

One Crazy Summer Study Guide

One Crazy Summer by Rita Williams-Garcia

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Plot Summary

NOTE: Due to the structure of this novel, the summary and analysis sections have been divided by page sections. This study guide specifically refers to the 2010 Amistad/HarperCollins Publisher paperback.

“One Crazy Summer” is a children’s novel of historical fiction by Rita Williams-Garcia. Set during the summer of 1968 in Oakland, California, “One Crazy Summer” follows the lives of the Gaither sisters, Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern, as they visit with their mother who abandoned them some seven years before. When the novel begins, 11-year-old Delphine, 9-year-old Vonetta, and 7-year-old Fern have been sent to Oakland from their home in Brooklyn, New York, by their father, Pa, and their grandmother, Big Ma, to reestablish contact with Cecile, the girls’ mother. Big Ma is not crazy about the idea, because she never got along with Cecile, and because she knows Cecile is a greedy, selfish person. The girls are more interested in being able to visit California and seeing the sights, rather than getting to meet their mother. None of the girls have anything positive to say about their mother, because their mother abandoned them. Delphine harbors the most resentment, for she is old enough to have some memories of the time when their mother was still around, which makes her abandonment all the worse.

In Oakland, Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern are less than happy to meet their mother. She is a Black Panther, spends most of her time in the kitchen working on poems and printing up flyers, and repeatedly says she never asked to have the girls visit her, and should have gone to Mexico to get rid of them when she had the chance. This is harrowing to the girls, but they decide to remain upbeat, wanting to make the most out of their trip. Each day, they are ordered to go to the local People’s Shelter by Cecile, where they meet other Black Panthers, some of whom are incredibly cruel and militant, like Crazy Kelvin. Kelvin criticizes Fern for carrying around a white baby doll. Others, like the teacher Sister Mukumbu, are kind and welcoming, and help the girls to learn about the Black Panther movement. Sister Mukumbu also teaches daily classes for kids at the Center about things like rights and revolution, and has the kids engaged in projects designed to solicit change, such as coloring in protest posters.

Delphine and her sisters continue to have a hard time with their mother, who only ever wants to order Chinese food. Delphine begins cooking for her younger sisters and her mother, instead. Cecile tells Delphine it would do her well to be selfish and not care for others. Delphine is beyond angry at this remark, for it conjures up images of abandonment once more. After a day of taking in San Francisco, Delphine and her sisters return home to find that their mother, and two Black Panthers, have been arrested. Cecile’s print studio in the kitchen has been trashed, and the girls clean it up. They decide to perform one of Cecile’s poems at a coming rally, with the aim of seeing to free Huey Newton and renaming a park after Bobby Hutton. On the day of the rally, the girls perform the poem to great applause. Fern also has her revenge on Kelvin, outing him as being friendly with the police –something she had seen without telling anyone before. Cecile is released from prison in time to attend the rally and see how well her daughters have done. She explains to her daughters that she has more or less

been on her own since she was 11, when her own mother was killed in a car accident. Cecile tells Delphine to enjoy being a child while she can. The next day, at the airport, as the girls all leave for New York, they hug their mother before they go.

Pages 1-48

Summary

Cassius Clay Clouds – It is 1968. 11-year-old Delphine, along with her younger sisters Vonetta and Fern, are headed to Oakland, California, from Brooklyn, New York, to see their mother, Cecile, for the first time in years. Fern carries a doll with her named Miss Patty Cake. The flight is bumpy, as if the clouds are Cassius Clay throwing punches. Delphine reflects on how her father, Pa, calls Cassius Clay “Mohammad Ali”, while Pa’s mother, Big Ma, still calls him “Cassius Clay”. Delphine alternates between the two. The girls are excited to be traveling to California, and consider it a vacation. Cecile had left Pa and her three girls when Delphine was almost five, Vonetta couldn’t walk, and Fern was a newborn. Big Ma, though deeply Christian, cannot forgive Cecile for leaving while Pa was sick. Big Ma, a native of Alabama, moved up to be with her family when Cecile left. Out of habit, Delphine looks around to see who else at JFK Airport is black – but there are mostly white people around. Big Ma looks down on two college-age black girls with afros, but looks favorably upon a young black woman dressed like Jackie Kennedy. Big Ma asks the woman to watch over the three girls, but all the woman does is smile. Big Ma is not happy to see the girls going off to visit Cecile. Pa gives Delphine \$200 for the trip, which Delphine keeps in an envelope in her shoe. As they leave, Delphine reflects on how only her uncle Darnell doesn’t hate Cecile. Darnell is a soldier in Vietnam.

Golden Gate Bridge – Delphine is often mistaken for being as old as 13 or more because of her long legs. As the plane comes over the Golden Gate Bridge, Delphine is angry that she hadn’t taken a window seat, having chosen instead to sit between Vonetta and Fern to keep them calm and from fighting with each other, creating a Negro spectacle that Big Ma is worried will reflect badly on the black race. All three sisters struggle to get a look at the bridge, but only Delphine gets caught by the stewardess, who tells Delphine to sit down. There is whispering and head shaking around them, and Delphine knows she has disgraced her race. The plane then lands in Oakland.

Secret Agent Mother – Delphine’s sisters wonder what to call their mother. Delphine instructs them to call their mother “Cecile”. To Delphine, the fact that Cecile Johnson is their mother is simply a biological, animal-like fact. Cecile means nothing more to Delphine beyond that. A young, redheaded stewardess is given the task of watching over Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern until Cecile shows up. A large white woman compliments Delphine and her sisters on being so well-behaved, and goes to give them money, but Delphine says that they aren’t allowed to take money from strangers. The stewardess disapproves of Delphine’s behavior, asking her if she doesn’t know when someone is being nice to her. Delphine pretends to have no idea what the stewardess is talking about. The woman nevertheless gives Fern three nickels. Vonetta takes hers, but Delphine does not take one. It is then that a woman dressed all in black – even with sunglasses and a scarf – is seen. The stewardess makes sure the woman is indeed Cecile Johnson, and then leaves the three girls to her. Cecile tells her children to move



along quickly, and doesn't offer to help any of them with their luggage. Everyone watches Cecile. Delphine likens her to a secret agent. They then go to a cab driven by a man in a black beret. Cecile and the man smoke cigarettes. The man drops Cecile and the girls off at a bus stop. Cecile rudely rushes them along, as if she is embarrassed of them. Delphine worries how the next four weeks will go.

Green Stucco House – Cecile brings Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern to a green stucco house, which Cecile explains is hers. It is very neat and clean inside. Delphine notices how Cecile wears pens and pencils in her hair. Cecile mutters that she didn't send for the girls, didn't want them in the first place, and that she should have gone to Mexico to get rid of them when she'd had the chance. This hurts the girls. Delphine now imagines that her mother ran away because her mother is crazy. The girls settle into their bedroom. The girls wonder about Mexico, and Delphine explains that rich people buy babies in Mexico.

Mean Lady Ming – Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern ask Cecile about dinner. Cecile asks if Pa has sent them with money, telling the girls she doesn't want them in the kitchen. Delphine and the girls insist this money is for Disneyland. This causes Cecile to laugh. She orders them to hand over the money or they won't eat. Delphine hands over the money. Cecile then gives Delphine \$10 for Chinese food and Pepsi from Ming's. Delphine says that they are not allowed to have soda, which causes Cecile to laugh. They ask Cecile for use of her phone, but Cecile says she does not have a phone, but that there is a phone down the street by Ming's. The three girls then head down to Ming's, a little worried about being on their own in a new place. Lots of kids are out playing. A boy on a wooden T-board comes rumbling by, clipping Delphine. He calls out that he is sorry as he continues on. At Ming's, Delphine hopes to use the pay phone before ordering, but it is occupied by a light-skinned guy with a big afro. He looks like a criminal to Delphine. She and her sisters go inside to order food. The Chinese woman working tells them she will not give them free egg rolls. Delphine shows her the money to explain that they are paying customers. The Chinese woman explains she gave out some free egg rolls to some hungry people once, and now everyone wants free egg rolls. While waiting for their food, Delphine thinks about how much she hates Oakland and cannot wait to get back home to New York.

Collect Call – Outside Ming's, Delphine calls her father, Louis Gaither. Big Ma picks up, and is stunned the girls are calling from a pay phone. Delphine lets her know they have arrived safe and sound. Back at Cecile's, the girls eat dinner, while Cecile eats sloppily with chopsticks and without manners. After dinner, Cecile rushes her daughters into the bedroom as three people with afros show up.

For the People – Delphine realizes that their mother is either a secret agent, or a criminal. She and her sisters do their best to listen in and watch from their door, cracked open. They talk about the time being now, about doing everything for the people, but Cecile keeps responding with words like "no" and "my art" and "my printing press". They call Cecile "Sister Inzilla". Delphine is sure the three visitors are Black Panthers. Some people believe they are there to help black communities; others believe they are dangerous because they carry around rifles. Cecile says her services aren't free, but the

Black Panthers counter that no one, from Eldridge Cleaver to Muhammad Ali to Huey Newton, is free. They insist that everyone must contribute to the cause. Delphine and her sisters, who know that Cecile writes poetry, imagine that the Black Panthers want her to write for them. Vonetta considers that maybe Cecile is counterfeiting money, but Delphine does not think so.

Analysis

“One Crazy Summer” is a children’s novel of historical fiction by Rita Williams-Garcia, which recounts the adventures of the Gaither sisters in 1968-Oakland, California. The girls are traveling to Oakland in order to see their mother, whom they have not seen in seven years. None of the girls are thrilled about it, because their mother abandoned them as infants. The theme of family is clear from the very start of the novel. Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern are very close with one another, though they argue and fight as sisters sometimes do – as evidenced by the struggle to see the Golden Gate Bridge through an airplane window – and they are very close with their father and grandmother, both of whom worry incessantly about the girls. Big Ma is especially worried about how the Oakland experience will be for the girls, because their mother, Cecile, is so selfish and crazy. While family is at its best among the Gaithers, family is at its worst when it comes to Cecile. Cecile, stunningly, openly tells her daughters that she did not ask for them to come, did not want to see them, and even horrifyingly to the reader, tells the girls she should have gotten rid of them in Mexico when she had a chance. This can only mean that Cecile would have either had an abortion, sold her children, or had them thrown into an orphanage. The girls themselves believe they would have been sold.

If this isn’t chilling enough, the reader also comes to see how racism, and racial attitudes, rule the day. Delphine, for example, looks around her at JFK International to see if she can find any other non-white people, who will not judge her. Big Ma asks a black woman to watch over her granddaughters, hoping the black woman will look out for black children, because she is worried that white people cannot be counted on to do so. While flying over San Francisco, the girls struggle to get a glimpse of the Golden Gate Bridge, causing a “Negro spectacle” and having all of the white people on the plane look unfavorably upon them. The girls know that they are to be on their best behavior around white people, otherwise it will reflect badly upon the black race as a whole, just as the black race is struggling for equality. Rather than merely being three misbehaving girls, the attitude received is that they are typical blacks, causing a spectacle.

The beginning of the novel also gives the reader a glimpse of the counterculture, which will itself become an important theme in the novel. In the first few chapters, it can easily be seen by readers how people of all races are either unsure of, or opposed to, the counterculture. At the airport, Big Ma distrusts two young countercultural black women with afros, and looks favorably upon a black woman dressed in a similar fashion to Jackie Kennedy. At the airport in California, Cecile is dressed like a Black Panther, which garners stares and disapproving looks from nearly everyone in the airport. Delphine herself is unsure about the Black Panthers, for she has heard they are

dedicated to improving the lives of blacks, but then carry around rifles and behave militantly, which to Delphine appears unsafe.

Discussion Question 1

Why are Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern traveling to Oakland, California? How do the girls feel about the trip? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Big Ma so apprehensive about the girls traveling to Oakland? Do you agree or disagree with her concerns? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Big Ma says that Cecile is crazy and selfish. Based on the evidence so far, does this appear to Delphine and her sisters to be true? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

exaggerated, immigrants, warbled, gawk, uppity, glommed, expressions, poverty, fugitive

Pages 49-94

Summary

Glass of Water – Delphine, looking at her Timex watch, realizes they are up an hour and five minutes past their bedtime. It is 9:35. Delphine bathes her younger sisters and gets them to bed. She reads to them from “Peter Pan”, and then reads to herself from “Island of the Blue Dolphins” before falling asleep. She is awakened by Fern going to the kitchen, but is too late to stop her from running into Cecile. Cecile will not let Fern get a drink of water. Delphine adopts the voice she uses for white people, pressing for a glass of water on Fern’s behalf. Cecile relents, saying she didn’t ask for them to be there. She goes into the kitchen, the door opening just enough for Delphine to see something like white wings hanging down from the ceiling. Cecile gives Fern a glass of water, and forces her to drink the entire thing. Delphine then understands that everything Big Ma said about Cecile – about her being the greediest, meanest person alive – is true. Cecile will not even address Fern by her real name, only calling her “Little Girl”.

Inseparable – In the morning, Cecile sends the girls down to get food from the People’s Center by the park. She tells the girls they can stick around and play if they want. They will know the center by seeing the Black Panthers. Delphine worries about being around militant strangers. As they go, Cecile hands Delphine a box to give to any Panther they see – a contribution to the cause – and to tell them to stop coming around asking for her materials. Cecile then mocks Fern for carrying around a doll, calling her too old for it, even though Fern and Miss Patty Cake are inseparable. She tells the girls not to come back until sundown. All three girls decide they want to go home. They will need to save up enough dimes to make a call for Pa to come and get them.

Breakfast Program – The people in line for food at the People’s Center are not all black, though there are many Black Panthers around standing guard like soldiers. Delphine finds this unnecessary with a police car patrolling up the street. Inside, Delphine hands Cecile’s box to the first Panther she sees, explaining it is from Cecile. The man pulls out a flier from the box, one with some writing and a crouching black panther. He thanks Delphine, and Delphine and her sisters move along. Delphine looks around. There are people of Mexican descent, Asian descent, and even a little white boy. The Black Panthers are preparing breakfast. One Black Panther confronts Fern. He is wearing a black t-shirt with a dead white pig on it. He wants to know why a little black girl is carrying around a little white doll, calling it “self-hatred”. An older teenage girl in a Cal State shirt tells the man, Kelvin, to leave Fern alone. Other Black Panthers tells Kelvin to back off, too, but Kelvin continues, driving home the point that Fern is black, and the doll is white. Eventually, Kelvin gives up and leaves, and the teenage girl apologizes, saying everyone calls Kelvin “Crazy Kelvin”. The other kids, except for a kid who is half-black, half-Asian, make fun of Fern, calling her a “White Baby Lover” and “Big Baby”. Delphine tells them all to shut up. Some of the Panthers speak among each other, saying that the girls belong to Sister Inzilla, alright.

Even the Earth is a Revolutionary – Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern stay around for the summer program at the People’s Center. Sister Mukumbu gets them situated. Sister Pat, the teenage girl in the Cal State shirt, helps. Delphine feels strange calling everyone “Sister” and “Brother” instead of “Mr.” and “Mrs.”. Nevertheless, she takes an instant liking to Sister Mukumbu, who wears an African print dress. The classroom at the Center contains two long tables, and photos on the wall of Malcom X and Huey Newton, rather than people like George Washington or Martin Luther King, Jr., which disappoints Delphine. She realizes the place must be something like a Black Panther training center. Sister Mukumbu begins with a demonstration about how the earth spins on its axis in which she asks Hirohito Woods, half-black and half-Asian, to assist. That is when Delphine realizes that Sister Mukumbu is actually a real teacher. She then uses the example of constant motion to relate to things changing, to relate to revolving, and to revolution. Huey Newton and Che Guevara are given as examples of revolutionaries. Vonetta raises her hand, saying that she has not come for the revolution, but to meet her mother. This causes Sister Mukumbu to chuckle.

Crazy Mother Mountain – At six, Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern return to Cecile’s. She has more Chinese food waiting for them. Delphine asks Cecile why everyone calls her “Inzilla”. Cecile explains it is “Nzila” and means “the path” in the Yoruba language. Her poetry blows the dust off surfaces, she explains, so that clear and true paths can be found. She goes on to say that she is now a new-self, and has the right to give herself her own name. The girls all want to know how anyone will know her poetry if she keeps changing her name, or if she would like to be famous for her poetry, but Cecile cuts them off, saying they are asking questions like the FBI or COINTELPRO. Cecile says the Feds hire midgets as kids to infiltrate families and report on black people. Cecile says that families report on families all the time in Red China. Delphine tells her they do not live in Red China. Cecile tells her that’s what she thinks.

Everyone Knows the King of the Sea – Delphine dislikes Cecile’s name-changing, and contends that a name is something meant to last. Delphine had always loved her name before learning that it wasn’t something Cecile had made up for her, but already existed. This is the one thing she has held onto from her mother, hoping it is something her mother had created and given her, but in the end, this is not the case. It further humiliates her when kids at school begin to make fun of her by singing the theme song for the show “Flipper” because “Delphine” sounds like “dolphin”.

Coloring and La-La – The next morning, Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern (along with Miss Patty Cake) dutifully return to the People’s Center. There, a local store brings bread and orange juice to the Center – all of the workers being young white guys. Delphine is surprised to see the white guys hang around for a little while and chat with the Black Panthers. It makes Delphine reconsider things, but then she hears someone say that the bread and orange juice are the least thing that the racist dogs can do. It spoils the moment for Delphine.

In class, Delphine sees different posters with phrases like “Free Huey” on them. Delphine reflects on how Big Ma always refers to Huey Newton as the biggest troublemaker of all. The kids are tasked with coloring in the posters. While this occurs,



one of the Ankton girls asks why Fern carries around her doll so much. Vonetta replies that Fern simply likes the doll. The Ankton girl continues to make fun of Fern, so Delphine gets involved, but before things get out of hand, Sister Mumbuku intervenes, makes the girl – Eunice – shake hands with Delphine, and has the girls return to their seats. Later, Delphine and Fern pick up Chinese food for dinner, but Vonetta stays behind. Delphine and Fern later learn why. Vonetta has used a black magic marker to color in Miss Patty Cake. Fern screams and goes after Vonetta. Cecile arrives to break up the fight, but rather than punish Vonetta and comfort Fern, she tells Fern she is too old for dolls.

Analysis

With Cecile refusing to take on the responsibilities of motherhood, everything from bath-time to bedtime to dinnertime falls on Delphine's shoulders. Here, the theme of family can be seen clearly again, as Delphine must make up for her mother's selfishness and disinterestedness. As the oldest sister, it is Delphine's responsibility to care for the younger sisters. Her younger sisters are appreciative of Delphine's efforts. Indeed, Cecile is so adamantly opposed to her daughters spending time with her that she orders them to go to the People's Center for breakfast, and refuses to let them come home until it is time for dinner. All that while, it is up to Delphine to behave as an adult, to watch out for her sisters, to make sure they are fed, and to make sure they are safe. These are very heavy burdens for such a young girl to carry.

It is here that the theme of counterculture can again be seen in various ways. Cecile's rejection of her role as mother is in keeping with the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, where women wanted to move beyond the traditional roles for women – being a wife, homemaker, and a mother. Cecile has, symbolically, blocked off her kitchen to her daughters, a place traditionally considered the woman's sphere of influence in the house. Instead of cooking and doing things associated with motherhood in the kitchen, Cecile has turned the place into a workshop. There, she follows a vocation of printing, writing, and art, that has nothing to do with being a mother or a homemaker. Cecile's refusal to be a mother, however, does not make her childless. Her irresponsibility as a countercultural figure ultimately falls on the shoulders of the most vulnerable in society – the children. Delphine must make up for her mother's failures. However, Cecile believes she has done nothing wrong by beginning a new life in which she is not a mother, but her own person – and she has even given herself a new name to symbolize that new beginning, a true act of countercultural behavior, and irresponsibility. Cecile can do as she wants, and can reinvent herself – but her children must pay the price for it. Cecile is so far gone that she will not even call Fern by her name, but only refers to her as "Little Girl".

The theme of counterculture also gives way to racism. Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern travel to the People's Center to have breakfast and attend the summer classes. The Black Panthers are supposedly devoted to equality for the black race by elevating them, but this doesn't stop Crazy Kelvin from bringing whites, as well as blacks, down. Kelvin cruelly and maliciously insults Fern for owning a white baby doll, calling it "self-hatred".



Fern, an innocent child, is racially-colorblind. She doesn't care what color the doll is, but is merely happy to have the doll at all. Many of the other students also make fun of Fern for the doll, but Delphine tells them all to shut up. Delphine, too, is racially-colorblind about such things, and is not concerned about the color of the doll. To Delphine, Kelvin's behavior is unconscionable and unsanctionable for someone who declares he is all about equality, but wears a shirt with dead white pigs on it, and criticizes a little girl for the doll she carries. Equally as disheartening is the reaction among many of the Black Panthers to the donations given to the Center by white people. The Black Panthers call these good-hearted people "racist dogs", which deeply offends Delphine.

Discussion Question 1

Why do Delphine and her sisters go to the People's Center? How do they react to the place and its people? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Cecile continues to refuse to be a mother for her daughters in this section of the novel. Why? Do you agree or disagree with her reasoning? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Kelvin so angry at little Fern for carrying a white baby doll? Is his reaction justified? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

volunteer, rustling, indignant, revolution, militant, envious, begrudgingly

Pages 95-139

Summary

Counting and Skimming – Delphine does her best to clean off Miss Patty Cake, but the plastic has absorbed much of the ink – and is now a bland gray color. The next day, Delphine and her sisters attend class at the People’s Center once more. They eat grapes and learn about how the migrant workers who pick grapes are fighting for their rights. Delphine and Fern are tasked with counting Black Panther newspapers. There, Delphine sees Huey Newton’s picture on the paper, for he is currently in jail – which Big Ma approves of. Sister Mukumbu offers Delphine a copy of the paper for twenty cents – a worker’s discount. Delphine agrees, but then realizes she has no money to call Pa, and will have to start saving again.

Big Red S – All night, Fern’s tummy aches from too much Chinese food. Delphine asks for \$10 for food the following morning before going to the People’s Center, which Cecile gives up without question. Cecile goes to Safeway to buy food for a home-cooked meal – and has plenty of money left over to call Pa. Cecile is enraged that Delphine wants to cook food in the kitchen, going on again about how she never wanted the girls to come out in the first place. Delphine is careful to avoid Cecile’s printing press and other art supplies in the kitchen. Though the cooking is not as good as Big Ma’s, Fern, Vonetta, and Cecile all eat. Cecile reprimands Delphine for living for others, rather than for herself.

China Who – Sister Mukumbu and Sister Pat oversee a t-shirt printing operation. Delphine and Eunice Ankton realize their middle sisters, Vonetta and Janice, are boy-crazy for Hirohito. Delphine also finds Hirohito to be cute. She realizes that Hirohito is the boy who almost hit her the other day while on his T-board, which causes her to insult Hirohito rather than compliment him, calling him China Boy. Eunice says that “Hirohito” is Japanese, not Chinese. She also tells Delphine that if she knew about Hirohito and Brother Woods, she would leave them alone.

Expert Colored Counting – On the behalf of Vonetta and Fern, Delphine presses Cecile for a television, which Cecile does not have. Delphine and her sisters love looking for other black people on television, and count them all. They even enjoy watching the news. None of these reasons sway Cecile. Cecile grudgingly gets them a second-hand radio.

Civic Pride – Sister Mukumbu teaches the kids at the Center what their rights as citizens are, and how to protect those rights against the police. Crazy Kelvin uses the words “racist pig” instead. As Sister Mukumbu tries to get Kelvin to calm down, he tells all the kids the police broke into Hirohito’s father’s house to arrest his father, Brother Woods, because his family had dared to speak the truth to the people. This saddens Delphine. It makes her think of her own father’s treatment by state police officers in the South, and how they called him cruel names instead of “sir”.



Rally for Bobby – Delphine and the others learn about Bobby Hutton, who as a 17-year-old Black Panther, has been the youngest person to die for the cause. During a shootout with police, Hutton, stripped down to his underwear, had gone outside to show he was not armed, and had been shot to death anyways. This makes Delphine worried about being at the Center with so many Black Panthers around. Many of them are in their late teens, and people often mistake Delphine for being older. She doesn't want to be shot by the police. She worries even more when Sister Mukumbu announces everyone will be attending a rally to free Huey and rename a park after Hutton. The students at the Center have been asked to do a special presentation, and it is up to them what the presentation consists of, but should incorporate their talents. Vonetta and Fern both are cute, love to sing, and love being the center of attention, but Delphine isn't one for the spotlight. Nevertheless, Vonetta and Fern demand she sing and dance with them. They insist on singing something from Brenda and the Tabulations. Later, Delphine confesses her worries about the rally to Mukumbu, who says that they must all stand together, united. Delphine knows she has to find a way to keep her sisters out of the rally, and says they will not be attending the Center anymore.

Eating Crow – The next morning, Delphine refuses to take her sisters to the Center, and explains why to Cecile. Cecile orders them to the center, but Delphine insists they will not attend the rally when it comes in two weeks. Cecile tells Delphine to watch her mouth, and how she speaks to her. Delphine says “Yes ma’am”, which annoys Cecile, telling Delphine she sounds like Pa’s mother, an old country “mammy”. At the Center, Delphine feels lousy, having to take back what she said the day before, and eat crow. Eunice wants to know why she and her sisters are back, but won't attend the rally. Delphine explains she has to watch out for her sisters, like Eunice does – and this strikes up the beginning of a friendship between the two.

Analysis

As the novel continues, the theme of family can be seen strongly once more through the character of Delphine. With Fern's tummy reacting badly to eating so much Chinese food, Delphine takes it upon herself to tend to her sisters, and to provide them with home-cooked meals. Delphine, in this fashion, assumes much more than a sisterly role, but a motherly role in that she shops, cooks, and cleans – all things that should rightly be done by Cecile. Cecile, however, continues to shirk her responsibilities as a mother. Just because she doesn't want to be a mother, doesn't mean she isn't a mother. Cecile then ironically challenges Delphine, telling her to live for herself rather than for others. While this may be possible for Cecile as an adult, for Delphine, in that time and in that place, it is not possible. Her sisters are not old enough to take care of themselves. She has a familial responsibility to them that she has assumed because her real mother has refused to do what she should. Here, the theme of childhood begins to emerge, as, once again, the irresponsibility of the counterculture is felt most strongly by the children.

The counterculture itself continues to perplex Delphine, and be opposed by others. Delphine finds some of the countercultural revolution to be enlightening, such as when she learns about her rights as a citizen. But the militant nature of the Black Panthers, as



well as the violence that breaks out between them and the police, leading to the deaths of numerous individuals, worries Delphine. Looking out for her sisters, she tries to keep them away from the Center, and from the coming rally, but is unsuccessful in doing so. Still, she worries that she and her sisters may end up dead like Bobby Hutton.

Racism can also be glimpsed here in the way that the police treat the black community, arresting Hirohito's father without an apparent reason, and in shooting Hutton to death, who stripped down to his underwear, was unarmed. Big Ma, however, believes the Black Panthers are bringing the law down on them unnecessarily. Big Ma believes in equality, but equality brought about peacefully. To her, countercultural figures like Huey Newton are nothing more than troublemakers, and belong in jail. Here, the dual theme of Brooklyn vs. Oakland can be glimpsed, as the Eastern and Western reactions to the counterculture can be understood. In the East, there aren't many Black Panthers, and those that are in the East are much more peaceful than the ones in the West. Nevertheless, Delphine decides to learn more about the Black Panthers, in order to also learn more about her mother in the process.

Discussion Question 1

Why do the Black Panthers want to free Huey Newton from jail? Why does Big Ma believe Huey Newton belongs in jail? Who do you believe is right? Why?

Discussion Question 2

In this section of the novel, Delphine begins to make a transition from a sister to a mother figure. How does this happen? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why it is condescending and ironic that Cecile should challenge Delphine to live for herself, rather than for others?

Vocabulary

blanched, suckered, flummoxed, civics, spoilsport

Pages 140-175

Summary

Itsy Bitsy Spider – Vonetta has decided to recite a poem at the rally. It is Gwendolyn Brooks's poem "We Real Cool". Cecile tells Vonetta the poem is horrible, and to stop practicing it. To add another insult, Delphine tells Vonetta she is just like Cecile, caring more about her image and getting people to like her than caring about her family.

Movable Type – Delphine discovers a second-hand stool by the stove one day, which allows her to sit while cooking. It is a welcome and unexpected gift from Cecile. Cecile even allows Delphine into the kitchen more and more often, as long as Delphine keeps quiet and minds her place. Delphine reflects on how Big Ma allows Delphine to speak up whenever needed at home. Cecile then, surprisingly, shows Delphine how to work the printing press, cranking out copies of Cecile's latest poem about movable type –with the double-meaning of printing press type being movable, and Cecile herself being the movable, free type. Despite this, Delphine realizes that Cecile must be happy devoting herself to the machine and the house even though she is not moving around much. The wet sheets of paper are hung to dry, and resemble wings. Delphine attempts to use the printing press for the first time, but without success, and with a condescending insult from Cecile about wasting paper.

San Francisco Treat – The third Saturday in Oakland, Delphine announces to her sisters that they are going on an excursion to San Francisco by bus, to see the Golden Gate Bridge, Fisherman's Wharf, and Chinatown. Cecile forks over some cash and change, which Delphine puts in her shoulder bag. Delphine brings her sister to the bus, and are distracted by Hirohito, who insists the girls watch him race down a hill. They watch him race down once, and then head to the bus.

Wish We Had a Camera – Delphine and her sisters see plenty of white hippies in San Francisco. They happily greet Delphine and her sisters. Her sisters say "Power to the People" and "Free Huey". A beautiful flower girl with daisies in her hair gives daisies to Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern, and tells them that peace is power. Delphine and her sisters then head for Grant Street, for the streetcars, and head to Chinatown. There, they eat food, buy fortune cookies, and look at all the beautiful things for sale in shops, such as jade statues and jewelry. They come across a family of very pale blonde people, who take pictures of them. They then go to Fisherman's Wharf, and then go to see the Golden Gate Bridge. It is beautiful to them, even though they deal with a white store owner who questions them on what they're doing in his store. Back in Oakland, the girls are happy to return, though they have loved their adventure. It is then that they see Cecile, and two Black Panthers, being led away in handcuffs from the green stucco house by policemen.

The Clark Sisters – As Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern approach, the police ask Cecile if they are her children. Cecile denies it, saying they are the Clark sisters from down the



road. Delphine gives her name as Clark, and the girls are allowed to move along. Delphine wonders why Cecile has been arrested, and if she has received her rights in the process. Delphine comes to realize that Sister Mukumbu and Crazy Kelvin are right—that the police will arrest someone for any reason at all. After the police leave, Delphine and her sisters return to the green stucco house. Delphine sees that the police have not broken into the house, but that Cecile's printing press and kitchen are wrecked. Delphine can only imagine what must have happened, with Cecile probably flipping out over the police looking through her things. Delphine decides she and her sisters will clean the kitchen for Cecile.

I Birthed a Nation – In the morning, Delphine and her sisters commence with cleaning the kitchen. While cleaning, Vonetta discovers a poem of Nzila's called "I Birthed a Nation", which she decides to recite at the rally. Hirohito and his mom, who is Japanese, visit, bringing food for Delphine and her sisters. Hirohito's mom, Mrs. Woods, says they must all stick together.

Analysis

For the first time on their trip to California, Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern are able to go sightseeing, and are able to truly experience something of a vacation—as children. Delphine, though she still behaves as an older sister by keeping an eye on her younger sisters while they are in San Francisco, does not have the usual burdens of motherhood she has lately assumed. While the girls encounter a little racism in San Francisco as they run around, ride trolleys, see the Golden Gate Bridge, eat in Chinatown, and see the Fisherman's Wharf, they are able to have a full day behaving as nothing more than themselves. They have no real concerns about revolution, adults, their mother, or the world as it is, and merely take in the beauty of things as children. Their return to Oakland, however, thrusts them back into adulthood once more.

Interestingly enough, the trip to San Francisco also brings about a divide in the counterculture itself. There, Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern experience hippies, most of them white and with long hair. While Delphine and her sisters mimic the militant nature of the Black Panthers in speaking to the white hippies, a beautiful hippie girl tells the girls that peace is power. It is disarming experience for the girls, and helps to transition them back into children for the day in San Francisco. Here, the reader should understand that the Black Panthers, feminists, and the hippies are part of the overall counterculture, but do not have the same methods for bringing about change. Nonetheless, they do share in common an abdication of responsibilities to some degree or another. The hippies want to drop out of society altogether and live peacefully, just to exist—and turn their back on things like having jobs and having a stable place to call home. The Black Panthers are prepared for militant change and seek equality, but turn their backs on peaceful solutions and engage in racism. Feminists, like Cecile, decide to live for themselves and no others—and in so doing, force the mantle of adulthood on their children. The poem "Movable Type" should be noted, here. While poetic and descriptive of Cecile, who is able to transition from one point in life to another, and to be



truly free and movable through her writing, which frees her from the confines of the world, she also places her burden on others, as will soon be borne out.

It is the return to Oakland, however, that plunges Delphine and her sisters back into adulthood. There, they are forced to contend with the aftermath of their mother's arrest, and begin to see how important certain things Sister Mukumbu and the other Black Panthers have taught them, are –such as knowing one's rights. In an incredibly symbolic scene, one that should not be missed by the reader, Delphine and her sisters clean up the kitchen for their mother, but it is more than merely an act of kindness or an act of familial love. Here, the three girls are symbolically, and literally, cleaning up their mother's mess. Her mother has decided to live a certain way –and the ramifications of that are now felt by her children in a way that has not been felt before. In the past, few weeks, Delphine has had to pick up for her mother's slack. Now, the mess her mother has left behind has become Delphine's to actually handle, and put back together. Having barred Delphine and her sisters from the kitchen, Delphine and her sisters have no choice but to enter the kitchen –to look out for someone else, even though they are lectured not to do so. Fortunately, Delphine comes to find she is not alone. Mrs. Woods comes into the picture, saying they must all stick together. As such, Delphine is about to have an unusual experience through Mrs. Woods.

Discussion Question 1

What is the trip to San Francisco like for Delphine and her sisters? What does it allow them to do, and to be? Why?

Discussion Question 2

In San Francisco, Delphine and her sisters have an encounter with hippies, who seek change through peace rather than militancy. How do the sisters react to the hippies? Why?

Discussion Question 3

What is symbolic about Delphine and her sisters cleaning up the kitchen? Why?

Vocabulary

groove, perfectionist, sulked, recitation, excursion, uncomprehending, majestic

Pages 179-215

Summary

Stores of the No Sayers – Delphine brings what few flyers Cecile had printed up before being arrested to Sister Mukumbu. Delphine reflects on how, if Cecile had been arrested early on in the visit, Delphine would have gladly called Pa and Big Ma to come home. Now, she does not want to leave without knowing who her mother really is. Until Cecile is released, Delphine and her sisters will be staying with Hirohito and Mrs. Woods. Sister Mukumbu explains that the police were actually originally only after the two Black Panthers arrested with Cecile, and that Cecile helps to spread the word through printing services. The kids from the center are then sent out to nearby stores and businesses, and are to ask the owners to display posters and flyers about the upcoming rally and the Center. They go into all sorts of stores, owned by whites, blacks, Asians, and Mexicans. Some owners say yes, others say no – including the Safeway manager. Delphine decides she will boycott all stores that say no.

Glorious Hill – Delphine is surprised that Mrs. Woods will not make her do any chores or help out around the house in any way, and will not let her. Hirohito asks Delphine if she wants to try out his go-kart. Delphine isn't so sure, but Hirohito insists. Delphine is thrilled with the ride, screaming happily the whole way, and Hirohito, Vonetta, and Fern come behind, applauding her for her run.

The Third Thing – Over a thousand people attend the rally. The police are also present. Delphine is no longer scared, but excited. Delphine and her sisters perform their mother's poem, "I Birthed a Black Nation". Fern then recites her own poem, unbeknown to Delphine or Vonetta. It is about Crazy Kelvin saying he hates the police, but then getting along with the police being patted on the back by them – something she has overseen. In other words, he has been outed as an informant. The crowd cheers and applauds Fern, who has gotten her revenge on Kelvin for his crudeness toward her earlier in the visit. The police have to escort Kelvin away, for the crowd turns on him. In that moment, a poet in Fern is born.

So – Delphine and her sisters then see Cecile at the rally. She is not mad that her daughters have changed the name and wording of her poem to include the word "black" in it. She compliments Vonetta's delivery of the poem, and is impressed with Fern's poem. Everyone loves it. Cecile decides to head home early. Delphine thanks Sister Mukumbu for everything. Vonetta and Fern run off with Janice and Beatrice Ankton, while Eunice talks to Delphine and Hirohito. She is amazed that Hirohito allowed a girl on his go-kart. She says that Hirohito must like Delphine, and Hirohito doesn't deny it, which makes Delphine quite happy.

Be Eleven – Cecile downplays her arrest as nothing important. She wants to know why Delphine didn't call her father after the arrest. She said she was counting on Cecile to call Pa after the arrest, and that as the oldest kid, Delphine should be the smartest, and



be able to figure things out. Angrily, Delphine responds that she is only 11, and wouldn't just up and leave. Calmly, Cecile explains that her mother was killed by a car when Cecile was 11. She lived with her aunt until the age of 16, when she was kicked out because her aunt got married. She spent her days reading in libraries, and her nights sleeping on benches, or wherever she could find a place. She was taken in by Pa and his brother in exchange for cooking and cleaning. Ultimately, she came to have three kids, and after Fern was born on the kitchen floor, Delphine stroked Cecile's head and cleaned the baby with a dishtowel. It was Cecile who gave Miss Patty Cake to Fern, and had originally named Fern "Afua" before leaving. Delphine asks if Cecile left because she couldn't name Fern "Afua", but Cecile explains that there is more to it than just a name, and that Delphine will have to be older to have it explained to her. For now, Cecile says, Delphine should just be 11 and enjoy childhood.

Afua – In the morning, Cecile calls all the girls together to get ready to go home. She calls Fern by her name, "Fern", and it thrills Fern. Delphine tells Fern her real name is Afua. Fern does not accept this, but Delphine tells her to get used to it. At the airport, a nice white man asks to take a photo of the girls to finish out his role of film, but Cecile puts a stop to it. She says her kids are not monkeys on display. Though Delphine feels bad for the nice man, she realizes Cecile has done a motherly thing. Before the girls leave on their plane, they all hug Cecile, beginning with Fern.

Analysis

Delphine, reluctant before to even be present at the rally, now decides to fully participate in not only helping to spread the word about the rally, but in actually performing at the rally. As such, Delphine and her sisters become a full-fledged part of the counterculture, though they want no part in cruelty or violence. They have learned, from both the hippies and from their grandmother, that change can be brought about peacefully. As such, they decide to recite one of their mother's poems. The poem itself is full of beautiful words, and words can change people's hearts and minds – and change the world in the process by motivating people to be better, and to do better things. The performance is overseen by Cecile herself, who has been released from prison just in time for the rally. In the end, Fern comes to have her revenge on Kelvin, by outing him as a police informant, and a traitor to the movement. There is also great irony here that should not be missed by the reader. Kelvin, famous for wearing a shirt with dead white pigs on it to symbolize his hatred of the police, must in turn be whisked away to stay safe by the police – the very people he endangers.

The theme of childhood fully comes to the fore by the end of the novel. While at Mrs. Woods's house, Delphine is stunned to discover that, not only will Mrs. Woods does not expect her to do any chores, she will not let Delphine do any chores, either. She insists that Delphine go and play. While driving Hirohito's go-kart down the street, Delphine screams, yells, and lets herself go, enjoying her childhood, and finally being a kid for once. Delphine comes to learn that Cecile's own childhood was taken away when her mother died. Even her teenage years were stolen from her, as she was homeless until finding a place with Louis and Darnell. While it is unclear whether or not Cecile wanted



to become a mother in the first place, at some point, her desire to live for herself and not for others as a mother became overwhelming, with Fern's real name being the breaking point. Cecile, rather than seeking greater freedom or more say in her life, simply throws everything out the window – including her children, and her responsibility – and flees New York for California, the farthest away she can get without leaving the continental United States. Poignantly, Cecile tells Delphine to enjoy her childhood – something she herself was once denied.

The theme of family also comes to a close with the end of the novel. While Delphine cannot excuse her mother's irresponsibility, she does come to have a better understanding of her mother, why she is the way she is, and who she has come to be. When traveling out to California at the beginning of the novel, Delphine considered the idea that Cecile was her mother to be a mere biological fact, but now, Delphine truly comes to see her mother as more than merely biological. Indeed, Cecile's first real motherly act is to stop someone from taking a picture of her children. While Delphine feels badly for the photographer, she is grateful for the actual display of motherhood from Cecile. The fact that Delphine finally comes to accept her mother as a mother comes through the hugging begun at the end of the novel by Fern. Here, the physical act of hugging is also an emotional act of reuniting, and forming a bond that will not be broken again.

Discussion Question 1

What is Delphine's time spent with the Woods family like? How does it affect her? Why?

Discussion Question 2

What does Delphine come to learn about her mother, and her mother's past? Does this change at all how Delphine views her mother? If so, how? Why? If not, why not?

Discussion Question 3

What lessons has Delphine learned from the hippies and the Black Panthers, as well as her mother, that she puts into her performance at the rally?

Vocabulary

doggedly, spectacle, ashen, reverberations, atone, consoled

Characters

Delphine Gaither

Delphine Gaither is the main character and narrator of the novel “One Crazy Summer” by Rita Williams-Garcia. At 11 years old, Delphine is the oldest of three sisters. She is unerringly responsible, cares deeply for, and takes care of her younger sisters, Vonetta and Fern, and deeply loves and respects her father, Louis Gaither, and her grandmother, Big Ma Gaither. A resident of Brooklyn, New York, Delphine and her sisters travel to Oakland, California, to reestablish contact with their mother, Cecile, who abandoned them seven years before to go and live her own life for herself. Delphine bears a grudge against her mother for this, for Delphine is old enough to remember some of her mother being around, and feels betrayed as well as abandoned.

In Oakland, Delphine is neither surprised nor let down by her mother’s selfishness and cruelty. She assumes the role of a mother through the novel, doing everything from making sure her sisters are bathed and bedded properly, to shopping and cooking for them. Cecile criticizes Delphine for living for others, but Delphine knows she does not have a choice in the matter. Cecile’s irresponsibility means that no one else besides Delphine is around to take care of Vonetta and Fern.

While in Oakland as well, Delphine comes to learn about the counterculture through both the militancy of the Black Panther movement, and the power through peace of the hippie movement. She also comes to experience feminism through her mother’s refusal to be a mother. Delphine is not quite sure what to make of the counterculture as a whole, though she does learn important things from the counterculture, such as the need for change, the use of peaceful means to achieve change, and how important responsibility is.

By the end of the novel, Delphine comes to understand why her mother is the way she is, though she cannot fully accept her mother’s lack of responsibility. Delphine is told by Cecile to enjoy being a child while she still can, because growing up is not far away. Having originally viewed her mother as nothing more than a biological fact, Delphine comes around to connect emotionally to Cecile, even going so far as to hug her at the end of the novel.

Cecile Johnson

Cecile Johnson is the mother of Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern. A peripheral member of the Black Panther movement who grudgingly donates her time, supplies, and services as a poet, artist, and printer, Cecile is immensely selfish and self-interested. Cecile has adopted the name “Nzila”, which means “the path” in the Yoruba language. Her poetry blows the dust off surfaces so that clear and true paths can be found, she tells her daughters. She has lived in Oakland, California, for the past seven years, having



abandoned her children in New York to live for herself. She is cold, callous, and often cruel to Delphine and her sisters when the visit, going so far as to say that she never asked for them to visit, and should have gotten rid of them in Mexico when she had the chance to do so. Cecile has also become a feminist in the process, and though she is a mother, she refused to act, behave, or actually be a mother to the girls, forcing them to fend for themselves and to rely on Delphine. Cecile and Delphine come to a mutual understanding that is christened with a hug before Delphine's departure. Delphine, though she never accepts Cecile's selfishness, comes to understand why Cecile is the way she is by the end of the novel.

When Cecile was 11 years old, her mother was struck by a car and killed. Cecile then lived with her aunt, sleeping on a floor for five years until her aunt got married. Concerned about Cecile's sex appeal to her new husband, Cecile was ordered out by her aunt. Cecile then became homeless, sleeping and eating anywhere she could, and spending her days reading poetry at the library. Ultimately, Cecile was taken in by Louis Gaither and his brother, Darnell, in exchange for her home-making. Whether or not Cecile ever wanted to become a mother is unclear, but it can be assumed that she did to some extent, for she had three children, and refused to get rid of them in Mexico when the chance was available to do so. Cecile, who had lived her life according to the whims of others – from the car driver to her aunt to what was expected of her by Louis and his brother – ultimately is overwhelmed with a lack of free will. Rather than try to press her case, when she is not allowed to give Fern the name “Afua”, Cecile opts to simply drop out and abandon her family by moving to California, the farthest away from New York she can get in the continental United States. As such, Cecile tells Delphine to enjoy childhood while she can.

Vonetta Gaither

Vonetta Gaither is the 9-year-old younger sister of Delphine, and the older sister of Fern. Vonetta is a sweet girl who enjoys the spotlight. Like her sisters, Vonetta does not look forward to visiting her mother, and complains about the lack of a television at Cecile's house. Vonetta becomes the most impressionable to Black Panther ideology, going so far as to cruelly color in Miss Patty Cake with a black marker, and devastatingly upsetting Fern in the process. Vonetta, like Delphine, sees how irresponsible their mother is, and finds it difficult to come to accept Cecile. Vonetta is stunned when Cecile compliments her for practicing a poem for recital at the rally, and later, like Delphine and Fern, hugs Cecile before departure, coming to accept her as a mother.

Fern Gaither

Fern Gatiher is the 7-year-old younger sister of Delphine and Vonetta. Fern is adorable, sweet, and patient, and was only a newborn baby when her mother left. Fern, like her sisters, does not look forward to the visit with Cecile. Indeed, Cecile criticizes Fern for constantly carrying around a baby doll named Miss Patty Cake, and only refers to Fern



as “Little Girl”. At the People’s Center, Fern is made fun of by the other kids because Miss Patty Cake is a white doll, and is insulted and raged against by Crazy Kelvin for having a white baby doll. Fern, however, is young enough to be racially colorblind. She does not care that Miss Patty Cake is white, and is just happy to have a doll. When Vonetta colors Miss Patty Cake in with a black magic marker, Vonetta is shocked and enraged. She decides to put away Miss Patty Cake, believing then that she is too old for a doll. Fern ultimately has her revenge against Kelvin, by outing him as a police informant at a Black Panther rally, having seen Kelvin being friendly with the police. At the end of the novel, it is learned that Fern’s intended name was “Afua”, and that Louis’s opposition to the name was the final straw that caused Cecile to abandon the family.

Louis Gaither

Louis Gaither is the father of Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern, and is the son of Big Ma. Louis is a good, kind, and hard-working father who loves his daughters dearly. Louis is also the brother of Darnell, who years before, together came across the homeless 16-year-old Cecile, and invited her to stay with them in exchange for home-making. At some point, Louis and Cecile became intimate, and had three children as a result. While Louis is angry with Cecile’s leaving, and knows she is selfish and irresponsible, he nevertheless believes his daughters need to have contact with their mother. The girls’ trip to visit Cecile is of his making.

Big Ma Gaither

Big Ma Gaither is the grandmother of Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern, and is the mother of Louis. Big Ma is a sweet, kind, lovely woman who is originally from Alabama. She is largely conservative in her views, believing that change in society must be brought about peacefully, the way that Martin Luther King, Jr., wants to do things. She believes that people like Huey Newton and the Black Panthers are nothing more than troublemakers, and belong in jail. Big Ma detests Cecile, calling her crazy and selfish – accusations which are ultimately confirmed. Big Ma lives with Delphine and her family because Cecile abandoned them, and Big Ma moved in to help Louis care for his girls.

Sister Mukumbu

Sister Mukumbu is a teacher who also teaches summer school at the People’s Center. She is immensely kind and intelligent, and wears African-print dresses every day. She is a full-fledged supporter of the Black Panther movement, and often has her summer students – including Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern – doing things to support the cause, such as handing out protest flyers or coloring in protest signs.

Crazy Kelvin

Crazy Kelvin is perhaps the most radical Black Panther at the People's Center. He is incredibly cruel and incredibly militant. He is famous for wearing a black shirt with dead white pigs on it, and for his hatred of the police. He is enraged when he sees Fern carrying around a white baby doll, and maliciously insults her and gets in her face for doing so. However, Kelvin is actually a police informant, and is overseen being friendly with the police by Fern, who outs him at the rally. Kelvin, ironically, must be escorted away safely by the very people he raged against – the police.

Hirohito Woods

Hirohito Woods is a kid who attends classes at, and hangs out at, the People's Center. He becomes friends with Delphine, and ends up with a crush on her. Hirohito is half-black, half-Asian, for his mother is Japanese and his father is black. Hirohito's father has been arrested by the police, with a reason never given, though it is suspected that it is because his father is a Black Panther. Hirohito ultimately gets Delphine to try out his go-kart, and is able to help her enjoy merely being a kid for once.

Darnell Gaither

Darnell Gaither is the mentioned, but never-seen younger brother of Louis Gaither, and uncle to Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern. Darnell is the only member of the family who does not have ill-will or bad thoughts about Cecile, though he is away fighting in the Vietnam War.

Symbols and Symbolism

\$200

Two hundred dollars is given by Louis to Delphine for use while in California. Delphine hopes that the money will be used to enjoy Disneyland, but this never comes to pass as Cecile takes the money away from Delphine, and deals it out, \$10 at a time, for Delphine to buy Chinese food and food from the grocery store.

Miss Patty Cake

Miss Patty Cake is a white baby doll given to Fern as a baby by Cecile. Fern and Miss Patty Cake are inseparable. Fern is racially colorblind, and so does not care that Miss Patty is white. She is just happy to have a doll. Nevertheless, Fern is challenged by Kelvin and the other kids at the Center over Miss Patty Cake being white, and is made fun of by Cecile for being too old to have a doll. Fern is enraged when Vonetta colors in Miss Patty Cake with a black magic marker, ultimately ruining the doll and causing it to be put away. Here, Miss Patty Cake comes to symbolize the innocence of Fern through her white skin, and the loss of innocence by way of the black magic marker. Note that Vonetta does not attempt to use a brown magic marker, but actual black ink – to blacken the soul, and tarnish Fern's innocence. Fern is no longer an innocent child, having been exposed to the cruelty of adults. The actual putting away of Miss Patty Cake also symbolizes the putting away, or loss, of childish innocence.

Printing Press

A printing press is owned and used in the kitchen by Cecile to print up copies of her poems, and to make copies of her artwork. Cecile also uses the printing press to print up flyers for the Black Panthers, which she does reluctantly. The printing press is later wrecked when Cecile is arrested, either by Cecile, the police, or during the arrest itself. The printing press comes to represent Cecile's abandonment of responsibility and motherhood, as well as making choices that ultimately lead to her arrest. As a result, a mess is left behind for Delphine, and her sisters, to be responsible for cleaning up.

Poems

Poems are written by Cecile, and printed up on her printing press. Cecile's poems deal with freedom, independence, and equality. One poem, "Movable Type", deals with not only the freedom of type pieces being moved in a printing press, but with Cecile herself being the type of person that is freely movable through her words and poems, though physically, she never moves. Yet her heart and soul are free when she works on her poetry. Another poem, "I Birthed a Nation", is tweaked by Vonetta into "I Birthed a Black Nation", and is recited by Vonetta and her sisters at the rally.



Dead White Pig T-Shirt

A dead white pig t-shirt is worn by Crazy Kelvin. It represents his racism against whites, and his hatred of the police. It is a physical expression of his cruelty, and serves to great irony due to the fact that Kelvin is secretly a police informant, and relies on the police for safety when he is outed.

Go-Kart

A go-kart is driven and enjoyed by Hirohito, and comes to symbolize the freedom and purity of childhood. Hirohito encourages Delphine to use the go-kart, and for the first time in the novel, she lets her inhibitions go, yelling and screaming and enjoying the ride – truly enjoying life as a child.

Chinese Food

Chinese food is made and sold at Ming's, around the corner and down three blocks from Cecile's house. Chinese food is a regular staple for Cecile, though too much Chinese food eventually causes Fern to have upset stomachs. The Chinese food represents Cecile's unwillingness to cook, and her unwillingness to care for her children as a mother.

Home-Cooked Meal

Home-cooked meals are ultimately made by Delphine for Fern and Vonetta, as well as for Cecile. These meals – from shopping for the food to cooking the food – represent the burden of motherhood that is shrugged off by Cecile, only to fall on Delphine's shoulders.

Black Clothing

Black clothing is worn by Black Panthers and their supporters to symbolize black pride and the Black Panther movement. All of the clothing worn by the Black Panthers – from their boots to their scarves, berets, and sunglasses – are all black.

Protest Flyers

Protest flyers are designed, created, and printed up by Cecile for the Black Panthers rally. These flyers are then taken around by Delphine and the other students from the Center, and are put up around town by supportive businesses, shops, and storefronts. The flyers ultimately attract more than a thousand people to the rally.

Settings

Oakland

Oakland is a major city in California near San Francisco. It is heavily-black, and is where Cecile moves to when she abandons her family in New York. Oakland comes to be a hotbed of countercultural activity, as the Black Panthers rise to prominence and seek to better the black community in Oakland by way of places like the People's Center. Oakland also becomes the scene of much violence between the Black Panthers and the police, and is the showcase for rampant racism between blacks and whites.

San Francisco

San Francisco is a major city in California located near Oakland. It is mostly white, and is where the hippie part of the countercultural movement is centered. San Francisco is a city visited by Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern during the last part of their visit in California. San Francisco is home to Chinatown, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the Fisherman's Wharf, all of which are visited by Delphine and her sisters. Their time in San Francisco is an escape from the harsh world of adults in Oakland, and it is a trip that the sisters very much enjoy.

The People's Center

The People's Center is a local community center in Oakland, California, administered and run by the Black Panthers, and Black Panther supporters. The center gives out free breakfasts, and is a learning and training center for the Black Panther movement. It is overseen by Sister Mukumbu, and runs on donations provided by white people. Delphine and her sisters attend the People's Center daily on the orders of Cecile, originally more interested in breakfast than the Black Panthers, ultimately becoming more interested in the Black Panthers and the counterculture than food in the end.

The Kitchen

The kitchen is located in Cecile's house, and is deeply symbolic in the novel. Cecile, a feminist, will do no cooking or home-making in the kitchen as traditionally done by mothers. Instead, she uses the kitchen for actual work, shirking her responsibilities as a mother. Cecile, with the exception of meals, forbids her daughters from entering the kitchen, attempting to bar them from the traditional way of life by keeping them away from a room most often associated with women and mothers. The kitchen ultimately becomes symbolic of the abrogation of responsibility and the choice Cecile makes, as the printing press and kitchen are ruined when Cecile is arrested. The mess she has left behind by shirking her responsibility is a mess that her daughters must clean up

instead. It is fine and well for Cecile to live as she wants, to refuse to be a mother – but her choices still have consequences for her children.

The Rally

The rally is held near a park in Oakland that the Black Panthers wish to be renamed for Bobby Hutton. The aim of the rally is to press for freedom for Huey Newton, to rename the park, to press forward with the Black Panther movement. It is at the rally that Delphine and her sisters recite one of their mother's poems, and Fern uses a poem to out Kelvin as a police informant. It is also at the rally that Delphine thanks Sister Mukumbu for everything, and Hirohito admits to a crush on Delphine without actually saying so.

Themes and Motifs

Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “One Crazy Summer” by Rita Williams-Garcia. Family, thematically, involves the mutual love, loyalty, compassion, and emotional, physical, and even spiritual support between individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who still act in accord with the traditional family unit. In the novel, family appears as both an incredibly important, positive, and successful thing, and as a failure in other parts.

When it comes to the success of family, this can be most clearly seen through the Gaither family. When it comes to Pa and Big Ma, family is a wonderful, beautiful, and successful thing. Pa is a hard worker, who strives to provide for his family, and to tend to their needs. Pa is protective, comforting, and loving. Big Ma is sweet, old-fashioned, and compassionate. Both Pa and Big Ma look to raise Delphine and her sisters rightly and correctly, demonstrating everything from love for one another to teaching them manners and respect. Pa places tremendous importance on family, insisting that his daughters reestablish contact with their mother. Even though Pa cannot stand Cecile, he understands how important it is for girls to have a mother figure in their lives.

Family also is an important and successful thing when it comes to Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern, themselves. The sisters fight and argue like any normal siblings, but like any normal siblings, they also love one another deeply, and do their best to care for and protect one another. For example, when Fern is made fun of at the Center, it is Delphine who leaps to her defense to protect her. Indeed, it is Delphine who even comes to represent a mother-figure to Vonetta and Fern, as Cecile washes her hands of motherhood, and refuses to act like a mother when the girls come to visit her.

It is through Cecile that that failure of family can be seen. Cecile, a selfish feminist, hates being a mother, and does not even want her daughters to be visiting. She admits to them that she wishes she had gotten rid of them when she had the chance. Cecile’s refusal to be a mother and care for her children means that Delphine must step into the role to feed, bathe, and bed her siblings. Cruelly and hypocritically, Cecile tells Delphine to live for herself instead of for others, without realizing that her own irresponsibility has forced Delphine to care for others. Delphine, however, does not mind taking care of her sisters, for she loves them deeply. She does, however, resent her mother having abandoned them seven years before, and her mother’s lack of care and compassion in the present.

Racism

Racism is an important theme in the novel “One Crazy Summer” by Rita Williams-Garcia. Racism is the hatred, mistreatment, or mental state of another based on that

individual's skin-color and race. Racism, and racial attitudes, appear in many ways in the novel, and all of them are equally as vile as the next.

In the novel, blacks are the recipients of much racism from white people. For example, in a store in San Francisco, Delphine and her sisters are watched suspiciously, for the white store owner believes that they may be stealing something simply because they are black. On the plane ride to California, Delphine and her sisters do their best to be on extra-good behavior, for most of the people traveling with them are white, and they do not wish to make a "grand Negro spectacle", and bring down the whole race, for many whites judge the entire black race based on a few people. Eventually, the three sisters struggle to get a view of the Golden Gate Bridge through the plane window, and create a so-called Negro spectacle, wherein many of the white people shake their heads disapprovingly.

In the novel, whites are also the recipients of racism from blacks. The white people who donate food and supplies to the Center in good faith and of good heart are dismissed as "racist dogs" by the Black Panthers who run the Center. Crazy Kelvin wears a black t-shirt with dead white pigs on it, for he hates white people, and especially hates white policemen. Fern, who is young enough to be racially-colorblind, is insulted by Kelvin for owning a white baby doll, and is called a "white baby lover" by the other kids in the Center.

Racism appears in other ways in the novel as well. Vonetta is the most impressionable of the sisters, and she is so moved by the Black Panther ideology that she colors in Fern's doll with a black magic marker, to make both a point about the doll being white, and because she believes Fern should be playing with a black baby doll. Additionally, Hirohito is the recipient of racist jokes made by blacks because of his Asian ancestry. Though he is Japanese, he is often simply labeled "Asian" or "Chinese" as well, as if all Asiatic peoples were one single race.

Childhood

Childhood is an important theme in the novel "One Crazy Summer" by Rita Williams-Garcia. Childhood, thematically, involves the young age and young experiences of human beings, usually through the teenage years. Childhood is meant to be carefree, worry-free, and full of promise, when children are not bothered by the realities of the world and can dream, play, and imagine as if nothing will ever hold them back. However, this is not always the case, as can be seen in the novel.

While Delphine comes to understand why Cecile is so selfish, she still will not accept it. Cecile, at the age of 11, was thrust into early adulthood when her mother was killed after being struck by a car. Cecile became a home-maker to her aunt and her aunt's children. At the age of 16, Cecile was considered sexually dangerous to have around, as Cecilia's aunt had remarried – and Cecile was kicked out. At a time when Cecile should be enjoying dating, picking out dresses for dances, and making plans for the



weekend, Cecile is sleeping on park benches and scraping by, homeless. Even her teenage years are not what they are traditionally supposed to be.

Ironically, Cecile becomes something of an overgrown child, for she becomes incredibly selfish and irresponsible. True, as Delphine warrants, Cecile had a difficult past, but that does not excuse her from her responsibilities in the present. Cecile does not recognize the irony in shirking her responsibilities, which forces Delphine to assume the mantle of motherhood at the age of 11, and then have Cecile insult her for not living for herself, and living for others. Delphine does not let it bother her too much, however. Only when Cecile is arrested, and Delphine spends time with Mrs. Woods, does she truly experience childhood for the first time in California. Her ride on the go-kart is symbolic of her letting her inhibitions go, and relishing, wholly and entirely, her childhood and her childhood alone.

Only belatedly does Cecile come to explain to Delphine what her past has been, and to recognize the error of her ways, though she makes little effort to truly change anything. Cecile realizes the burdens that have been placed on Delphine's shoulders because of her, and she tells Delphine to relish and enjoy being a child while she can. It is in this instance that Cecile finally does something responsible, and akin to being a mother, by telling her child to enjoy being a child before it is too late to enjoy it anymore.

New York vs. Oakland

New York vs. Oakland is an important dual theme in the novel "One Crazy Summer" by Rita Williams-Garcia. The novel contrasts the worlds of New York and Oakland through the eyes of Delphine, who experiences the differences between both cities, which becomes important to the plot as the novel progresses.

New York – specifically the borough of Brooklyn – is home to Delphine, her sisters, Darrell, Pa, and Big Ma. New York is everything familiar for Delphine, from knowing her way around to knowing where to go to shop and pick up food. While kids play outside in New York, they are not prone to play all over the place as they are in Oakland. Indeed, when it comes to manners, the kids in Oakland have far less than the kids in New York, as Delphine is clipped by a skater early in the novel, and the kid doesn't even stop to see if Delphine is alright. Delphine and her sisters have been taught to have manners – a combination of Southern politesse and Northern formality brought together by Big Ma. For example, Delphine's use of the word "ma'am" is rudely attacked by Cecile for being the ways of an "old country mammy", the insult extending to Big Ma as well as Delphine's use of the word itself.

While there is racism in New York, it is not as apparent or visceral as the racism that is seen in Oakland, where being black can lead to an actual shootout with police. In New York, there are a few Black Panthers around, but nowhere near as many as those in Oakland. In New York, the Black Panthers do not have much of a presence, and seem to float around the edges of the city. In Oakland, the Black Panthers are front and

center, taunting the police, holding rallies and protests, and ingraining themselves in the community in way such as running a People's Center.

In addition to the black Panthers, the counterculture itself is far more visible out West than it is in the East. The East – places like New York – are considered Establishmentarian, and the seats of power. The West –places like Oakland – are full of people determined to challenge the perceived view of power. As such, while there are some Black Panthers in the East, most are concentrated in the West. Additionally, while there are some hippies in the East, the vast majority are concentrated in the West. Everything that is new and “happening” is considered to be in the West, while everything old and traditional, is considered to be in the East. Change is considered to be possible in the West, while the status quo remains unchanged in the East.

Counterculture

Counterculture is an important theme in the novel “One Crazy Summer” by Rita Williams-Garcia. The counterculture is, simply defined, an alternative life and lifestyle than the one that dominates society and culture. The counterculture in the United States in the 1960s, as illustrated by the novel, was made up of multiple movements with multiple ideas and goals, but with all of them being determined to change the prevailing views, norms, laws, institutions, and attitudes of society and culture. Each of the three main movements noted in the novel – the Black Panthers, feminists, and hippies – all press for change in different ways and for different ends. All movements, however, are shown as being undermined in some way or another.

The Black Panthers press for equality for blacks in an age when institutionalized, but unlawful racism and discrimination persist. Blacks are treated with suspicion, contempt, and violence by many white people. The Black Panthers dress mainly in black, seek equality, and to bring up the black community. They are undermined, however, by racism within their own camp toward whites, and by the extreme militancy of some members who are seeking to use violence to achieve their ends. These individuals can best be seen in the character of Crazy Kelvin, whose dead white pig t-shirt is emblematic of the radical elements of the movement.

The hippies push for equality and peace, seeking to end the Vietnam War at a time when most Americans supported the Vietnam War, and when most Americans had experienced the successive American efforts in World War II and Korea, and America was one of the world's two lone superpowers (the other being the Soviet Union) militarily, and the world's premier economy. Mostly white, the hippies wear their hair long and concentrate in San Francisco, drifting around, singing songs, and pushing for change in society, opposing capitalism, and the traditional American way of living. They are undermined, however, by their overall lack of responsible living, as many of them use drugs, dress strangely, and are seen as a drain on society, rather than a way to improve society.

The feminists in the novel push for more rights and equality for women. They eschew traditional roles for women, such as marriage, motherhood, and home-making. They can best be seen in the character of Cecile, who refuses to be a mother even though she is one, refuses to use the kitchen as anything other than a work place for what she wants to do, and will not let anyone else tell her what to do. Feminism, however, is undermined by the shirking of responsibility of people like Cecile, and by their extreme selfishness, wanting to live as if they are the most important people in the world, and no one else compares. Cecile's refusal to care for her children, as well as her cruelty toward them, undermine the feminist ideas of greater equality and female independence, by taking away the freedom and independence of those most dependent on them – their children. Delphine is forced to compensate for her mother's lack of mothering, by becoming a mother-figure herself for her younger siblings.

Styles

Point of View

Rita Williams-Garcia tells her novel “One Crazy Summer” from the first-person, limited omniscient narrative, from the point of view of main character and principal protagonist, Delphine Gaither. This is done for at least three reasons: first, the first-person narrative mode allows the reader to experience things firsthand through the narrator. The narrator’s inmost thoughts and feelings are made apparent to the reader. Second, while much of the countercultural change occurring in the novel is being propagated and experienced by adults, the children are experiencing things, too. Here, a child is able to relate her experiences of 1968 Oakland. She is given a voice, the way the adults around her are also seeking voices in an era of change. Third, because Delphine is the narrator, and is an 11-year-old girl, she doesn’t know everything going on around her, and doesn’t know everything in the world, either. Therefore, the limited-omniscient aspect of Delphine’s youth and inexperience.

Language and Meaning

Rita Williams Garcia tells her novel “One Crazy Summer” in language that is simple and straightforward. This is done for at least two reasons: first, the book is a children’s novel, with the target audience being children. The language must therefore be fitting for the understanding of that audience, and is, accordingly, simple and straightforward. Secondly, the book is narrated in the first-person by an 11-year-old girl, a child, and so the language used must be indicative of her age and her education, as well as her background. The language employed by Delphine itself is peppered with phrases and terms more common in the 1960s than in contemporary America, giving the novel a truly atmospheric feeling. For example, phrases like “black power”, “peace is real power” and “power to the people” are interspersed with terms like “fraidy cat”, “surely do/don’t”, and “eating crow”.

Structure

Rita Williams-Garcia divides her novel “One Crazy Summer” into 33 unnumbered, titled, chronological chapters that cover a 28 day period in the summer of 1968. Each chapter’s title deals with a specific theme or event in that chapter, and each chapter ultimately gives rise to the next chapter. For example, the chapter “San Francisco Treat” deals with Delphine and her sisters preparing to go to tour San Francisco, while the succeeding chapter, “Wish We Had a Camera” deals with the three girls actually visiting San Francisco, and wishing they had a camera to take pictures to remember the experience by.

Quotes

He said seeing Cecile was something whose time had come. That it had to be done.
-- Delphine (Cassius Clay Clouds paragraph 9)

Importance: When the novel begins, Delphine and her sisters are traveling to see their mother for the first time in seven years after their mother abandoned them. It is a trip insisted on by Pa, saying it is time for them to reestablish contact, and because Pa knows that young girls need a mother in their life.

Cecile Johnson – mammal birth giver, alive, an abandoner – is our mother. A statement of fact.
-- Delphine (Secret Agent Mother paragraph 4)

Importance: Delphine was five when Cecile left, so she is old enough to have some memories of her mother, and what a mother is supposed to do. Cecile's leaving is a betrayal, and so Delphine especially detests her mother. The only way Delphine considers Cecile to be a mother is biologically, and in no other way.

I didn't send for you. Didn't want you in the first place. Should have gone to Mexico to get rid of you when I had the chance.
-- Cecile (Green Stucco House paragraph 21)

Importance: Here, the staggering cruelty and selfishness of Cecile becomes shockingly apparent to Delphine and her sisters as their mother actually admits she doesn't even just want them to visit, but that she doesn't want them at all. This is horrifying to the girls, but they do their best to take it in stride. This reveals a tremendous amount of information about Cecile's character as a person, and this utterance is something that Cecile never apologizes for.

A name is important. It isn't something you drop in the litter basket or on the ground. Your name is how people know you.
-- Delphine (Everyone Knows the King of the Sea paragraph 2)

Importance: Delphine dislikes the fact that Cecile has changed her name on a whim. Delphine believes a name is permanent, and an identifier to who a person is, making them unique. To Delphine, Cecile's dropping of her name is akin to her dropping her responsibility of motherhood, which to Delphine is unforgivable.

I was too tired to try to make things between Venotta and Fern wilt away. This wasn't exactly fighting over who gets the gold crayon or the last cookie.
-- Delphine (Counting and Skimming paragraph 4)

Importance: Following Vonetta's coloring in of Miss Patty Cake, she and Fern get into their biggest fight ever. Vonetta has cruelly ruined Miss Patty Cake, symbolizing the loss



of Fern's innocence as a child, and the fight symbolizes Fern's entrance into the rough-and-tumble world of adult cruelty.

A protest was never a love-in.

-- Delphine (Rally for Bobby paragraph 9)

Importance: Delphine worries about the coming rally that she and her sisters are expected to be at due to the violence that continually breaks out between the Black Panthers, and the police. She knows that Bobby Hutton was not much older than she was when he was killed, and realizes that she, as well as her sisters, could end up dead, because protests sometimes got out of hand, and ended in violence.

And that's why you're like Cecile. You want to be a fairy on TV more than you care how your kids will feel and if they miss you.

-- Delphine (The Itsy Bitsy Spider paragraph 34)

Importance: Here, Delphine compares Vonetta to Cecile. Vonetta wants to perform at the rally, and be the star of the everything. Her desires, Delphine explains, are selfish. She would rather be on TV and be famous than worry about her kids, the way that Cecile only does what she wants to do, and doesn't care about her kids.

Don't cry. Stay quiet. Want nothing.

-- Delphine (Movable Print paragraph 3)

Importance: Delphine reflects on one of the few memories she has of her mother as a child. Even then, Cecile was cruel toward Delphine. Her mother refused to allow Delphine to cry, make noise, or ever ask for anything – the same as she expects of all her children in the present. Here, the reader realizes that Cecile probably never truly wanted to become a mother, and probably should never have been one in the first place.

In Oakland they arrested you for being something. Saying something. If you were a freedom fighter, sooner or later you would be arrested.

-- Delphine (The Clark Sisters paragraph 20)

Importance: Delphine comes to realize that there is serious racism in the Western United States, making the East, from North to South, look tame in comparison. In California, violence breaks out between the police and the Black Panthers regularly, and Black Panthers are often arrested merely because they are black, and are Black Panthers.

We really didn't know our mother, and I couldn't leave without knowing who she was.

-- Delphine (Stores of the No Sayers paragraph 2)

Importance: With the arrest of Cecile, Delphine and her sisters have the option to return to New York early, but Delphine refuses to do so. She has come all the way to

California to at least understand her mother, even if she doesn't agree with her mother – and she will remain in order to find out just who her mother is.

I've been fighting for freedom all my life.

-- Cecile (Be Eleven paragraph 2)

Importance: Cecile explains to Delphine that her entire life has been a fight for freedom in one way or another. Cecile, until seven years before, had never been able to call her own shots in life. Whether she is pressing for freedom on behalf of others, or herself, she has been unable to live her own life. While Cecile insists this is all about freedom, to Delphine, it still rings as selfishness, because Cecile's freedom has ruined much of her own by forcing her to become a mother figure to her sisters.

It only took Fern to know we needed a hug from our mother.

-- Delphine (Afua paragraph 31)

Importance: At the end of the novel, Delphine and her sisters are prepared to return to New York. They have been able to reconnect with their mother communicatively, but not emotionally. To do this requires a hug, which Fern begins. This hug becomes symbolic of the forming of an emotional bond between Cecile and her children. They may not accept Cecile's way of life, but they do understand her, and that matters deeply to them.