reena goes to the pasture to visit Zora. She has not yet been able to put a halter on Zora or get her to move. She decided to go see the stubborn cow and just say hello without trying to get her to do anything. Because she was not interested in making the cow do anything, but simply gave her affection, Zora let her guard down and followed after Reena. This is the beginning of a special relationship between the two.

And I was thinking that I never saw anything like everything I was seeing never saw anything like those everythings ever in my life. Sometimes I had to close my eyes to rest them from all the new everythings pouring.

-- Reena (Fog paragraph 7-8)

Importance: In the poem, "Fog," Reena recounts a morning when the family goes to the harbor early in the morning and watches as the fog rolls off the water. The family stands on the beach and looks out over the water, but everything is covered in fog. It slowly rises off the water and reveals the hulls of the boats, then the sails and all the



colorful buoys bobbing in the harbor. It is a magical sight and a brand new experience for everyone. Reena's mother is especially in awe. But Reena comments that everything they are seeing and experiencing in Maine is new and special. Sometimes it is almost overwhelming for her and she feels like she needs to close her eyes to keep from seeing anything new.

The cows at the farm -- Zep said -- some we keep for breeding, and some for showing, sure, but you know where the rest go right?' Luke and I shared one last moment of mutual innocence.

-- Zep/Reena (Sad Zep paragraph 13)

Importance: Zep has just told Reena and Luke that one of the cows at Birchmere Farms died the previous night from an unknown illness. Luke says that cows should not die. Zep hesitates to say anything, but then he goes on to explain that while some cows have the main purpose of giving birth to other cows and some cows become show cows, most of the cows on the farm are raised to be used for food. This opens the children's eyes, both horrifying them and making them fear for Zora's life. All the time that they were getting close to the cows, they had not considered that their own food comes from animals just like the ones they have come to love.

I had a quick glimpse of me in my room in our old apartment back in the city, an inside girl, and now here I was an outside girl, a cow girl.

-- Reena (Breed paragraph 6)

Importance: Reena has just chased down Zora and captured her after she bolted from the ring at the fair. Her parents are surprised to see all the things that Zora has learned about handling these large animals. Reena realizes too that she has come a long way from being an inside, city girl who knew nothing about these animals, to learning how to manage Zora and being someone who really loves this country way of life.

Luke had been quiet on the ride home, drawing in his notebook, but now he said, 'It was the best day ever, and you and Zora did the best job ever, and I will tell Mrs. Falala that if she says anything mean.

-- Reena/Luke (Rides paragraph 10)

Importance: Luke has matured personally a lot over the summer while learning to get along with Mrs. Falala. At first, he was terrified of her and did not like her touching him or being anywhere near him. But now, after weeks and weeks of working at the farm, sitting by her side and drawing and talking together, Luke is no longer afraid of her. They have become friends and Luke feels that he can even stand up to her if she were to say anything mean to Reena about not doing better at the fair. He has learned to express his feelings verbally and respectfully.

Mrs. Falala. So much we did not know about her.

-- Reena (Notebook paragraph 41)

Importance: Luke has just told Reena all about the different things that Mrs. Falala has



learned to draw and the things she especially loves to draw. He told her about the animals and showed her Mrs. Falala's first attempt at drawing a cow and one of her latest pictures of Zora. He told her about the attic window she likes to draw and the notes and ribbons and flowers she draws coming out of it. Luke says that she explained that the room is her remembering room where she remembers things from her past. When she plays her flute and remembers, sometimes the room gets too full and she needs to have the window open so the extra music and memories can flow out the window. They have heard the music before but never knew exactly what it was about or who played it. Reena thinks about all this and realizes that even though they have gotten to know the old woman over the summer, there is so much about Mrs. Falala that they have not learned yet.

The other drawing was of Luke and me, as we were riding away on our bikes, and trailing behind us were all the animals -- Zora and Yolanda, China, Crockett, Paulie, and seagulls flying circles over our heads. Very small in the bottom right corner was a little figure with a long braid, her hand raised in the air.

-- Reena (Portraits paragraph 4)

Importance: Luke and Reena have just discovered Mrs. Falala's body on a cot in her attic. While they wait for the others to come upstairs they look around and see all the pictures she has drawn and tacked up on her wall. They are of the animals, the farm and of Luke drawing and Reena with Zora. They are posted in the wall in the order in which she drew them as they go from left to right. One of the last pictures is of the children leaving the farm as Mrs. Falala waves goodbye. All the animals are following them. This is a foreshadowing of what is about to place; Mrs. Falala has passed on and the children are about to take her place in caring for all her beloved animals.