

The Man Who Loved Clowns Study Guide

The Man Who Loved Clowns by June Rae Wood

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Plot Summary

The Man Who Loved Clowns is the story of thirteen-year-old Delrita Jensen's journey to self-acceptance in a world where she feels she must constantly protect her handicapped uncle, Punky.

In the novel's first scene, Delrita Jensen struggles to run away from the new girl at school, Avanelle Shackelford, who chases her down while she is clearly trying to be friendly. Ever since Delrita moved to Tangle Nook, Missouri, her mother has been hounding her to make friends, but Delrita is hiding a secret: she lives with her Uncle Punky, who has Down's syndrome. Delrita is worried that if people find out they'll make fun of Punky, something she's spent her entire life trying to prevent. As a way of protecting Punky, Delrita has made herself socially invisible, refusing friendship offers and certainly not making any of her own. She is a lonely, sad girl, but she fears that letting anyone new into her life will only bring her pain. When Avanelle finally catches up to Delrita and invites her over for a snack, Delrita rudely turns her down.

In the days that follow, Delrita learns a lot about Avanelle and her family: they live on the outskirts of town, have a houseful of kids, are on welfare, and have a father in prison. Even though the girls are kindred spirits - both with a secret to hide - Delrita refuses to befriend her, or anyone else. A few weeks later, Delrita's parents take her and Punky to Silver Dollar City, an old fashioned city where a master woodcarver works. Delrita's favorite hobby is whittling wood, so she's very excited for the excursion. Her parents drop her and Punky off before heading further north to an antiques fair. The day couldn't be any better for Delrita: she and Punky ride rides, eat junk food, and best of all, visit the woodcarver's workshop, which is a source of great inspiration for Delrita. When they are supposed to meet Delrita's parents, however, Delrita has a nagging suspicion that something is wrong. As the minutes, and soon hours, tick by with no sign of her parents, Delrita knows something terrible has happened. Then she receives the news: her parents have been killed in a car accident. She and Punky are sent to live with Delrita's Uncle Bert (Punky's brother) and Aunt Queenie.

Delrita has a very difficult time adjusting to live with her uncle and aunt, mainly because Aunt Queenie's fastidious nature clashes with Punky's messy eating and habits. Delrita is outraged when her Aunt and Uncle suggest that Punky would do well at a sheltered workshop: a place for handicapped adults. Delrita's mother had dedicated her life to caring for Punky, and now Aunt Queenie wants to send him away. Delrita swears that she will stop at nothing to protect Punky, no matter the cost.

Feeling desperately alone, Delrita finally accepts Avanelle's offer to come over after school. The girls become fast friends, and Delrita soon develops a crush on Avanelle's older brother, Tree. For a few weeks, Delrita catches glimmers of real happiness as she enjoys her first friend, whose entire family accepts Punky as he is without making fun of him or asking him to change. Unfortunately, a misunderstanding with one of Avanelle's letters to her father in prison breaks up the happy friendship around the same time that



Aunt Queenie succeeds in sending Punky to the workshop. Delrita feels as if her world is falling apart again.

At Aunt Queenie's insistence, Delrita accompanies Punky to work one morning and finds that it is a very happy place: he has friends, a girlfriend, and a sense of pride he never had before. Delrita is ashamed for the way she's been sheltering Punky, and she realizes that her own fears of rejection have caused her to hide behind Punky's handicap, using his difference as an excuse to separate herself from society. She vows to change, but unfortunately, Avanelle is unwilling to forgive her. As the weeks pass, Delrita resigns herself to becoming invisible once again. And then everything changes, once again: Delrita receives the terrible news that Punky has had a heart attack. A few days later, Delrita's best friend and uncle passes away. The entire city shows up for his funeral, and Delrita realizes that Punky was well loved by his community. At the close of the ceremony, she runs into the arms of Avanelle, who has realized that Delrita's friendship means everything to her, too.



Chapters 1 & 2: The Invisible Girl, Out of the Frying Pan [and] Into the Fire

Chapters 1 & 2: The Invisible Girl, Out of the Frying Pan [and] Into the Fire Summary

The novel opens with a scene of Delrita Jensen trying to run away from the new girl at school, Avanelle Shackelford. Avanelle is new to school and hasn't yet learned that Delrita is "invisible." Avanelle and Delrita have been assigned to share the same math book, and Avanelle wants to know how they will organize the swap so both can get their homework done on time. Avanelle suggests that Delrita come over after school once in a while so they can do their homework together, but Delrita refuses. She claims that she has a lot of chores to do, but it's clear to everyone, including Avanelle, that she's lying. Delrita is as rude as possible to Avanelle, but the girl is so friendly that Delrita's not sure she's getting the message. She snaps at Avanelle one last time and it's clear now: Avanelle's feelings are hurt, but at least that will stop her from dropping by Delrita's house.

When Delrita arrives back home, she's greeted by her uncle, Punky, who was born with Down's syndrome. Still thinking about Avanelle and how nice it would be to have a friend, Delrita remembers the one time in second grade that she brought a friend home from school. The girl was so terrified of Punky that she ran out of the house, screaming. Delrita has sworn to never go through that again. Delrita also remembers how the neighborhood reacted when their family moved in four months ago: kids were hiding behind the hedges hoping to catch a glimpse of Punky in the backyard. As always, Delrita was there to protect him from their taunts.

Chapters 1 & 2: The Invisible Girl, Out of the Frying Pan [and] Into the Fire Analysis

Delrita's main character conflict is introduced in this first section of the novel: she is terribly lonely and desperate for a friend, but she is embarrassed of her Uncle Punky. Delrita fears that if kids at school find out that she has a mentally retarded relative, they'll think something's wrong with her, too. She's afraid that they'll mock her, or worse, mock Punky, who can't stand up for himself. It's interesting to note that at the end of the section, Delrita admits to feeling guilt over her embarrassment of Punky, and that any feeling, even loneliness, is better than guilt. In a way, Delrita is self-punishing, refusing herself friends as punishment for her embarrassment.

In this section, Delrita also introduces an image that has stayed with her since childhood, and one that is an important symbol in the novel: the image of a tree she'd once seen growing from between rocks: "Maybe I'd be like that tree, which stood proud



and willowy after fighting its way to the sun, while the rock was cracked with a deep, jagged scar all the way to the ground" (p. 15).



Chapters 3 & 4: The Birthday Boy, Aunt Queenie

Chapters 3 & 4: The Birthday Boy, Aunt Queenie Summary

Delrita feels badly about the way she treated Avanelle, particularly because they share three classes together and it's clear that neither one of them has any friends. Still, Delrita can't risk the embarrassment she feels when other kids are scared of Punky. She pushes all these thoughts aside because today is Punky's birthday. Mom has fried two whole chickens because Uncle Bert and Aunt Queenie are coming over for dinner tonight, too. Delrita tries not to whine, but she can't stand Aunt Queenie. All she does is criticize Mom for the way she's chosen to raise Punky (her brother). Delrita agrees that her parents spoil Punky, but that's because the doctors told them that people with Down's syndrome rarely live past forty. If that's true, Punky only has a few years left and they want to make the most of them. While Punky gets ready for dinner, Delrita wraps the present she made for him: a hand-carved clown, Punky's favorite.

At dinner, everything seems to go wrong. Punky tries to kiss Aunt Queenie while he still has frosting on her face (and she's wearing a new dress), Punky leaves the table so he can eat his dinner in front of the table (which Aunt Queenie objects to), and Aunt Queenie suggest sending Punky to the sheltered workshop (which Mom is vehemently opposed to). All in all, it's a very tense, uncomfortable meal with everyone arguing over what's best for Punky. Aunt Queenie insists that things have changed since Punky was a boy and that Delrita's parents are holding him back from many opportunities. After dinner, Punky opens his presents and Aunt Queenie comments on how beautiful the clown Delrita carved is.

Chapters 3 & 4: The Birthday Boy, Aunt Queenie Analysis

This section mainly serves to characterize Aunt Queenie and the relationship Delrita has with her. From the onset, Aunt Queenie is described as finicky and controlling, bent on sending Punky away to the workshop - which Delrita and her mother refer to as the "workhouse" conjuring images of Dickensian workhouses - claiming that it is in Punky's best interest. As far as Delrita is concerned, Aunt Queenie wants to send Punky away to make her own life easier so she won't have to worry about frosting face kisses or chicken bones behind the television. Aunt Queenie argues that Shelia, Delrita's mother, spoils Punky, and through the entire meal, Aunt Queenie reminds Punky to sit up straight, chew his food, and speak slowly so people can understand him. Aunt Queenie thinks she is helping Punky become a better person through her nitpicking, but to Delrita, she is taunting Punky, reminding him of his differences. Shelia shares Delrita's



overprotective nature and is quick to stand up to Queenie when she feels she has crossed the line.

Sam, Delrita's father, shrugs off Queenie's suggestions, saying that now Queenie is volunteering with the handicapped, she thinks she knows what's best for all of them. The main conflict has to do with the workshop. Queenie feels it will empower Punky and better his life, but Delrita and her mother equate the place to a torture chamber. As the novel progresses, Delrita's view of Aunt Queenie, the workshop, and even Punky himself will change. This section also characterizes Punky as a man with many habits. Due in part to his handicap and in part to his overprotective sister's mothering, Punky does the same thing day in and day out. He's never been to school, even though there are schools for handicapped children, and he spends his days singing into an imaginary microphone and watching commercials on the television. Throughout the first half of the novel all the characters, including Delrita, will struggle to define the best life for Punky: is Shelia giving him what he needs, or is Queenie right that there are many more opportunities for Punky than his family gives him credit for?



Chapters 5 & 6: The Bratty Gregory Kid, The Whistle

Chapters 5 & 6: The Bratty Gregory Kid, The Whistle Summary

Delrita's mother wakes her in the morning with a surprise: she's going to join her husband at an estate auction later in the week, which means that Delrita will be alone with Punky for the day. Normally that wouldn't be a problem, but last year, Punky had a heart attack and could have another at any time. Delrita is sure she can handle the responsibility, particularly because taking Punky for the day means they'll get to explore Silver Dollar City, her favorite place on earth. Delrita remembers the first time she entered the master woodcarver's workshop at Silver Dollar City and watched him carve a beautiful swan. She knew that's what her hands were meant to do, and she bought her first woodcarving tool that very day. Ever since watching the craftsman in his studio, Delrita has been dying to carve a beautiful swan, but her skills haven't matured enough and she keeps breaking the swan's slender neck.

Later that day Delrita walks outside to check on Punky, where he's playing with the clown she carved for him. In the bushes, she sees the neighbor boy, Marcus Gregory, staring. Delrita marches up to Marcus and confronts him about staring at Punky. The boy looks startled and says that he wasn't staring, he just wants to join in Punky's game. Punky is thrilled to have a friend and reluctantly Delrita lets the boy into the yard. An hour later, she checks on them and the two are laughing hysterically.

Before dinner, Delrita takes Punky to the grocery store for supplies. She gives him a quarter for a prize from the dispenser and blushes with embarrassment when Punky jumps up and down, clapping his hands with excitement. She's sure everyone in the entire store is looking at them, making fun of Punky behind his back. Too embarrassed to finish her shopping, Delrita agrees to take Punky to McDonalds. She knows that Avanelle lives next door to the restaurant, so while her family is eating, Delrita slips away to borrow the math book. When she knocks on the door, it's clear Avanelle is shocked and embarrassed see Delrita there. Clearly she hadn't been expecting her. The house is filthy and overrun with children in faded clothes. Feeling bad, Delrita gives one of the little girls the whistle Punky won in the vending machine. The girl looks thrilled to have something of her own.

Chapters 5 & 6: The Bratty Gregory Kid, The Whistle Analysis

In this section, Delrita visits the Shackleford home for the first time. She is shocked to see how poor the family really is. To Delrita, the house is dingy and ramshackle. The



kids are dirty and totally out of control. They all wear faded clothes and she even heard that their mother takes welfare. When she walks up to the house, the little girl outside, Birdie, says that her daddy is in prison for being a thief. Like Delrita, Avanelle has a secret to keep, which explains why she doesn't have any friends at her new school. Still, this is not enough for Delrita to take pity on the girl. If anything, it is further proof that Delrita shouldn't get involved. Yet the embarrassment and shame on Avanelle's face strikes a chord with Delrita: she knows that feeling well. Before she leaves, Delrita gives Birdie Punky's whistle, and the little girl is thrilled.

As the novel progresses, Delrita and Avanelle will actually become good friends. Looking back on this moment, it will become clear that Delrita has a terrible habit of underestimating people. Because the Shackelfords are poor, Delrita assumes they must be bad, untrustworthy people. Delrita also underestimates Marcus Gregory, assuming that he has come over to make fun of Punky when in fact the boy wants to play with him. As the novel progresses, Delrita will realize that she has underestimated many people in her life, from Aunt Queenie to Punky and even herself.



Chapters 7 & 8: The Moptops, Spirit Week

Chapters 7 & 8: The Moptops, Spirit Week Summary

The next morning, Delrita wakes to rain pelting the windows. Punky is in tears because he's afraid of rain, so Delrita pretends to phone the weather channel to ask them to change things. The family packs into their car and drives to church, one of the few places Delrita feels she can really be herself - the congregation is all used to Punky's antics - so she is surprised to see a line of red-headed children at the front of the church. Knowing this must be Avanelle and her family, Delrita is mortified. Now everyone at school will know the truth about her family! As soon as she thinks this, Delrita is overwhelmed with guilt: "How could I love Punky and be ashamed of him at the same time?" (p. 61). Delrita's embarrassment escalates when Punky runs his fingers through Avanelle's older brother's hair and tells him he looks like Ronald McDonald. Even though the boy laughs off Punky's joke, Delrita is suddenly aware of how inappropriate Punky's actions are. She wants to run out to the car and hide, but she knows her parents will just come looking for her. Delrita is clearly attracted to the older brother, whose name is Trezane, but is too embarrassed to even speak to him. Surely he'll just laugh in her face she thinks. So she's shocked when Trezane invites her to watch the football game this weekend - he'll be playing, but maybe she can sit with Avanelle? Delrita is flattered, but keeps her vow to hold friends at a distance and turns him down.

The next day, Delrita is angry with herself for running away from Trezane (Tree). She notes that Avanelle and her brother are much nicer than the other kids at school and wonders if it's that because they're so poor they have to be extra-nice if they want to make friends. Delrita finds herself wandering through the ninth-grade hallways in search of Tree, even though she has nothing to say to him, and even allows Avanelle to sit with her at lunchtime. The two girls chat away, with Avanelle spilling her entire family drama (with the exception of the fact that her father's in jail). In turn, Delrita tells Avanelle about living with her Uncle Punky. It's the first time Delrita has ever talked about him with a friend. Delrita nods through the story and says, "All families have secrets. I guess some of us just have worse secrets than others" (pp. 73-74). After that, Delrita and Avanelle are practically inseparable.

Chapters 7 & 8: The Moptops, Spirit Week Analysis

When Delrita's mother was growing up, she didn't have many friends, and Delrita is clearly following her footsteps. Even though her mother encourages her to make friends, particularly with the Shackelford family, Delrita is too embarrassed. It's hinted at that Delrita's mother is also somewhat ashamed of Punky, which is why she doesn't have friends of her own. It's interesting to see the ways these women's overprotective



nature has actually hindered their own lives. Although Delrita won't admit it until the end of the novel, it's clear that Aunt Queenie might have a good point: It would be better for everyone if Punky spent some time on his own.

Trezane proves to be the key that opens the door to friendship between Delrita and Avanelle. Not only has Delrita never had a true friend, she's never had a boyfriend, and she develops a desperate crush on Tree. Wanting to be close to him, she allows herself to spend time with Avanelle and soon finds herself embroiled in a brand new best-friendship. She never saw it coming. The benefits of this friendship are immediately apparent: both girls seem a lot happier in school. They smile and giggle for the first time in the novel. But it's clear that Delrita doesn't really know how to act around a friend: she speaks to Avanelle at school, but never asks her to come over and never asks to hang out with her after school. It's important to note that neither Tree nor Avanelle has ever made a derogatory comment about Punky or made fun of him behind his back. Because of their financial situation and the fact that their father is in prison, the Shackelfords know what it feels like to be laughed at. All they want is friends. Still, Delrita has a difficult time pushing past her own insecurities. When Avanelle doesn't mention that her father is in prison, Delrita wonders why she's keeping it a secret. If she doesn't trust Delrita to accept her, even with her flaws, maybe she can't expect Avanelle to fully accept her. No matter how many kind people enter Delrita's life, she is always looking for excuses to push them away.



Chapters 9 & 10: Silver Dollar City, The Master Woodcarver

Chapters 9 & 10: Silver Dollar City, The Master Woodcarver Summary

On the morning that Delrita and her family will travel to Silver Dollar City, Delrita asks her father to cut her blocks of basswood for her whittling. He encourages her to finally try to carve a swan in flight, even though she hasn't mastered one in the sitting position: "Come on, give this little fellow a chance. Let him spread his wings and fly" (p. 80). On the way to Silver Dollar City, Delrita's parents decide that she's old enough to watch Punky on her own for the day. They're headed off to an antiques market without Delrita or Punky, fearing that one wrong move with clumsy Punky could cost them hundreds of dollars. He would have more fun at the amusement park anyway. So with a long list of instructions, Delrita's parents drive away. Planning to meet her parents at the general store at 2 o'clock, Delrita enjoys bringing Punky to the amusements and eating carnival junk food.

Delrita's favorite stop in Silver Dollar City is the master woodcarver's studio. As the carver works, many tourists stop for a few moments to watch before moving on, but Delrita stays glued to her spot, unable to take her eyes off Whittlin' Walt's skilled work. Suddenly, from across the room, Delrita hears Punky shout "My box!" and she knows something terrible has happened: Punky has a habit of trading one of his "treasures" for something beautiful he finds in a store. In other words, Punky has a habit of shoplifting, and Delrita knows he's "made a trade" in the studio. She rushes to Punky's side to explain what has happened, but the shopkeeper isn't interested in her explanation. The situation escalates, and Delrita is both shocked and embarrassed when Whittlin' Walt comes to mediate. Kindly, Whittlin' Walt offers to make Punky's trade: a carved clown for a pair of Punky's red socks. When Punky shows Walt his other clowns - the ones Delrita carved - Walt is impressed and gives Delrita a beautiful block of wood for her next project.

With their gifts in hand, Delrita and Punky sit outside the general store waiting for Delrita's parents. They wait and wait, but there is no sign of her parents. At 3 o'clock, Delrita starts to get worried, but she doesn't want to let on. She tries to keep Punky occupied, but he's tired, hungry, and wants to go home. At four o'clock, Delrita knows something terrible has happened, but she's still not prepared when Whittlin' Walt walks slowly toward her from his studio. He calls her name and delivers the news: Delrita's parents were killed instantly in a horrific car accident.



Chapters 9 & 10: Silver Dollar City, The Master Woodcarver Analysis

This section presents the major turning point in the novel as well as the novel's greatest symbol: the swan. The turning point is obviously the death of Delrita's parents. The entire novel has been building to this moment, when Delrita must face her emotions about Punky head-on, and she must stand on her own two feet as an independent teenager responsible not only for herself, but for her handicapped uncle as well. Delrita has already exhibited her maturity: she is able to watch over Punky in stressful situations, advocate for him when he is being abused, entertain him when he is bored, talk him down from crabby moods, and ensure he takes his medication when needed. Because of this, the reader is not worried for Punky's safety. They know he is safe in Delrita's care.

The main symbol in the novel is the swan, which, when in flight, represents freedom. Throughout the novel, Delrita whittles a swan from the block of basswood Whittlin' Walt gifted to her. She carves carefully with tiny tools, creating the perfect replica of a bird in flight - the complete opposite of how she feels, caged by her emotions. This novel is a coming-of-age story, in which Delrita grows in confidence and self-worth despite her depressing situation.



Chapters 11 & 12: Going Home, The Blank Wall

Chapters 11 & 12: Going Home, The Blank Wall Summary

Delrita can barely process what she's just heard: her parents are dead. She screams and weeps and embraces Punky, knowing that he's all she has left of a family. She realizes then that Punky needs her to be strong: she's all he has left, too. Whittlin' Walt says that Uncle Bert and Aunt Queenie are on their way to pick them up. In the meantime, Whittlin' Walt will take them to his house to wait. When Bert and Queenie arrive, Walt stops Delrita on her way to the car. He hands her a package, saying it might mean something to her someday. Delrita can't even bring herself to open it. The drive home seems endless. Even though Aunt Queenie has packed pillows and blankets, Delrita can't sleep. All she sees when she closes her eyes is her parents' car smashing into the guardrail. It's only when Uncle Bert takes a left at the fork near home instead of a right that she realizes they won't be returning to her parents' home. She and Punky climb quickly into bed, but Delrita knows she won't be able to fall asleep. A few hours later, Punky opens her door, crying. He wants to go home. To his home. Not knowing what else to do, Delrita nods, pushes her belongings into a bag, takes Punky's hand, and leads him out into the deserted streets. They walk the two miles to their own home, where Delrita is finally able to fall asleep.

Delrita is woken a few hours later by a frantic Uncle Bert, shaking her awake. He's been looking for her for the past few hours and has been worried sick. The next day is Delrita's parents' funeral. Uncle Bert's house fills with relatives who all say the same thing: "Your folks didn't suffer" or "They lived a good, happy life" or "At least they went together" (p.107). These thoughts make Delrita sick. Her parents are dead. She's never going to see them again. Although she feels like she's going to fall apart, Delrita has to remain strong for Punky, who doesn't understand that Sam and Shirley won't be coming to this party. Each night, Punky cries himself to sleep, desperate to go home, confused why Sam and Shirley won't come to get him. Delrita is also having a difficult time adjusting to life at Aunt Queenie's house, where everything is neat and organized. Aunt Queenie spends all her time smoothing wrinkles on the tablecloth, ensuring all her pencils are evenly sharpened, and watering the hundreds of potted plants she keeps in her living room. One evening, Delrita overhears Aunt Queenie asking Uncle Bert if he's filled out Punky's paperwork yet, paperwork to send him to the sheltered workhouse. Barging into the room, Delrita shouts her outrage: how dare Aunt Queenie do this to Punky! Aunt Queenie dismisses Delrita's shouts by saying that she's too protective of her uncle. She has to let Punky go; she has to let him live his own life.



Chapters 11 & 12: Going Home, The Blank Wall Analysis

Delrita begins to process her emotions in the wake of her parents' sudden death. At first, her reaction is hysterical, a mixture of screams, giggles, and tears as the shock overtakes her. When it's time for the funeral, Delrita first resents her relatives visiting - they say the most absurd things to her - and then resents them for leaving her all alone. Delrita fully understands the gravity of how her life has changed and what her new responsibilities are: with her mother gone, it is Delrita's job to protect Punky from the sheltered workhouse. Aunt Queenie insists that the workhouse is a great place and that Punky would thrive there, but to Delrita, even the suggestion of sending Punky away insults her mother's memory. She is positive that Aunt Queenie wants to get rid of Punky because he threatens her perfect existence, her well-ordered life. She doesn't consider, even for a moment, that Aunt Queenie could be telling the truth: that the workhouse isn't a terrible place.

Defining "Home" is an important theme in the novel. When her parents die, Delrita is sure that she will never have a home again. She can't imagine feeling comfortable enough at Uncle Bert and Aunt Queenie's to call it home. Punky's resistance to the move is apparent: he needs his belongings, his own bed, his sawed-off table, to feel like he is at home. Uncle Bert brings these items over, which settles Punky down, but for Delrita, home is less finite. It's a sense of belonging, a feeling of security, a knowledge that the adults around her have her best interests - not their own - in mind. When her parents die, Delrita pulls further into herself wanting to protect her uncle, her broken heart, and her insecure emotions. This internalization will be outwardly expressed in many unpredictable ways as the novel progresses. The reader sees the first hints of Delrita's anger when, after sneaking out of Uncle Bert's house in the middle of the night, she walks past the Shackleford house. Delrita is outraged that her own father, a good, upstanding man, was killed when a deadbeat criminal like Avanelle's father is allowed to live.



Chapters 13 & 14: The Swan, The Tree Breaks Through the Rock

Chapters 13 & 14: The Swan, The Tree Breaks Through the Rock Summary

Things escalate at Aunt Queenie's house when Punky dumps a bottle of her expensive shampoo down the toilet just to watch it bubble. It's been nine days since Delrita's parents died and she decides it's time to return to school. On her walk, Delrita shoves her hands in her pockets and discovers the package Walt gave to her. It's a beautifully carved swan in flight and a note that reads, "Life is like an untouched block of wood. We can carve out a beautiful niche for ourselves, or we can leave it unused and unproductive on a shelf" (p.117). Immediately, Delrita knows that she wants to carve a swan of her own. She turns the swan over and over in her hands, marveling at its beauty. At school that day, Delrita is not invisible. Although many kids don't speak to her directly, they give her sympathetic smiles, or nod encouragingly in her direction. Avanelle stays near Delrita all day, not saying much, just showing her support. On the walk home from school, Delrita reaches out to Avanelle: she needs a friend to make it through this hard time. She shows Avanelle the swan, and her friend is very impressed with the craftsmanship. Suddenly, Delrita is telling Avanelle everything, everything from life with Punky to life with Aunt Queenie. As they reach Avanelle's house, the two girls are in fits of laughter. Avanelle pulls Delrita into her house, not embarrassed at all, and the girls feast on homemade doughnuts, hot out of the grease.

Chapters 13 & 14: The Swan, The Tree Breaks Through the Rock Analysis

On her way to school, Delrita passes the Shackelford home and has a quick discussion with Birdie, the Shackelford she gave the whistle to in Chapter Six. While talking about Halloween with the bright-faced, eager little girl, Delrita is overcome with guilt having wished the girl's father dead. She realizes that God has a plan and that he doesn't make substitutions. This knowledge, and the knowledge of the beautiful swan in her pocket, gives Delrita a new sense of calm: she can make it through this tribulation. Walt's instruction, to carve a niche for oneself, will become Delrita's motto as the novel progresses. She doesn't fully understand what Walt's words mean, and she pushes them aside. Meanwhile, she begins whittling her own swan, the novel's symbol for freedom. She carves carefully with tiny tools, creating the perfect replica of a bird in flight - the complete opposite of how she actually feels, caged by her emotions. Avanelle's friendship gives Delrita the first feelings of true freedom, of creating a niche for herself. When she spends time at the Shackelford house, Delrita is reminded of the image of the tree she once saw growing from between the rocks. Surrounded by the

warmth and love in the Shackleford home, Delrita feels warm inside: "I'd finally burst through the rock," she says (p.127).



Chapters 15 & 16: Aunt Queenie's Decision, Sitting on a Time Bomb

Chapters 15 & 16: Aunt Queenie's Decision, Sitting on a Time Bomb Summary

The relationship between Avanelle and Delrita blooms. The two girls quickly become inseparable, and Delrita's crush on Tree grows. When she returns to Aunt Queenie's house one day, however, Delrita's feeling of excitement and calm is spoiled: Punky has cut all the leaves off Aunt Queenie's beloved plants and now she's talking about sending him to the workhouse. Once again, Delrita is outraged. At dinner that night, Delrita finally explodes, shouting at Aunt Queenie, calling her names, and making horrific accusations. After her outburst, Delrita's gaze falls on her new swan. How could she carve something so delicate and beautiful when she is filled with this overwhelming feeling of hatred?

The next day, Delrita takes Punky to the Shackelfords' house. There, she tells Avanelle all about Aunt Queenie's decision. Delrita is sure that Avanelle will be outraged, just as she is, but is shocked when Avanelle agrees with Aunt Queenie: maybe the workhouse is a good idea. Avanelle says that in her old hometown, the Special Olympics were a big deal. If Punky gets a job at the workhouse, he could participate in that. That afternoon, Delrita and Punky accompany the Shackelfords to the homecoming parade at school. Delrita is shocked to see the town's Special Olympics team marching in the celebration. Looking around, Delrita is sure she'll see the crowd making fun of the handicapped adults, but the crowd is cheering and applauding as if nothing strange is happening. That night, her fight with Aunt Queenie continues when Uncle Bert suggests that it would be best for Delrita as well if Punky went to the workhouse.

Chapters 15 & 16: Aunt Queenie's Decision, Sitting on a Time Bomb Analysis

This section of the novel functions mainly to set-up the great change in Punky's life: his journey to the sheltered workhouse. While Delrita is at the Shackelford house, she learns that Aunt Queenie is actually a volunteer for the Special Olympics in Tangle Nook. Delrita can't believe Aunt Queenie would take on such a philanthropic position, and she's sure Aunt Queenie must work in the organization department, certainly not with the handicapped athletes. Still, Delrita begins to question her attitude toward Aunt Queenie: could she be wrong about her? Delrita is also shocked to see workhouse members marching at the homecoming parade, especially because none of the residents make fun of the crew. For the first time in her life, Delrita begins to question whether she has underestimated the outside world. Maybe Aunt Queenie is right, maybe she has been overprotective of Punky. At dinner that night, Uncle Bert suggests



another reason why sending Punky to the workhouse might be a good idea: it will give Delrita the chance to live her own life, not constantly having to look out for Punky: "You've grown up in Punky's shadow. We want you to stop hiding behind him and lead a normal life. We want him to have something every person needs - the feeling of self-worth" (p.147). Although she's not ready for another big change in her life, Delrita begins to see that Uncle Bert and Aunt Queenie might have been right all along, although she 's not ready to admit this.



Chapters 17 & 18: The Sheltered Workshop, Alone Again

Chapters 17 & 18: The Sheltered Workshop, Alone Again Summary

On the day Punky begins work at the sheltered workshop, Delrita travels with him to the job. She's expecting to see handicapped people chained to workstations or being abused by their supervisors, but that's not what she sees at all. As the workers arrive, they greet each other warmly, slapping high fives and talking about what they did over the weekend. There are blind people and deformed people and people with Down's Syndrome, just like Punky. Punky even meets a beautiful girl with Down's Syndrome and it's clear there's an attraction between them. While Punky walks off with his new friends, Boss gives Uncle Bert and Delrita a tour of the facility. Delrita is surprised to see the workers enjoying their jobs, despite the limitations of their handicaps. When he sees Delrita staring, Boss says, "Most of our employees have been kept in a valley by their disabilities. We teach them to use whatever capabilities they have to climb up to the mountaintop. They're freed by what they can do, instead of being restricted by what they can't" (pp.157-158). The workers refinish furniture, peel microfilm, and many other jobs Delrita never imagined they could accomplish.

On the drive home, Delrita is embarrassed by her behavior in front of Aunt Queenie. Clearly she should have given her Aunt more credit: the workshop WILL be a good place for Punky. When she arrives at school later that day, Delrita rushes to Avanelle's locker for the math book they share, hoping she can finish her missed homework during gym class. In the locker room, Georgina Gregory, the most popular and snobbiest girl in school, knocks the book out of Delrita's hands and a letter from Avanelle, addressed to her father in prison, falls out. Before Delrita can stop them, all the girls in the locker room are laughing and passing the note around, screeching that Avanelle is a jailbird's daughter. Avanelle walks in and is flabbergasted. She is outraged and embarrassed and turns all her emotions on Delrita. She shouts at Delrita and says that she never wants to see her again. When Delrita returns home that day, Punky is in a great mood and wants to talk about all his new friends. Devastated, Delrita locks herself in the bathroom to carve, feeling desperately lonely.

Chapters 17 & 18: The Sheltered Workshop, Alone Again Analysis

In this section, Aunt Queenie finally gets her wish and sends Punky away to the workshop. This is the moment Delrita has been trying to avoid since her parents died, and Aunt Queenie wisely sends Delrita along. At the workshop, Delrita realizes just how many people she underestimated. First, she sees Punky flourishing with his new friends

and realizes that she had been holding him back all these years. Second, she realizes that she underestimated Aunt Queenie's devotion to Punky and that she had his best interests in mind all along. It's an eye opening experience for Delrita who feels pleased that Punky is doing well, but is saddened by her own loneliness. Now, she feels truly alone. Delrita's fight with Avanelle only heightens these emotions.



Chapters 19 & 20: Big Bucks, Herkimer

Chapters 19 & 20: Big Bucks, Herkimer Summary

Two weeks after Punky starts his job at the workshop, he receives his first paycheck. The whole family travels to the bank together to watch him cash it - \$48 all in one dollar bills. While they are out for a celebratory dinner, Aunt Queenie suggests that Delrita should try to make up with Avanelle. It would be nice for both girls to have a friend, especially since they're both going through a difficult time. After dinner, Aunt Queenie takes Punky to buy his own television set for his room. The next day, Delrita accompanies Punky to the athletic field where he's training for the Special Olympics. One of his new friends from the workshop, Frankie, is clutching one of the carved clowns Delrita once carved for Punky. Obviously, Punky has recycled the hand-made gift, but Delrita isn't bothered. She's glad Punky is making friends. As she discusses the carving with Frankie, Tree sneaks up behind her. He's very impressed by the carving, and also suggests that Delrita should give Avanelle a call: She's miserable at home, he says. That night, Delrita finishes carving Herkimer, and she's incredibly proud of her accomplishment. She plans to give the swan to Avanelle as an apology, but when she wakes up the next morning, Herkimer is missing. Delrita races to the athletic field knowing Punky must have swiped it, but by the time she gets there, she sees Punky's new girlfriend, Susie, holding the swan.

Chapters 19 & 20: Big Bucks, Herkimer Analysis

Many things about Punky have changed now that he has found work. His bald spot, where he nervously pulled out hair before, has begun to fill back in. He has stopped chewing on his fingers, and no longer cries when it rains. Most importantly, however, he wakes up every morning with a sense of purpose. He's able to afford a new television set for his bedroom so he can watch commercials in peace without annoying the rest of the household. He has friends, and even a girlfriend. Like Herkimer, Punky is finally able to spread his wings and soar. Even Aunt Queenie acknowledges this, saying, "They both started with the basic ingredients, but it took a special touch for them to spread their wings and fly" (p.185). Even Delrita's self confidence is growing. Many people have complimented her carving skills in the past few days, and Aunt Queenie has even insisted that Delrita carve in the living room - with a tarp underneath her, of course - because she doesn't want Delrita hiding her talent behind a locked bathroom door. In this chapter, it becomes clear that the new family is finding ways to live and love together, when previously, it seemed all hope was lost.



Chapters 21 & 22: The Rock, The Invisible Shell

Chapters 21 & 22: The Rock, The Invisible Shell Summary

At school one afternoon, Delrita is shocked when Tree asks if she'd like to go with him to the upcoming sock hop. She's shocked and speechless, so Tree has to practically beg her to come. Dumb, Delrita just nods her head, totally unable to speak. Tree promises to pick her up on Friday at 7:00 pm, saying they can go with his friends, Mike and Wanda. Now that her relationship is progressing with Tree, Delrita figures she should do her best to patch things up with Avanelle. She tries to invite Avanelle over for a Coke, but Avanelle says she already has plans with Mrs. Myrtle, the old lady from church. Delrita is sure Avanelle is making it up - who would want to spend time with an old lady? - and assumes Avanelle is still angry with her. In preparation for the dance, Delrita takes a crash-course in dancing and buys a new dress. On Friday evening, she and Aunt Queenie spend an hour doing her hair and make-up. Delrita waits anxiously on the couch. Seven o'clock arrives and passes. Delrita watches the minutes tick by with no sign of Tree. Finally, at almost 8 o'clock, Mike, Tree's friend, calls from the dance. Delrita hears snickering in the background as Mike tells her that Tree had to baby-sit tonight. Outraged, and sure he's making up an excuse, Delrita slams down the phone and swears she will never speak to the Shackelford family again.

The next day is the Anniversary Party at McDonald's. Delrita doesn't really want to go - she fears she might see one of the Shackelfords - but agrees when Punky begs her to come along. Not surprisingly, moments after arriving, Delrita runs into Tree, who is laughing and talking with Cindi Martin. Sure that Tree stood her up the night before so he could take Cindi to the dance instead, Delrita marches toward him and shouts at him for setting her up, especially when she thought they were friends. Tree looks shocked; didn't Mike call her to explain? Delrita doesn't want to listen to any of Tree's excuses. When Tree reaches down to touch her, Delrita screeches, "Take your hands off me!" and runs away (p. 202). In the car, Aunt Queenie explains that Mrs. Shackelford had her baby last night, which is probably why Tree had to babysit. Delrita doesn't care, whatever the reason she's not going to forgive Tree for standing her up.

Chapters 21 & 22: The Rock, The Invisible Shell Analysis

Delrita has such an emotional reaction to the miscommunication surrounding the dance for many reasons. First, she feels very alone now that Avanelle is ignoring her at school. With Punky making friends of his own, Tree is the only person left who makes Delrita feel special. When he stands her up for the dance - whether his reason is valid or not -



Delrita feels like a jinx, a weirdo, a person who doesn't deserve friends at all. All her life, Delrita has held friends at arm's length. The Shacklefords are some of the first people she's ever allowed herself to be vulnerable with. Delrita is sure that both friends have abandoned her because she let them get too close: she was asking for it. She thinks about the tree she once saw growing in the rock and thinks, for the first time, that maybe she isn't the tree. Maybe she's the rock, cracked and crumbling. It is no surprise, then, that Delrita confronts Tree at the Anniversary Party. She's positive that Tree stood her up to take Cindi to the dance, and then laughed with his friends as they called to make up a lie about babysitting. Her emotions are somewhat irrational, but to Delrita, it's the only possible explanation. Even when Aunt Queenie tells her the truth, that Mrs. Shackleford had her baby last night, Delrita doesn't want to believe it. She doesn't want to lose her sense of control, and she certainly doesn't want to feel vulnerable again.



Chapters 23 - 25: Heartache, Home, Flying

Chapters 23 - 25: Heartache, Home, Flying Summary

In the final section of the novel, Delrita retreats fully into her invisible shell, refusing to accept Tree's apology in the hallway and refusing to bond with the other girls in gym class over softball. She feels totally alone, and as if she completely deserves the isolation. Around Thanksgiving, Delrita is shocked to receive the news that Punky has had another heart attack. Along with Uncle Bert and Aunt Queenie, she races to the hospital to be at his bedside. Punky begs to be taken back to his own home - and for the first time, he means Bert and Queenie's home - but the doctors say it's impossible; his heart is too weak. A few days later, the doctor tells Delrita and her family that Punky is being moved out of the intensive care unit - not because he's getting better, but because there's nothing left the doctors can do for him - so Aunt Queenie makes the executive decision to finally take Punky home: "It may be two days. It may be two weeks," the doctor says. "But Punky's going to die. Are you prepared to deal with that?" (p. 214).

The family takes Punky home. Delrita looks around. It breaks her heart to see all the changes Aunt Queenie has made to ensure Punky is as comfortable as possible before he passes. Boss and many of Punky's friends from the workshop come to say goodbye before he dies. And then one night, after Delrita says goodbye, Punky slips peacefully and quietly away. Immediately, Delrita asks her aunt and uncle to ensure the funeral is private. She doesn't want anyone from the town coming to make fun of Punky in his casket. Reluctantly, Bert and Queenie agree. On the day of the funeral, the service is quiet, family only, but when they move to the cemetery to bury Punky's body, Delrita is overwhelmed to see a parade of townsfolk arriving to say goodbye. Delrita spots Tree and Avanelle in the crowd, and overwhelmed with emotion, rushed toward them, arms wide open, like wings, for a hug.

Chapters 23 - 25: Heartache, Home, Flying Analysis

In this section, Delrita realizes for the first time that she has found a new home with Uncle Bert and Aunt Queenie. When Punky is in the hospital, he asks to be taken back to his home, and he doesn't mean the home he had with Delrita's parents; he means the home with Bert and Queenie. When Queenie packs up his things to bring them back to his room, Delrita notices the calm sense of belonging she feels in Queenie's living room, and the reader knows Delrita has found a place to call her own, even after Punky dies.

Throughout the novel, Delrita has constantly second-guessed her friend's motivations, which prevented her from fully trusting them and, therefore, from ever fully being free. It isn't until Punky's death, when Delrita is faced with a parade of people who loved him,



that she realizes her mistake: "Punky had used his time wisely. While I had been learning to carve beautiful things with my hands, he had been carving a niche for himself with his heart" (p. 223). Delrita finds Avanelle in the crowd and races toward her in search of her friendship, her niche.

The run toward Avanelle is symbolic in another way: Delrita has finally found her wings. At the end of the novel, the truth for both girls comes out and Avanelle and Delrita are left exposed. Rather than running away, the girls embrace each other, arms flung wide as wings, with the knowledge that now they can truly fly.



Characters

Delrita Jensen

Delrita Jensen is the novel's main character and narrator. Delrita is thirteen years old but lives her life as a much older adult. She takes full responsibility for protecting her handicapped uncle, Punky, at a great social loss for herself. Delrita is quite pretty, but she takes great lengths to hide what she describes as her "skinny chicken legs," even though no one would ever see them. As a way of protecting herself and protecting her Uncle Punky, Delrita has created an invisible shell around herself, protecting her from all outside emotion, whether positive or negative. She has lived in that shell for many years, refusing to let acquaintances get close enough to call them friends. As a result, Delrita is untrusting, miserable, and terribly lonely. Another form of protection Delrita has invented is her very harsh, snap judgments of people. Delrita is certain that people are judging her - calling her names behind her back - and she feels that if she judges them first, she has a sense of power over them. Unfortunately, Delrita's snap decisions are often wrong and she is left feeling more isolated than ever. Delrita's one comfort in life is her whittling, and she can often be found hiding in Aunt Queenie's bathroom, whittling a block of wood until late in the night. Whittling is one of Delrita's only expressions, and she is able to process her torrent of emotions by carving her knife into wood. The last project Delrita works on is a carved swan with his wings spread wide. This is symbolic of Delrita's own quest to find her wings and take flight.

Punky Holloway

Punky Holloway is Delrita's uncle. Punky was born with Down's syndrome, a disorder that has left him handicapped and unable to live on his own. Punky is described as having a moon-shaped face, almond-shaped eyes, doughy white skin, and a thick tongue that seems to be too big for his body. His appearance is very similar to most other people diagnosed with Down's syndrome, yet it often elicits mockery and taunts from strangers. Because Punky is mentally retarded, he doesn't understand when people are laughing at him, and he sometimes joins in, which drives Delrita crazy, and she has made it her personal mission to protect Punky from the many bullies in the outside world. Even though he is in his thirties, Punky still acts very much like a child. He wears a cowboy hat, sings into an imaginary microphone, rolls broken crayons on his table, throws chicken bones behind the television set, and loves watching advertisement commercials. He's so different that Punky's legal guardians, Sheila and Sam, have raised him solely at home, never sending him to school and never sending him to the sheltered workshop where many other handicapped adults spend time. When Sheila and Sam unexpectedly pass away, Punky is sent to live with his brother Bert and his wife, Queenie. Bert and Queenie opt to send Punky to the sheltered workshop despite family pleas. There, Punky discovers that he loves work. He makes friends - even a girlfriend - joins the Special Olympics, and has a sense of pride and self-worth.



At the end of the novel, Punky suffers a heart attack and dies, leaving Delrita to mourn his death and learn what she can from Punky's life lessons.

Uncle Bert

Uncle Bert becomes Delrita and Punky's legal guardian when Mom and Dad die in the horrific car accident. Uncle Bert is a stout man who wears a toupee. It's clear that he loves Punky and wants the best for him but is overwhelmed by the responsibility of raising him. Uncle Bert is an excellent stand-in father for Delrita, and it's clear that she'll thrive in his household.

Queen Esther (Aunt Queenie)

Aunt Queenie becomes Delrita and Punky's legal guardian - along with her husband Bert - when Mom and Dad die in the car accident. Aunt Queenie is described as a stuck-up control freak who needs everything to go her way. Conflict in the family arises when Queenie states that Punky should be sent to the sheltered workshop, which everyone else in the family disagrees with. As the novel progresses, however, it becomes clear that Aunt Queenie knows what she's talking about and that she only has Punky's best interests at heart.

Avanelle Shackelford

Avanelle Shackelford is Delrita's first and best friend. Avanelle moves to Tangle Nook when her father is sent to prison for a crime he didn't commit. She and her family live in a tiny house next to McDonald's, where they survive on government assistance, a position that earns them a lot of mockery. Avanelle reaches out to Delrita when it becomes clear that neither of the girls have any friends. Avanelle is short and skinny with wild red hair that frizzes into crazy curls around her face.

Trezane Shackelford (Tree)

Trezane Shackelford (Tree) is Avanelle's older brother and Delrita's love interest. Like Avanelle, Tree moves to Tangle Nook when their father is sent to prison for a crime he didn't commit. His family lives in a tiny house next to McDonald's, where they survive on government assistance, a position that earns them a lot of mockery. Unlike Avanelle, Tree is straightforward with his friends about his family's past, which earns him a bit of respect, and admiration from shy teenagers like Delrita who would never dream of being so upfront.



Whittlin' Walt

Whittlin' Walt is the master carver who works at Silver Dollar City, Missouri. As a master carver, he is also Delritia's idol, and she always looks forward to visiting his studio to see what he's been working on. Whittlin' Walt has the unfortunate job of informing Delritia that her parents have died, and when he delivers the news, he slips Delritia a block of wood with the message, "Life is like an untouched block of wood. We can carve out a beautiful niche for ourselves, or we can leave it unused and unproductive on a shelf" (p.117).

Susie

Susie is Punky's girlfriend, whom he meets while working at the sheltered workshop. Susie has a bright disposition in spite of her many disabilities and is always seen with big ribbons tied in her hair.

Barney

Barney is Punky's best friend, whom he meets while working at the sheltered workshop. Like Punky, Barney was born with Down's syndrome, so the two share a very special bond. When Barney meets Delritia for the first time, he proclaims that he wants to marry her.



Objects/Places

Tangle Nook

Tangle Nook is the small town in Missouri where this novel is set. The town itself is not given a lot of physical description, but Delrita's impression of the people is quite clear: she believes they are all closed minded, xenophobic jerks who will make fun of her handicapped uncle as soon as they have the chance. As the novel progresses, however, Delrita learns that there is actually a strong community of Tangle Nook residents who love and nurture the handicapped.

Mulberry Lane

Mulberry Lane is the street where Delrita lives with her parents - and Punky - while they are still alive. This is also the street where Georgina and Marcus Gregory live.

Down's Syndrome

Down's Syndrome is the condition Punky was born with. Down's syndrome occurs when a baby is born with an extra chromosome that affects his appearance and his mental abilities. Most people with Down's syndrome have a moon shaped face, almond shaped eyes, doughy, white skin, and a thick tongue that appears too large for the mouth.

The Special Olympics

The Special Olympics is an athletic event where handicapped people - both mentally and physically - compete against each other for awards and titles. Unlike the "regular" Olympics, the Special Olympics puts extreme emphasis on participation and community, with a team of "huggers" running around making sure all the athletes feel supported and loved.

Silver Dollar City

Silver Dollar City is an amusement park a few hours' drive away from Tangle Nook. Every year, Delrita looks forward to her visit to the park because it is where she can see the work of Whittlin' Walt, the best woodcarver in the world. It is after dropping Delrita and Punky off at the park that Delrita's parents get into their fatal car accident.



The Lunchbox

The Lunchbox is Punky's most prized possession and is where he stores all his treasures, like his broken crayons, his miniature American flag, and all the clowns Delrita whittled for him. Punky never leaves the house without his lunchbox and often swaps one of his treasures - like a pair of red socks, for example - for something he finds in a store. This often gets him into a lot of trouble because he doesn't pay for what he takes.

Countryside Church

Countryside Church is the church Delrita's family and the Shackelfords attend. Delrita loves the church because everyone there accepts Punky and she doesn't have to worry about protecting him, but she is often embarrassed when Punky shouts "Bang!" at the end of a prayer, or when he sings the hymns too loudly.

Spirit Week

Spirit Week is a week at school where all the students dress up in different costumes each week in support of the football team. Because Delrita is "invisible," she doesn't participate in any school events.

The Arkansas Stone

The Arkansas Stone is what Whittlin' Walt uses to sharpen his carving knife. The stone is actually two stones - one white and one gray - pressed together in a rectangular shape. Walt fills the crevice between the stones with oil and uses that groove to sharpen his knife.

The God's Eye

The God's Eye is a souvenir Delrita made for her parents when she was in second grade, winding colored yarn around popsicle sticks. Now that her parents are dead, Delrita hangs the God's Eye above her own bed as a reminder that God is always watching over her.

Herkimer

Herkimer is the swan Delrita whittles from the block of wood Walt gave to her when her parents died. Herkimer is the first swan Delrita carves without breaking its neck, and it becomes a symbol for Delrita's own freedom.



Themes

Friendship

The most obvious theme in the novel is that of friendship. When Delrita first arrives in Tangle Nook, her parents encourage her to make some new friends, but Delrita is hiding a secret: she's embarrassed of her handicapped Uncle Punky and fears that if friends find out she lives with him, they will make fun of her. As a result, Delrita is completely isolate in her life, dedicating all her time to protecting Punky. She is clearly miserable and lonely, but she justifies these emotions as self-punishment for the guilt she feels over her embarrassment: "My mixed up emotions [ate] me alive. How could I love Punky and be ashamed of him at the same time?" (pp. 60-61). Delrita lives in an invisible shell, and until Avanelle Shackelford comes along, no one has tried to penetrate it. Avanelle has a secret of her own, and knows what it feels like to be lonely: "All families have secrets," Avanelle said. "I guess some of us just have worse secrets than others" (pp. 73-74). The girls become fast friends and share everything except their secrets with each other. Both girls become more confident and more open as a result of their new relationship, but dark shadows always linger: their friendship won't be truly real until they trust each other to reveal their shameful secrets. At the end of the novel, the truth comes out, one way or another, and both Avanelle and Delrita are left exposed. Rather than running away, the girls embrace each other, arms flung wide as wings, with the knowledge that now they can truly fly.

Creating A Niche

When Delrita's parents are alive, she feels as if she has a perfect place in the world. Although she is lonely and miserable, Delrita feels that she and her Uncle Punky are exactly where they belong. When her parents die, however, Delrita realizes just how untrue that was. She and Punky were living a sheltered existence, one that doesn't exist any more. Wittlin' Walt gives Delrita a bit of advise after her parents die: "Life is like an untouched block of wood. We can carve out a beautiful niche for ourselves, or we can leave it unused and unproductive on a shelf" (p. 117). Delrita doesn't fully understand what that means, and she pushes his words aside. Meanwhile, Delrita continues to whittle her swan, the novel's symbol for freedom. She carves carefully with tiny tools, creating the perfect replica of a bird in flight - the complete opposite of how Delrita herself feels, caged by her emotions. Avanelle's friendship gives Delrita the first feelings of true freedom, of creating a niche for herself, but she struggles to keep hold of it. Delrita constantly second guesses her friend's motivations, which prevents her from fully trusting her and, therefore, fully being free. It isn't until Punky's death, when Delrita is faced with a parade of people who loved him, that she realizes her mistake: "Punky had used his time wisely. While I had been learning to carve beautiful things with my hands, he had been carving a niche for himself with his heart" (p. 223). Delrita finds Avanelle in the crowd and races toward her, arms flung wide as wings, realizing the value of friendship and how it will truly set her free.



Underestimation

Throughout most of Punky's life, people have underestimated what he could do, including his own family. There are few people who believed Punky could succeed in an independent life, and those who did, like Aunt Queenie, are villainized in the novel for trying to send Punky away to the town's sheltered workshop, where handicapped adults work and find a sense of community. After Delrita's parents die and Aunt Queenie finally gets her wish to send Punky away, Delrita realizes just how many people she underestimated. First, she sees Punky flourishing at the workshop and realizes that she had been holding him back all these years. Second, she realizes that she underestimated Aunt Queenie's devotion to Punky and that she had his best interests in mind all along. Delrita's underestimation is not unique. As the workshop boss says, "Most of our employees have been kept in a valley by their disabilities. We teach them to use whatever capabilities they have to climb up to the mountaintop. They're freed by what they can do, instead of being restricted by what they can't" (pp. 157-158). When she begins looking around, Delrita realizes that she underestimated most people in her life, including the Shackelfords (who she thought were nothing but a dirty, welfare family), and even the bratty neighborhood kid, Marcus (who she thought was only getting close to Punky so he could mock him). The starkest realization, however, is that Delrita realizes she's also been underestimating herself. She is capable of a lot more success, love, and tenderness than she ever gave herself credit for.



Style

Point of View

The novel is told in first-person limited omniscience narration through Delrita's perspective, which means that Delrita speaks using "me" and "I" and that the only character whose thoughts the reader has access to is Delrita. The reader is held very close to Delrita's emotions and thoughts, as these are the most important factors to understanding the novel as a whole. Because the reader is held so close to Delrita, the point-of-view is completely reliable. As Delrita is struggling to deal with the pain and shame in her life, she has no reason to manipulate the circumstances for her own personal gain. The story is told mostly through exposition, with scenes of dialogue. Delrita spend most of their time alone, especially before befriending Avanelle, so hearing her thoughts and emotions is extremely important for the reader to understand what is happening in the novel. Without insight into Delrita's thoughts, the reader would likely be confused as to the motivations of her character, particularly when dealing with her conflicted emotions - shame and love - about Punky. However, this point of view is interesting because Delrita is such a stubborn, determined character. When reader is exposed to conversations and characters, they may interpret situations differently than Delrita. As a result, the reader knows more about Delrita than she knows about herself. For example, the reader figures out that Aunt Queenie is not a bad person and that the workshop would be a lovely place for Punky long before Delrita does.

Setting

The Man Who Loved Clowns is set in the tiny town of Tangle Nook, Missouri. The town itself is not given a lot of physical description, but Delrita's impression of the people is quite clear: she believes they are all closed minded, xenophobic jerks who will make fun of her handicapped uncle as soon as they have the chance. As a result, Delrita has closed herself off socially, refusing to make friends at school or in the neighborhood. When Delrita arrives in Tangle Nook, she believes that Punky is the only handicapped person in town - likely because all the other handicapped people have been shipped away, she thinks - but as the novel progresses, Delrita learns that there is actually a strong community of Tangle Nook residents who love and nurture the handicapped.

For most of their lives, Delrita and Punky live with Delrita's parents, Sheila and Sam, in an average, middle-class home. The reader learns this through the comparisons Delrita makes about other homes she visits: Aunt Queenie is considered upper-class because she lives in a fancy neighborhood, had fanatically cleaned carpets, and a well-maintained garden in her living room. Avanelle, on the other hand, lives behind the McDonalds in a tiny, ramshackle house full of children all living on welfare. The other main settings for Delrita's story are her school, where she considers herself to be "invisible," and the sheltered workshop, where Punky goes to work at the end of the novel.



Language and Meaning

As the novel is written for young readers, the language tends to be very conversational and easy to understand. The sentences are constructed in a way that is not only easy to follow but also so they gain momentum as the reader reads on. The sentences are constructed to entice the reader to turn the next page, with many chapters ending in a cliffhanger, and often this structure works. Adult readers should be able to finish the entire novel in one or two sittings. Occasionally, there are passages utilizing medical words and phrases - particularly when discussing Punky's disability, but as they are filtered through the narration of a thirteen-year-old-girl, most readers should not be hindered by the language. Most readers should be able to deduce what these vocabulary words mean contextually, and this language, in fact, adds a depth to the novel that allows the reader a glimpse into a world of life with a handicapped person, which was clearly Wood's intent. Because the reader is held so close to Delrita's personal thoughts, there is rarely, if ever, a moment of confusion. Even when Delrita is considering complex philosophic ideas, including her own thoughts on popularity and death, the reader is never confused. Because much of Delrita's story takes place in the busy place of her high school hallways, many different characters occupy the same space simultaneously, with many of them moving in large packs. Through Delrita's narration, individuals are created within the masses - although most are arguably two-dimensional. Because of Punky's handicap, most of his dialogue is written in vernacular, which sometimes affects grammar, spelling, and syntax. If readers are confused by what he - or the other handicapped characters - are saying, they should be encouraged to read his passages out loud, as hearing the words being spoken might clarify their meaning.

Structure

The Man Who Loved Clowns is comprised of twenty-five short chapters averaging seven pages in length. At fourteen pages, chapter sixteen is the longest chapter in the novel, and at four pages, chapter twenty-four is the shortest. Each chapter has a name that refers to some action or event within the novel that foreshadows what the reader is about to read. The chapters tend to be short and full of action, which propels the reader through the novel.

The plot of the novel is fairly simple, without many subplots. At the opening of the novel, Delrita struggles with loneliness and guilt as a result of her overprotective relationship with her handicapped uncle, Punky. After Delrita's parents die in a horrible car accident and she and Punky are sent to live with her uncle and aunt, Delrita fights harder than ever to protect Punky from the world's evils. As the novel progresses, however, Delrita realizes that by holding Punky back, she is also holding herself back, and that she must first let go if she ever wants to fly. Even though the majority of the conflict takes place in Delrita's mind, the pace of the novel is quick as Woods uses secondary characters such as the Shackelford family to incorporate action into the story. The novel is quite easy to read and the plot is relatively enjoyable despite the lack of character depth. Generally

speaking, the story line is linear with no flashbacks or long sections of backstory to contend with. The novel is quite easy to read and entertaining in its entirety.



Quotes

"Now, instead of having Punky watch after me, I was watching after him, trying to protect him from outsiders in a world that was growing up and leaving him behind."

Chap. 2, p. 14

"I scolded myself as I worked on the swan. Why shouldn't Punky have a friend? After all, he wasn't invisible."

Chap. 5, p. 45

"My mixed up emotions [ate] me alive. How could I love Punky and be ashamed of him at the same time?"

Chap. 7, pp. 60-61

"All families have secrets. I guess some of us just have worse secrets than others."

Chap. 8, pp. 73-74

"The average person sees only what's in front of him. The artist sees things that aren't there."

Chap. 10, p. 92

"I thought my heart would break as I gathered him in my arms and wept. Punky was all I had left of home, and I clung fiercely to him, for fear that he, too, might die and leave me all alone."

Chap. 11, p. 98

"Life is like an untouched block of wood. We can carve out a beautiful niche for ourselves, or we can leave it unused and unproductive on a shelf."

Chap. 13, p. 117

"You've grown up in Punky's shadow. We want you to stop hiding behind him and lead a normal life. We want him to have something every person needs - the feeling of self-worth."

Chap. 16, p. 147

"Most of our employees have been kept in a valley by their disabilities. We teach them to use whatever capabilities they have to climb up to the mountaintop. They're freed by what they can do, instead of being restricted by what they can't."

Chap. 17, pp.157-158

"Home. The word turned over and over in my mind. Punky and I no longer had Mom and Dad, but at last we had a home."

Chap. 24, p. 216

"Punky had used his time wisely. While I had been learning to carve beautiful things with my hands, he had been carving a niche for himself with his heart."

Chap. 25, p. 223



Topics for Discussion

How is whittling a symbol for Delrita's life? What does she realize about herself and her family through the process of whittling? What does the Whittlin' Walt's quote, "Life is like an untouched block of wood. We can carve out a beautiful niche for ourselves, or we can leave it unused and unproductive on a shelf" (p. 117), mean to the message of the novel? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe Delrita's relationship with her Aunt Queenie. Why does Delrita struggle to trust her aunt? Do you understand Delrita's hesitation? Why or why not? What does Delrita learn about herself and her relationship with Punky through her experiences with Aunt Queenie? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Compare and contrast the characters of Delrita and Avanelle. What is the same about these two teenage girls? What is different? Why is Delrita so hesitant to befriend Avanelle? How does Delrita's friendship with Avanelle change her life forever? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Compare and contrast Delrita's loss when her parents die with her loss when Punky dies. What is the same about these losses? What is different? Which loss do you think will have the greatest impact on Delrita as she matures? How can you tell? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Why is Delrita so attracted to Tree? What does Tree symbolize in Delrita's life? Do you think Tree is a good romantic match for Delrita? Why or why not? Do you think their relationship will blossom as the story continues off the page? How can you tell? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Does it change your impression of the novel, or the characters, to know that June Rae Wood based the novel on her own life experiences? Do the author's note and biography at the end of the novel give you a deeper understanding of the novel or give the novel deeper meaning? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

How might Punky's life be different had he been born in today's society rather than forty years ago? Do you think the public's reaction to Punky's handicap is believable today? Why or why not? In what ways is our society accepting or judgmental of people with handicaps? What does this book teach you about the way society should behave? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.