

Phoenix Rising Study Guide

Phoenix Rising by Cynthia D. Grant

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Overview

Phoenix Rising deals with the effects of seventeen-year-old Helen Castle's death from cancer on the other members of her family: her parents, her twenty-year-old brother Lucas, and— especially—her sixteen-year-old sister Jessie. The story is told partly by Jessie, who has clearly been traumatized by her sister's death, and partly by Helen's journal, portions of which Jessie reads as the novel progresses. Not only do Jessie and the other members of her family eventually begin the healing process, but Helen herself, whose world we see through the journal selections, comes to terms with a life that, in her case especially, seems capricious and unjust.



About the Author

Cynthia D. Grant was born in Brockton, Massachusetts and eventually moved to California where she attended high school in Palo Alto and where she still lives. She is married and has one son. Grant says of herself, "I have always written. I have to write.

Sometimes it's the most fun thing in the world; other times, I feel like chucking my typewriter out the window."

Grant likes to compare herself to an "empath," a Star Trek character who is able to take others' suffering on herself: "If acid scorched your face, she absorbed your pain so completely that her own face was scarred."

"Why did [the empath] make such a mark on my mind?" Grant asks. "Because I empathized with the empath.

I, too, felt like an alien. A lot of what I saw going on around me made no sense. The world appeared to be a scary fun house, torn by what is called 'senseless violence.'"

Grant credits her grandmother, a "devout Christian in the best sense," with helping make her a kind of empath by teaching her "to believe that if everyone in the world treated others as they themselves wished to be treated, there would be a lot less poking and punching and hurting."

Grant began writing poems and stories when she was eight and published her first young-adult novel twenty-two years later, in 1980. She likes to write for teenagers, she says, because those years remain so vivid in my mind. . . . The kids were so mean to each other! If you stuck out in any way, by being especially smart, or handicapped, or even handicapped with an especially hideous home permanent, you were picked on until you bled to death from a thousand tiny cuts. Kids who were picked on took it out on smaller kids. Hurt people hurt people—and themselves.

Nothing that, like such kids, she had a less-than-perfect childhood and "knew how it felt to be wounded," Grant says she writes to reach out to readers and let them know that they are not alone; that, unique as each of us is, we all feel lonely and scared and confused sometimes. And to say, in the words of an anonymous author: Be kind; everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.



Plot Summary

The story takes place a day after a nuclear explosion at the plant in Cookshire, which is not far from North Haversham where Nyle Sumner lives. Nyle is a thirteen-year-old girl that lives with her grandmother on a sheep farm. As the story evolves, the author disburse pieces of information throughout via flashbacks to fill in the blanks about how Nyle came to live with her grandmother.

Nyle watched her mother die of cancer in the back bedroom of the farmhouse when she was just seven years old. Just two years before the story begins, her grandfather also died of cancer in that room. The back bedroom came to symbolize death. Nyle feared and hated that room. One day on her way up the hill from the bus stop, Nyle sees that the curtain in the back bedroom is closed. Instantly, Nyle knows that something is not right in the house. As she enters the kitchen, Gran does not answer her calls, nor is she waiting for her with a usual snack. Afraid of what the closed curtain might mean, Nyle does not walk to the room. Instead, she waits. Gran finally appears in the kitchen and tells her about the evacuees.

Nyle and Gran had discussed possibly housing evacuees from Cookshire but had decided in the end not to. Something changed, though, when Gran learned that these two evacuees in particular were not easy to find housing for due to their "status." The two evacuees turned out to be the plant manager's wife and son. The plant manager died shortly after the exposure, and while keeping at his side, the son showed signs of extreme radiation poisoning. The doctors did all they could for him and then discharged him from the hospital to make room for others that needed care. The day they closed the curtain was the day Gran brought Mrs. Trent and Ezra home with her.

Learning that in life there are things that "you'd rather not do," Nyle spends time each evening talking to, singing to, reading to and just sitting with this fifteen-year-old boy, Ezra. As each day passes, Ezra fights to live. Remarkably, he recovers and resumes a near-normal life. Ezra attends school with Nyle until a fight with the school bully sends him back to the hospital. During Ezra's initial recovery, he and Nyle develop a strong friendship that borders on romance. They teach each other how to live, how to heal, how to accept things and other important things in life.

Friendship, grief, fear, suffering and prejudice are common themes woven into this heartwarming yet heartbreaking story. Through the eyes and feelings of two teenagers and the vivid description of emotions, the author pulls the reader into the story. Death, fear, loss, friendship, pain, suffering and prejudice are all themes that people experience at one time or another in their lives. This common connection enables the author to attract all readers to this story and connect them to the characters.

The overall message in this story is overcoming fear and letting it go. When people can let go of their fear, they are able to move on with their lives. Until people release their fears, they cannot function in a healthy state. Ezra helps Nyle deal with her own fear of leaving and even helps her in the end, as he lies dying.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The story opens with Nyle, the main character, yelling at Tyrus, the always-straying dog that belongs to Ripley Powers. Nyle throws a stone close to, but not at, Tyrus to scare him off. The method is successful, and Tyrus runs into the woods. While Nyle and her friend Muncie watch the sheep, Nyle sees one laying still. As she gets closer, she realizes there is no movement at all. Nyle leans down and discovers that the ewe suffered at the hands, or rather teeth, of Tyrus. Just then, Ripley Powers approaches, and there is a stand off between the two. The two characters exchange words, and tempers flare. Despite the desire to fight, Nyle and Muncie back off and return home just as Tyrus picks up a scent elsewhere in the woods and is off again.

One of the comments that Ripley throws at Nyle is asking why Nyle chooses to hang out with Muncie, the "dwarf" in Ripley's eyes. Muncie tells Nyle that if hanging out with her gets Nyle into trouble then Nyle does not need to do it. Nyle is one of the few people who have chosen to look past Muncie's deformities and gotten to know her. Nyle likes Muncie and tells her so. She says that no one will tell her whom she should or should not hang out with.

As the two girls walk back up to the farm, they go their separate ways up to their houses. When Nyle approaches the house, she notices something different, something unusual that stops her in her tracks. The back bedroom's curtain is closed. She reflects on how many times she walks by that room each day. The closed curtain puzzles her. The uneasy feeling of the "dying room" curtains closed gives her a chill. She shrugs it off and continues with her chore of bringing in firewood.

As Nyle approaches the house, she calls for her grandmother to open the door for her, as is customary. When Gran does not open the door, Nyle finagles the knob and gets the door open herself.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Nyle is a very strong-willed girl who does not want people or objects interfering with her well being. This includes that nuisance of a dog, Tyrus. The friction between Nyle and Ripley is apparent as the two near one another. The two characters have a disdain for one another that leads them to a near-fight. Nyle's own sense of wisdom accompanied by the support of Muncie prevents the fight that seemed sure to occur.

Symbolism enters into the story at the end of this chapter when Nyle approaches the house to find that the curtains in the back bedroom are closed. This discovery haunts Nyle and stops her in her tracks. The recollection of her mother's death in that room seven years ago and her grandfather's death just two years ago brings a chill to Nyle. Fighting the bad feeling, Nyle continues with her chores of loading the firebox with



wood. When she elbows the front door and calls for her Gran to open up, her uneasy feeling returns. The call and the bang go unanswered, and so she opens the door herself.

The reader begins to wonder what the significance of the closed curtain in the back bedroom could mean. This event has a cataclysmic effect on how the rest of the story will unfold.

Throughout the first chapter, the author hints at the major event that took place just eight days before the story begins. Through the author's continual reminders about the characters wearing protective masks and about an accident, the reader realizes that the characters are facing the fear of radiation.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Nyle continues with her chore of unloading the wood carrier despite her unanswered calls to Gran. Not only are Nyle's calls to Gran unanswered, but the calls to their dog Caleb and cat Bayley also go unanswered. The usual snack left out for Nyle is nowhere to be seen. These revelations combine with the closed back curtain create an uneasy feeling in Nyle. Eventually, Caleb comes out from the long hallway and greets Nyle. Nyle scratches him, and then Caleb turns and returns to the back bedroom. Finally, Gran appears quietly behind Nyle. Gran tells Nyle that they are housing the evacuees that the two of them discussed just days before. Although Nyle and Gran had jointly decided not to bring them home, Gran did just that earlier in the day.

Nyle takes refuge in her room with Bayley cuddled in her lap. Bayley's purring brings warmth to Nyle and comforts her. Gran comes up to her room, and together they listen to the radio. Nyle asks Gran if she thinks the affects of the accident will ever end, and Gran says that it will take a long time. Then, Nyle asks about anger. She admits to being so angry that she can see "the blood inside your eyes." Gran wisely advises her to lose the anger because it is not good for a person to hang on to that kind of anger. The two return to the kitchen, where Gran prepares a piece of apple pie for Nyle so she can fill Nyle in on the visitors. The evacuees are a mother and son from Cookshire, which was hard hit by the radiation.

Just the day before, the boy's father died from the radiation. The mother, Mrs. Trent, and her son, Ezra, have no money, no home and no family to help them. The rest of the townspeople are afraid of them, thinking that they might be carrying radiation. Gran describes how Ezra got sick, and it brings back memories of how Nyle and her mother came to live with Gran. When Nyle asks how they will manage to take care of them and the farm, Gran tells her that Mrs. Trent is not sick and will care for her son. Gran says that Nyle needs to spend time with Ezra. Nyle states that she is not going to make friends with a dead boy. Gran responds by informing her of the importance of being with people as they are dying. Just then, Nyle and Gran hear a truck pulling up to the house. Assuming it is Red Jackson to discuss the dead sheep, the two put on their masks and walk out to meet him.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Fear is the first theme to appear in this chapter. The fear builds as Nyle approaches the house in the first chapter, but it continues to grow as her calls to her grandmother, dog and cat all go unanswered. Nyle cannot help but think of what might be in the dark back bedroom. When Nyle hears her grandmother's voice in the kitchen behind her, Nyle instantly feels relief from that fear.



The feeling of fear is also apparent when Gran describes the situation with the Trent family and how everyone is afraid that the Trents carry radiation on their bodies. This fear leads to isolation and rejection for the Trent family. Mrs. Trent and her son, Ezra, have no place to go. Upon learning this, Gran decides to do the right thing and bring them home.

When Nyle learns who is in the back bedroom, she is angry. Nyle's anger stems from the anger of her own father leaving her and her mother when her mother was sick. The anger builds because of the accident and climaxes when she learns that her grandmother has brought the refugees home despite their previous conversation. Nyle is also angry about the nuclear incident and the effects of it on her, her friends and the surrounding community.

The trait of stubbornness that is so strong in Nyle appears again in this chapter when she claims that she "will not make friends with a dead boy." The reader can question whether Nyle's attitude arises from mere stubbornness or whether she is protecting her own raw emotions. Nyle has already lost two family members to the back bedroom and is not keen on making friends with someone and getting close only to have that person die and leave her.

The use of flashback appears when Nyle remembers her father leaving her with her grandparents. This memory allows the reader to get inside Nyle's feelings and discover that Nyle has a haunting slant on people leaving her. Nyle comments that her "father was the first to leave" her, but "he sure wasn't the last." These two comments make it apparent that she has not gotten over the fact that her father left her and her mother.

Death is a strong presence in this chapter as well. The death of Ezra's father brings on memories and feelings that still cause a lot of pain for Nyle as well as unresolved issues. Nyle foresees the imminent death of Ezra, expecting the past to replay itself.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

In school, Mr. Sobel, the science teacher, informs the students all about radioactive materials. Nyle reflects on how much better science class was when it was just text in a book and not material that the children experienced firsthand. Back at home, Nyle thinks about the boy in the back bedroom downstairs who is sick from the radiation. Nyle feels her protective mask and ponders how it could possibly protect her from that which one cannot feel, see or smell.

Nyle realizes that she has not used the bathroom since she left school, and she is unable to hold it any longer. She goes downstairs. After leaving the bathroom, she cannot help but notice that the back bedroom door is open. An irresistible urge draws her toward the bedroom. Inside she sees what must be Mrs. Trent lying on the cot with blankets around her shoulders. As Nyle's eyes scan the room, they fall on the sleeping boy. As Nyle stands to return to her room, her legs make a noise that causes Ezra to turn his head in her direction. Ezra looks at her and says, "I had a dog." Nyle tries to walk away, but her legs are asleep from being in the cramped position. She waits for the blood to return to them. Nyle lingers in the hall a little while longer, but Ezra says nothing else. Nyle turns and returns to her room where she hears moaning and then a retching noise. Nyle considers what has just transpired and wonders if going across the hall was part of doing something you'd rather not. Nyle knows that regardless, tomorrow she will return to Ezra.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Irony begins the chapter as Nyle is sitting in science class and learning about radiation. Mr. Sobel is teaching the children things that they know about firsthand now. Nyle wishes that science were not "so close to home" and longs for questions that are just textbook material, not life experiences.

The symbolism of the radiation mask brings on questions of how such a small piece of fiber can protect life. One cannot see, feel or smell radiation. How does this little mask protect? Nyle cannot help but feel endangered, although the mask is supposed to protect her.

Nyle thinks about death now that radiation has completely changed their lives. Nyle considers the long-term affects of this accident. Will the animals all die off? Will humans be the only ones to remain? Will it be okay for humans to touch one another? If not, will they die from lack of contact? This end-of-the-world thinking is very unusual for a girl of thirteen, but not in this setting.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Waiting for the bus on a blustery November morning, Muncie tries to carry on a conversation with Nyle. Nyle is lost in thought about Ezra and does not even hear Muncie ask her a question. When Muncie finally breaks through Nyle's trance, Nyle realizes that Muncie is asking her a question about a book that they just finished for their English class. The book is about death and belonging, which brings up the topic of the nuclear accident. Nyle asks whether or not the people nearby should have stayed or left. Muncie replies nervously that she does not know. Muncie does admit that she does not want the "affected" people near her.

Muncie also inquires about why Nyle did not come up to do homework the day before. Nyle does not want to tell her about Ezra and Mrs. Trent, and so she avoids the question. Muncie thinks it has something to do with Ripley's comments from the day before. Nyle tries to reassure Muncie that it is something with her grandmother and nothing about Muncie, but Muncie insists that Nyle is not telling her everything. Muncie picks up on the fact that something is bothering Nyle, but Nyle denies that anything is bothering her. Nyle does not mention one word about Ezra.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The theme of insecurity surfaces as Muncie inquires about why Nyle did not come up to her house for homework after school. When Nyle tells Muncie that she will not be coming up again today after school, Muncie feels rejected. The comments made by Ripley the day before perhaps bring on the insecurity. When Nyle tries to explain to Muncie that it has nothing to do with Muncie at all, she fails. Muncie continues to ask if it is because she is stupid or because of how she acts. Nyle purposely does not tell Muncie about Ezra.

Appropriately, the book the girls are reading in their English class is about death. Muncie asks Nyle if she thinks the refugees should have left the mountain or not. The two girls differ in their opinion. Perhaps it is this difference of opinion that compels Nyle to not "dare" tell Muncie about Ezra.

The subject of the book coincidentally is similar to the situation the girls are in relating to the nuclear disaster. When Muncie admits that she does not know whether the people affected by the nuclear accident should have stayed or left, she does admit that she just "doesn't want them near me" (p. 27). This attitude is similar to most of the other townspeople and is very different from the accepting attitude of Gran.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The next day of school passes, and Nyle finishes her evening chores. Nyle sits on her bed listening to the radio and notices all of her treasures. Nyle looks at all of them and realizes that if the wind shifts, she will have to leave all of her treasures behind. Nyle thinks of Ezra in the back bedroom, and she immediately feels uneasy. Knowing that she would not know what to say to Ezra, Nyle decides that she could read to him. Nyle examines the collection of books in her nightstand and decides on a book about a boy alone in a train station. Nyle has read this book many times and thinks it is the perfect book to read to Ezra.

On Nyle's way down the hall, Mrs. Trent comes out to meet Nyle. Mrs. Trent introduces herself and reviews the book. Nyle shows Mrs. Trent the cover, and Mrs. Trent approves of Nyle reading it to Ezra. Mrs. Trent thanks Nyle for inviting her and Ezra into their home. Mrs. Trent understands that it is against popular opinion and that Nyle's friends might not approve. Mrs. Trent tells Nyle of Ezra's illness, that his fever is coming on again and that the doctors have done all they could for him. Mrs. Trent tells Nyle that Ezra has not spoken a word since they arrived at Nyle's house. Hearing this, Nyle gets a lump in her throat.

Nyle enters the room and notices that the shape of Ezra's eyes is unusual. Nyle begins to read, and then Ezra turns to look at her. When Nyle introduces herself, Ezra blinks, nods and then closes his eyes again. Ezra's breathing is loud and terrible sounding. Nyle pauses and asks him a few questions about the book, but he remains silent and motionless except for his laborious breathing. Nyle continues reading.

Nyle smells fresh bread, and then Mrs. Trent comes into the room and dismisses Nyle with a gesture and a thank you. Mrs. Trent walks over to Ezra and places a washcloth over his forehead. Then, Mrs. Trent kisses her son and says a prayer for him.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Appreciation is the opening theme in this chapter. As Nyle sits on her bed scanning her treasures on her shelves, she eyes each one and appreciates it before moving on to the next. Nyle knows that if the wind direction shifts, the radiation will contaminate her treasures and everything else. As Nyle has already learned, she would need to leave all contaminated items behind.

As Nyle decides on which book to read to Ezra, Bayley climbs her legs for some attention. Nyle scratches Bayley under his chin and says aloud to her cat, "Bayley, you lucky old cat, you don't ever have to do anything you'd rather not." Of course, Nyle is referring to her need to spend time with Ezra.



Appropriately, Nyle chooses to read a book about a boy who lives in a train station and is all alone. Nyle has read this book at least four times because she closely associated with the loneliness that the main character felt. Nyle knows this is the right book to read to Ezra, the boy alone in the dark room downstairs.

When Mrs. Trent and Nyle meet, Nyle observes Mrs. Trent looking over Nyle's dirty hand as Nyle offers it in a handshake. Despite her repulsion, Mrs. Trent accepts Nyle's hand. As Nyle listens to Mrs. Trent speak, she realizes that Mrs. Trent is very elegant and formal in her language. The difference between Mrs. Trent's manicured hand and Nyle's rough and dirty hands is a clear example of the irony of the situation. Mrs. Trent was "well off" until the accident that killed her husband and threatens to kill her son. Now, the farming family with their rough hands and lives are providing room and board for the well-groomed Mrs. Trent and son, who now find themselves quite desperate.

As Nyle prepares to read to Ezra, she smells the familiar smell of illness in the room. It is the same odor she smelled when her mother and her grandfather died. As in an attempt for comfort, Nyle reaches down and strokes her dog, Caleb. Caleb returns her attention with a wet lick and then goes back to sleep as if giving Nyle her cue to begin reading to Ezra. Before she begins, she thinks that perhaps it is better for her to let him be - to let him die in peace. Knowing that both Mrs. Trent and Gran want her to spend time with him, Nyle begins reading. Ezra turns his head and opens his eyes to look at Nyle, but then he does not look at her again, although he does open and close his eyes frequently during the reading.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The thing that the residents have all feared occurs this day - rain. It is a downpour, a torrential rain soaking into the earth. Contrary to what the residents all thought, the news of the day is good after all. Mr. Perry announces on the school's PA system that workers at the nuclear plant have capped the leak and that the air is safe. Ten days after the accident, the principal instructs the kids to throw their masks away. Some do, but Nyle cannot throw it away. Muncie is elated but does not remove her mask until her parents tell her it is okay to do so.

After the bus drops the girls off at their stop, they walked up the hill together. Muncie falls into a mud puddle, and Nyle offers her hand. When Muncie asks Nyle to come up to the house for hot chocolate, Nyle refuses with a short "Can't." Immediately, Muncie feels the rejection again and takes off up the hill, obviously upset. Nyle offers to wait and watch her get up the hill, but Muncie replies with a sarcastic comment: "You can't." Again, Nyle allows the strain in their friendship to continue.

Since Nyle is already wet, she decides to complete all her outdoor chores before going inside. When Nyle arrives at the door, Gran is waiting for her with a towel and some hot chocolate. The two discuss the good news about the plant, and Gran tells Nyle to throw her mask out. She says that she threw hers away immediately upon hearing the good news. Nyle chooses instead to hang it on a hook in the kitchen as a symbol of remembrance.

Nyle changes into dry clothes before going down to read to Ezra. Before she even leaves her room, Nyle sits down on her bed and strokes Bayley. Nyle is heavy in thought remembering that her mother and grandfather died. Nyle nuzzles Bayley while thinking that Ezra will die, too.

Mrs. Trent meets Nyle outside the back bedroom and tells her that Ezra is worse today. Ezra has not eaten anything, and Mrs. Trent asks Nyle if she would dip the washcloth into the sweet water and dab on his lips. Immediately, Nyle remembers that her grandmother promised that she would not have to tend to Ezra's physical needs, but she sees the look of exhaustion on Mrs. Trent's face and decides that this is another one of those things that "she needed to do."

Since the air is safe now, Nyle goes to the window so that she can see outside. Nyle wants to see the rain and hopes it will turn to snow. Just as she reaches for the curtain, Mrs. Trent appears and stops her, stating that Ezra asked for the curtain to remain closed. Nyle obeys reluctantly.



Chapter 6 Analysis

Nyle learns about a different kind of responsibility in this chapter, doing things that "you'd rather not do." Nyle learns about this type of responsibility quickly and without a choice because of the Trents moving into the back bedroom. Doing things that "you'd rather not do" is part of growing up. Dealing with Ezra is one of those things for Nyle, especially when Mrs. Trent asks her to dip the washcloth into the sweet water and dab his lips.

When Nyle learns that the workers have capped the leak at the plant, she decides to save her mask and hangs it on a hook in the kitchen as a remembrance. This symbol will be there to remind her of the fear, the feelings and the accident so she will always remember to appreciate life and all that surrounds her.

On the way home from school, Nyle once again refuses the invitation to go to Muncie's house. Since Muncie does not know about the Trents, she does not understand why Nyle "can't" come over, and she walks away obviously hurt. Nyle reflects that the Trents have quickly created a rift in her friendship with Muncie.

Perhaps the most symbolic event in this chapter occurs when Mrs. Trent abruptly prevents Nyle from opening the curtain in the back bedroom. The closed curtain is surely a sign of death, and Nyle wants to open it. Mrs. Trent states that Ezra wishes the curtain closed, though. Not only does this infuriate Nyle, but it cements her belief that Ezra will die in this room.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Mrs. Haskin, one of Nyle's teachers, returns to school after taking a leave of absence immediately after the nuclear leak. Mrs. Haskins assigns the students to write a letter to their congressional representatives and senators. In the letter, Mrs. Haskins wants the students to explain what it is like now and to ask the legislators what they plan to do for the community in the future.

That night at home, Nyle does not even try to read the book. Instead, she sits there and stares at Ezra, willing him to live. A nurse recently hooked up an IV to him. Mrs. Trent begins to show signs of radiation sickness, and soon Gran is taking care of both Mrs. Trent and her son. One night, Mrs. Trent tells Nyle that she is Israeli and disappointed her parents by marrying out of her faith. Mrs. Trent goes on to say that her parents have never met Ezra. When Nyle suggests that perhaps it is not too late, both women look over at him laboring to stay alive. Mrs. Trent believes that because she broke her parents' hearts, she is paying the price now.

Another night after sitting in silence for an hour, Nyle stands to announce her departure. Mrs. Trent is dozing off. Just as Nyle stands to leave, she hears Ezra say something. Nyle tries to get him to repeat himself, but Ezra has already disappeared back into his illness. Mrs. Trent awakens and motions Nyle to come to her. Mrs. Trent describes the manner in which her husband spoke once right before he died, much like Ezra's recent speech.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The author uses a hint of foreshadowing when Mrs. Haskins assigns the students to write letters to the congressional representatives and senators. The assignment is to write about the current situation and to ask the lawmakers what their plans are for dealing with the ongoing problems that arise from the accident.

The deadly and feared disease of cancer surfaces in this chapter as Mrs. Haskins discusses the long-term affects that will take place because of the accident. The reader learns that Nyle's mother and grandfather both lost their battles with cancer.

Regret enters the story when Mrs. Trent confides in Nyle one night. Mrs. Trent tells of her heritage and that she fell in love with Ezra's father and completely disregarded marrying a man of her faith. Mrs. Trent also shares with Nyle that her parents have never met Ezra. When Nyle offers that it might still be possible, they both look over at the struggling Ezra and realize that it is highly unlikely. Mrs. Trent believes that because she disregarded her parents' wishes, she is now paying the price.



When Nyle announces her departure one evening after sitting in silence for an hour, Ezra says something that neither Nyle nor Mrs. Trent hears. When Nyle asks Ezra to repeat himself, Ezra slips back into his illness and leaves them in silence again. When Mrs. Trent tells Nyle that her husband spoke once and then died, the reader wonders if this is foreshadowing of Ezra's fate.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Days drift by as Nyle monitors Ezra's non-movement and as the teachers and principal monitor the radiation levels. Each night, Nyle consistently appears by Ezra's side and talks about nothing and everything.

One day after school, Nyle invites Muncie to help her move the fencing. When they complete the project, the two girls collect loose wool in the pasture. Muncie has enough to fill her basket, and Nyle offers to help her card and spin it after Muncie cleans it. By the time Nyle returns home, it is late, and Gran scolds her. Gran tells her that Mrs. Trent waits for Nyle to spend time with Ezra before she takes a break. Nyle tries to get out of visiting Ezra and the back bedroom, but once again, Gran reminds her that it is the right thing to do. After eating her supper, Nyle goes to visit Ezra. Thinking that Ezra is lying in a comatose state, Nyle begins to let her feelings escape and tears fill her eyes. What Nyle does not realize is that Ezra is watching her until Ezra asks if she is crying. Nyle cannot believe that Ezra is speaking. When Nyle promises to return the next day, Ezra promises to wait for her.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The author uses foreshadowing in the first part of this chapter as Nyle remembers how it used to be in the back bedroom before Nyle's father left her and before her mother left her. Nyle remembers when she used to have a crib in this room. It was a happy room then. Gran would make cookies and store them in the tins in the corner of the room. Then, Nyle's father and Nyle would sneak into the tins and eat cookies. Gran would catch them and scold Nyle's father, but then she would sneak a cookie herself. Those were such warm memories, in contrast to the cold and dark memories of her mother and her grandfather dying in this room. The reader also feels the theme of leaving. Nyle mentions it during the flashback. It is obvious that in Nyle's mindset, "people are always leaving."

Nyle and Muncie spend time together after school. By doing this, they strengthen their friendship. Nyle recounts that Muncie is always there for her, which is very important to Nyle. However, Nyle's grandmother scolds her when she gets back to the house late. This does not bode well for Nyle and Muncie's friendship.

Finally, a sign of hope appears in the sickroom. Ezra has not moved in a week, and Nyle's heart is very heavy. During an evening visit, Nyle is fighting back tears due to anger. Nyle is angry with Gran for forcing her to sit in the back bedroom with Ezra, angry with Mrs. Trent for only leaving the room when Nyle comes and angry with this room for taking the people she loves. Lost in her own sorrow, Nyle does not realize that Ezra is watching her until Ezra asks if she is crying. Stunned, she turns on the light to



see if it is actually Ezra speaking. The shock of the bright light causes sensitivity in Ezra. Nyle speaks to him again and explains that she has a lot of homework to do tonight, but she will return tomorrow. Nyle asks if Ezra will wait for her until tomorrow. He replies, saying, "You bet, Shep." This sign of hope exhilarates Nyle. The nickname must have come from stories Nyle has told him about shepherding.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Muncie and Nyle are carding the wool at Muncie's house. Mr. Harris starts a fire for the girls, and Nyle enjoys the crackling of the fire. Sitting cozily there, carding the wool, makes the girls feel snug and warm. Muncie invites Nyle to stay the afternoon so that they can spin the wool together, but Nyle tells Muncie that she needs to get home since after a snow there are always more chores. Muncie finally asks Nyle what is going on at Nyle's house. Nyle denies that anything is going on, and Muncie even asks if Gran is sick. Muncie has noticed that the curtain in the back bedroom is closed. Nyle wants to tell Muncie the truth, but she cannot.

Nyle knows that Muncie's family will not allow Muncie to see Nyle if they know she and Gran are housing evacuees. It is not just that they are housing evacuees but that they are the plant manager's wife and son. To test the waters about the subject, Nyle asks Muncie whether she thinks about the people who used to live in Cookshire. Immediately, Muncie's tone gets judgmental about the people sick with radiation. Nyle defends the sick people, perhaps too vehemently. Once again, there is tension between the two friends.

Chapter 9 Analysis

As Nyle and Muncie card the wool, it reminds Nyle of a doll that her mother gave her when they moved in with Gran and Gramps. Thinking of the doll reminds Nyle of her mother's battle with cancer and subsequent defeat. Nyle remembers the day her grandmother finally opened the door for Nyle to go in and see her mother. Much to Nyle's shock, her mother was dead. Nyle went running and hid upstairs for hours in the knee-wall. Up until that point, Nyle had taken perfect care of the doll her mother gave her. Ironically, the doll's hair ended up bald and patchy just like Nyle's mother. Nyle could not stand to look at the doll and threw her away.

Fear and judgment come into the story when Nyle asks Muncie about the sick people from Cookshire. Muncie reacts as Nyle predicted, and despite Nyle's best efforts to stick up for them, Muncie does not change her mind. Perhaps she realizes, or at the very least suspects, that Gran and Nyle are housing evacuees.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

As Nyle enters Ezra's room, he calls out her nickname: Shep. Ezra is waiting for her and is sitting up propped up against pillows. Ezra has improved so much that he is able to carry on a conversation. The two teenagers speak of the weather and sheep farming. When they speak of the weather, they talk about the snow that has fallen. Nyle tries to open the curtain so that Ezra can see, but he quickly shouts "No!" Nyle stops. Ezra asks Nyle to teach him about sheep farming.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Put two teenagers of the opposite sex together, and flirting is bound to happen. When Ezra is well enough to speak, he admits that hearing Nyle's voice is what kept him going when he was very sick. At this, Nyle's cheeks flush, and she begins to read. When it appears that Ezra is too still, Nyle calls out his name. When Ezra responds, Nyle calms down. Already, her concern for Ezra is noticeable. When Ezra thanks her for the food, Nyle discounts it, saying that it was nothing. To the contrary, Ezra knows that it is meaningful (in many ways) and tells her so. Again, Nyle feels a rush. This time, her hands shake. The two teenagers banter back and forth about the future, and when Nyle switches off the light, she gets the feeling that Ezra will be alive in the spring.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Nyle and Gran begin to turn the milk into cheese down in the cellar. While the two of them are down there, Nyle begins to question her grandmother about sheep farming. Nyle wants to know what her grandmother likes the most. After a long silence, Gran finally says she likes the routine. Then, the two discuss all the different things they like about sheep farming. Not surprisingly, Nyle really likes how the sheep are always there.

When Nyle enters the back bedroom to visit Ezra and give him his first lesson in sheep farming, she is stunned to see him standing with the help of Gramp's canes. Ezra begins asking questions, and Nyle answers all of them. Nyle begins to leave, but then she walks back in the room toward Ezra and requests permission to ask him one personal question. Ezra coils at first but then agrees. Nyle wants to know about the scar above his forehead. Ezra is relieved that it is such an easy question and tells her about it. Just as Nyle thinks of the stark contrast that a few days makes, Ezra says that he feels like a phoenix and how good it feels to be alive.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Gran has a heart of gold. Her constant comfort, giving and patience with everyone around her makes her a role model for all. Most people would not open their homes to someone suffering from radiation poisoning, but she does so without thinking twice. Now, as her renters struggle financially and cannot make rent, Gran continues to give and be patient, explaining the importance of helping people, especially through hard times. This lesson is an ironic one for Nyle, since she has such issues with people leaving.

During the sheep farming lesson, Ezra expresses admiration for what Nyle and Gran do to live. As Ezra sees it, they do not need the outside world, at least not as much as most people. Again, the reader can reflect on how well off Ezra and his family were prior to the accident and compare it to their current situation. This sheds light on why Ezra feels the way he does.

There is a little foreshadowing in this chapter when Nyle reflects back on her grandfather making the canes. Nyle remembers cutting the wood with her grandfather and then watching him strip the bark, shape the canes, sand them and then oil them. Nyle thinks about her grandfather dying in this room, and then she thinks hopeful thoughts and knows that Ezra will live.

Perhaps most important to this story is the revelation Ezra makes the night of the first sheep farming lesson. Ezra tells Nyle that he feels like a phoenix. He compares his life with that of the bird that dies by burning and then rises from the ashes. This symbol is

an accurate representation of what has so far transpired for Ezra. He lived, and then he burned up with fever. He is currently rising from the ashes through his recovery.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

As time passes from November to December, Ezra continues to strengthen and heal. With each passing day, Nyle feels closer to Ezra. Nyle teases Ezra, walking down the hall toward his room asking whether he is decent. In return, Ezra teases back. Now, Ezra has the strength to walk back and forth in his room, but he will not even walk out of the room to go to the bathroom.

Gran takes over most of Nyle's chores, which allows more time for Nyle to visit with Ezra. On the weekends, Nyle goes out early to work, accompanied by Muncie. One morning after a big snowfall, the girls finish their work early, build a large snow fort and then have a snowball fight. Just as they are nearly finished, Ripley walks up to them and inquires about his dog. Tyrus is missing again. Fortunately, the missing dog did not cause any trouble the night before in the sheep pasture.

In an attempt to ignore Ripley and get him to leave them alone, Muncie throws a snowball at Nyle. Nyle ducks out of the way, and it lands near Ripley's feet, starting another confrontation with Ripley. Ripley gets defensive and again starts bullying Muncie and throws snowballs at her. One of them hits Muncie hard in the stomach. After a scolding from Nyle, Ripley walks off while Nyle tends to Muncie. The two girls walk up the hill to go inside. They both notice that the curtain in the back bedroom is open. Not only that, but the well-lit house illuminates the shadow of two figures. Muncie immediately asks who she can see through the window, but Nyle remains silent. Muncie declares that if Nyle has nothing to say to her, then she has nothing to say to Nyle.

After Muncie walks home in her fury, Nyle is excited to have seen Ezra up and looking out the window. Nyle is eager to change into dry clothes and go visit with him. When Nyle enters the house, Gran has a cup of coffee waiting for her. Nyle is in such a hurry to talk to Ezra that she runs upstairs to change. Gran tries to talk to her and finally goes up to her room to do so. Gran is concerned with Nyle's attachment to Ezra. When he is well, he will leave, and Gran worries that this will devastate Nyle. Nyle admits that she understands that Ezra may leave, but she says that all that matters is that Ezra is getting well.

In the last month, many changes have occurred. The supplies to live on are getting tighter and must be rationed, but regarding Ezra, all the changes are good.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Determination is prevalent in this chapter in many different examples, from Muncie's determination to keep Nyle outside as long as possible to her winning the snowball fight. Determination is also evident as Ezra continues to improve and shake off his radiation illness. Nyle is also determined to continue to help Ezra get well and stay well. Nyle is



so determined that she firmly believes now that Ezra will live. Nyle is also determined not to mention Mrs. Trent and Ezra to Muncie, despite the fact that she has seen their shadows in the back bedroom window.

The open curtain in the back bedroom symbolizes Ezra's wellness. Not only is he recuperating physically, but he is also improving emotionally. Ezra is afraid of the outside, which has prevented him until this moment to allow even the curtain to be open. Ezra is even afraid to leave the back bedroom. When Nyle sees the open curtain, it confirms her belief that Ezra truly is getting better.

Gran stops Nyle before she is able to go see Ezra one Saturday. Gran is concerned about Nyle's growing attachment and feelings towards Ezra. She wants to protect Nyle from being hurt. The two talk about the hurt that comes from people leaving physically and not just dying. Nyle flashes back to the feelings stemming from her father's departure and tells Gran that she understands. Nyle also tells her that she is not afraid of the back bedroom anymore. In fact, Nyle has come to think of that room as Ezra's room and now loves going in that room.

Gran tells Nyle that the nurse has instructed Ezra and Mrs. Trent that he needs to get outside and live. Ezra's fear holds him back, but Gran tells Nyle so that she can help him overcome his fear of going outside and of leaving the back bedroom.

The mask that Nyle kept as a remembrance becomes the mask that Ezra insists on wearing when he is looking out the window. The mask is something that Ezra hides behind, a symbol of protection against the dangers of the world outside.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

The night of the meteor shower, Nyle cleverly dangles the carrot in front of Ezra in an attempt to get him out of bed and out of the room. In his anger, he jumps out of bed and hustles over to the door. Frozen by fear, he pauses, and then gives in and takes refuge in his bed. Ezra looks away from Nyle, unable to look at her.

Nyle and her dog Caleb go outside to watch the meteor shower. Nyle talks to Caleb about Ezra and getting a guard dog. With Ripley's dog on the loose and winter coyotes hungry, Nyle decides that adding a guard dog is the right thing to do. Nyle remembers what Ezra told her the first night he was at their house: "I had a dog." Nyle decides that the new dog will be Ezra's dog.

Unfortunately, the introduction of the puppy to Ezra does not go well on either the first attempt or the second. Ezra screams and is visibly upset that they have brought in a puppy that is "radioactive." On the second attempt to introduce Ezra to the new dog, he screams that he does not want Nyle to bring anything for him to love. With that, Mrs. Trent asks Nyle to leave the room. When Nyle leaves, she is visibly upset and screams back at them both, "Fine!"

Chapter 13 Analysis

Ironically, the back bedroom, which meant death for Nyle's mother and grandfather, symbolizes life for Ezra. The world outside of that room could bring death to Ezra if he breathes in any more radiation. Ezra clings to that room as if it were his life source.

Conquering fear is often the most difficult challenge people face. Paralyzed by his fear of leaving the back bedroom, Ezra cannot get himself to cross the threshold of the bedroom door. After giving in to his fear, Ezra is angry. Obviously, Ezra is angry that he cannot muster the courage to overcome his fear, but his anger is deeper than that. He is angry about the accident, his father's death and his illness.

Not only is Ezra afraid to leave, but he is also afraid of things brought to him. When Nyle so happily presents the cute puppy to Ezra, he goes ballistic. Who in their right mind rejects a cute puppy? Ezra is full of fear - afraid of further contamination and afraid of loving something. This foreshadowing is a clear example that Ezra is not just afraid to love the puppy, but afraid to love people, too. Ezra has not dealt with his loss of his father because of his illness. Now that Ezra is well, his unprocessed feelings about his father's death leave him with additional anger and confusion. Like most people that are afraid, Ezra rejects the gift and the giver.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

As Nyle lies in bed one night, she overhears the voices of Gran and Mrs. Trent downstairs in the kitchen. In an attempt not to listen, Nyle puts her pillow over her ears. The next morning, Gran tells Nyle that they are going to Manchester after chores, stating that she has sheep business there and that Nyle can shop for Christmas. Nyle invites Muncie in an effort to rekindle their friendship. The two girls spend all day shopping together. During lunch, Dan Taylor and some other boys from their eighth grade class arrive at the same restaurant. The boys sit at the table next to the girls, and the two groups banter back and forth. As is usual, someone makes a jab at Muncie, but this time instead of Nyle sticking up for her, Dan elbows the assailant.

While the girls wait inside Radio Shack for Gran, they watch the row of TVs. The news is reporting on the destruction at the plant, the empty streets of Boston and other areas hit by the radiation. Then, the president of the United States appears on the TV. Finally, a string of commercials come on, and that is when the girls realize that they are already late to meet Gran.

Chapter 14 Analysis

The themes of rudeness and the inability to accept people for who they are appear in this chapter. When Muncie and Nyle are at the restaurant, the waitress begins to stare at Muncie's size and shape and then makes derogatory comments about Muncie to Nyle, as if Muncie were not even there. Nyle does not say anything to defend Muncie, but Muncie pulls herself together with a quick trip to the restroom. Shortly after the girls sit down, some classmates arrive and end up sitting at the table next to them. At first, the bantering back and forth is fun and flirtatious, but eventually one of the boys makes a wisecrack at Muncie. Dan Taylor, the boy in the Fedora, defends Muncie by elbowing the wise guy.

After the girls have spent the day shopping, they wait inside Radio Shack for Gran because of the cold weather. The local news is on a row of TVs, and the girls watch the clippings. The news channel shows the devastation of the aftermath of the nuclear accident through clips of empty streets, empty neighborhoods, crowded hospitals, weeping family members and other sad realities. Despite the fact that they live in this reality, a crowd gathers around the row of TVs. Going to Manchester seems to be an escape for them, and at the end of the day, as the girls prepare to go home, the news reminds Nyle and Muncie of the reality in which they live.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

On a Sunday morning a week after the trip to Manchester, Nyle makes pancakes in the shape of sheep. Gran does not make frivolous food, nor is she a good cook. Nyle tells the reader that she learned to cook early in life because she did not care for Gran's cooking. Over their breakfast conversation, Nyle brings up the idea of Mrs. Trent and Ezra staying on after Ezra is well. Gran tells her that it is important for them to make a fresh start, and in order to do so, Mrs. Trent and Ezra need to leave. Then, Gran informs Nyle that Ezra walked to the kitchen the day before. Nyle is physically disappointed and sags in her chair. Nyle tells Gran that she wanted to get him out of the room. Gran suggests that it was Nyle who motivated Ezra to do it.

As Gran clears the table, she and Nyle hear noises in the hallway. In an effort to busy herself and stifle her shyness and embarrassment, Nyle begins to clean the kitchen. As Ezra enters the kitchen, Mrs. Trent asks Nyle to close the curtains and then disappears back down the hall, leaving Ezra and Nyle alone in the kitchen. The two teenagers sit across from each other at the kitchen table. Nyle inquires about Ezra's well being, and she notices that he appears to be looking for something in the kitchen. Finally, Ezra asks where the puppy is hiding. Teasingly, Nyle takes the detector around all objects in the kitchen, including the puppy's rear end. Ezra takes the teasing quite well. Nyle offers him some of the sheep-shaped pancakes that she saved for him, but he refuses them.

As Nyle pets the puppy in her lap, she welcomes Ezra to "the land of the living." Just then, Gran comes in and announces that she needs Nyle's help in getting the ewe to Aunt May and Uncle Lemmy's place. Ezra stumbles to his feet and makes his way clumsily back to his room.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Determination reappears in this chapter as Ezra forces himself to leave the back bedroom. Two days in a row, he walks out of the bedroom and into the kitchen. On the second day, he walks to the kitchen to see Nyle and show her his accomplishment. Nyle does not make a big deal out of it at all and even teases him about his over-reaction to the puppy. Ezra shows determination also by seeking out the puppy and telling Nyle that of course the puppy is not contaminated.

When Gran explains the importance of a fresh start for Mrs. Trent and Ezra, Nyle is disappointed to learn that her plan of keeping them at the farm will not happen. Still, she accepts the facts. Already, Nyle has grown and matured in her thinking. Nyle is no longer thinking so selfishly, and she has developed her ability to think of what is best for others.



Protecting loved ones is so common that it almost goes unnoticed in this chapter in reference to Bayley. Once a master mice catcher, Bayley is now restricted to the house for fear that he might eat a contaminated mouse. The concern of contamination is so real that Nyle and her grandmother decide to protect Bayley from a premature death.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Gran and Nyle deliver the two pregnant ewes to Aunt May and Uncle Lemmy. When Gran and Nyle arrive at the defunct dairy farm, Nyle inquires about their safety. Gran explains that with all the rain they have had, it washed away most of the surface radiation. Gran explains that it is safe to visit but not safe to live there, since the radioactivity is now in the earth, the hay and the grass.

Despite the warm December day, Uncle Lemmy has stoked the wood stove, making it quite warm in the living room. Realizing that she has never spent much time in the house, Nyle invites her similar-aged cousins, Lou and Maxine, to join her outside to play. Both cousins look up at her with fear. Nyle puts on the protective clothing and mask and ventures outside, heeding the advice of her uncle. As Nyle walks around the farm, she begins to think about her father again, and in her anger, she forgets all about her uncle's advice and begins to run back to the house.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Doing the right thing can often mean causing undue hardship on one's family. This is the case with Uncle Lemmy. Despite the government ignoring high levels of radiation on his farm, Uncle Lemmy refuses to sell contaminated dairy products. With the government ignoring the radioactive levels of his farm, Lemmy is not able to collect any special funds due from the disaster. By doing the right thing, Lemmy puts his family's livelihood in jeopardy. Lemmy could sell tainted milk and make money doing so because people will buy what the government deems is safe. In his mind, Lemmy knows that his herd is contaminated, and he will not be responsible for making others sick. Not only is he doing the right thing, but Lemmy also suffers from the government's accusations that he is taking advantage of a bad situation when his farm is healthy.

Again, Nyle experiences anger at her father's leaving. As she leans against the barn, Nyle remembers that her grandfather helped build this barn. Nyle remembers that neither he nor Gran held a grudge against Aunt May. Nyle recalls that her grandparents and she alike had arguments with her father. In Nyle's thinking, her father's departure started the domino effect of all the leaving.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Two days after Ezra first walked to the kitchen, he walks to the kitchen with ease and with just one of Gramp's canes. Nyle moves the detector all around the kitchen to prove to Ezra it is safe to be there. Surprising Nyle, Ezra removes his mask. Ezra tells Nyle that he thinks their house is nice. Nyle informs Ezra that her grandfather preferred carpentry to sheep farming, so he worked inside the house a lot. Nyle tells him that her grandfather made built-in shelves and a window seat for her in her room. Nyle invites Ezra upstairs to look at it. Ezra accepts the invitation, and he walks slowly up the stairs to her room. The puppy follows.

Once Nyle and Ezra are upstairs, Ezra begins scanning Nyle's room. Ezra's gaze stops at the curtain-less window. Nyle asks Ezra if he wants her to scan the room. Ezra nods that he does, so Nyle goes downstairs to get the detector. As Nyle approaches her room, she sees Ezra kneeling down to face the puppy. Soon, the puppy and Ezra are nose to nose. Nyle enters just as Ezra scoops the puppy into his arms. Ezra and the puppy are friends at last. As Nyle scans the room, the detector picks up a trace of radiation. At first, it alarms both she and Ezra, but Nyle discovers that it is just her glow-in-the-dark watches. Ezra asks Nyle to move them out of her room, so she does.

When Nyle returns to her room, she begins her somewhat self-conscious tour of her room. When Nyle sees Ezra eyeing her books, she wishes that her selection were as great as Muncie's. Nyle offers Ezra a book, and he chooses *Slake's Limbo*, the book that Nyle first read to him when he arrived. The puppy and Ezra play together on the floor in Nyle's room until Mrs. Trent calls Ezra downstairs. As he proceeds downstairs, Ezra turns and looks over his shoulder to say good night to Nyle.

Chapter 17 Analysis

Ezra continues with his determined state of mind and conquers more of his fears. First, he removes his mask after the detector reveals no radiation. Then, he climbs the stairs to Nyle's room. Up in Nyle's room he continues to win his battle over his fear by making friends with the puppy. When the detector registers a trace of radiation in Nyle's room, instead of fleeing, he simply tells Nyle to "get them out of here" (p. 114).

For the first time, Ezra calls Nyle by name. Nyle notices and registers it in her thought process. This transition from Shep to Nyle symbolizes the change in Ezra's feelings towards her. By calling her by her formal name, Ezra is accepting Nyle formally into his life. He has gone through a significant change since Chapter 13, when Ezra tells her not to bring anything for him to love. At this point, Ezra is allowing himself to be attached to not only the puppy but also to Nyle.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Visiting Nyle in her room is now a regular routine for Ezra. Each day, Ezra is able to climb the stairs easier. Together the two teenagers teach the puppy new tricks. Ezra is able to walk now without the use of the cane, but he keeps it with him anyway.

One day at school, Mr. Perry calls Nyle into his office. Mr. Perry tells Nyle that he has had a conversation with her grandmother and knows all about the evacuees staying with them. Instantly, Mr. Perry calms Nyle's rising fear. Instead of a lecture, Mr. Perry explains that he will be sending home studies and books for Ezra, and he tells Nyle that she will be the messenger. Mr. Perry understands the sensitivity of the Trent family staying with Nyle and her grandmother, puts her fears to rest and tells her that what they are doing is right.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Doing the right thing is a common theme throughout and surfaces again in this chapter when Mr. Perry and Nyle meet in his office. Not only are Nyle and Gran doing the right thing by allowing the Trents to live with them, but Mr. Perry, the teachers and the school board are also doing "the right thing" by providing course work and materials to Ezra. By keeping the secret, they are also doing the right thing by protecting the Trents from what could be a mob scene or an uprising.

Ezra and Nyle continue to develop their relationship with their nightly visits. Ironically, Nyle no longer walks down the hallway to the back bedroom. Now, Ezra makes the journey to Nyle.



Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Ezra flourishes. As he regains his strength, Ezra devours his studies. Now, the back bedroom looks less like an infirmary and more like a healthy teenage boy's room. In fact, Nyle can barely find a trace of Mrs. Trent or Gramp.

One afternoon when Ezra and Nyle are in his room doing homework, the fire department sirens go off. Immediately, he commands Nyle to close the curtains. Nyle tries to calm Ezra's fears, but he succumbs to them anyway. Soon, the sirens dissipate, and they hear a lone fire truck drive by on the road. Ezra recovers quickly and thanks Nyle for understanding.

Ezra then talks to Nyle again about how he admires her and her grandmother's way of living. Ezra tells Nyle that he does not like being led around like sheep and decides at that moment that he will be in control of his life. Nyle tries to tell him that she is as dependent as everyone else is, but Ezra will not believe her.

Chapter 19 Analysis

Nyle's feelings for Ezra continue to grow. Nyle admits that sometimes while they are studying, she finds herself staring at him. Nyle's feelings are like that of a normal teenage girl toward a normal teenage boy.

When the sirens go off, it immediately signals disaster to Ezra, and he overreacts to what turns out just to be a fire siren. However, Ezra recovers quickly and then thanks Nyle for her understanding. In typical teenager thought process, Ezra tells Nyle that she must think he is a jerk. Nyle denies it, and then Ezra tells her that she is "alright for a sheep girl" (p. 122). That comment opens up a complex issue. Ezra uses sheep as a metaphor for his life. Ezra explains that the government created and implemented an elaborate plan in case disaster struck. Ezra says he and the others were just like sheep, being led from one place to another - following instead of taking the lead. Nyle tries to reason with Ezra and tell him that she and her grandmother are dependent in many ways, but he does not see it that way based on his experience. This admonition also indicates his anger with the government for allowing this to happen to him and to others.



Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

Christmas comes and goes without much ado. Nyle and Gran have never made it a big celebration before, and they certainly are not about to this year, what with all that has taken place. In addition to the accident, the Trent family does not celebrate Christmas.

The day after Christmas, accompanied by the puppy and Caleb, Nyle makes rounds checking on the sheep. It is bitter cold, so Nyle decides to take the shortcut through the Powers' property. The puppy hears Ripley and begins barking, giving away their presence. Ripley asks Nyle what she is doing on his property, and she tells him she is on her way to the far pasture. Nyle quickly moves herself and the two dogs off the Powers' property. As Nyle is feeding the sheep, the puppy begins barking with an unusual tone. The puppy detects Ripley standing on the edge of the woods. Muncie hears the barking, and she comes over to see what it might mean. Ripley calls Muncie names, and as usual, Nyle defends Muncie. A troublemaker to the end, Ripley hurls an ice ball over at Nyle. Nyle bends down to move the salt bucket, and the ice ball hits her in the cheek with such force that she falls to her knees and her head aches.

Muncie explains to Nyle that as soon as she fell down, Ripley took off like a coward. Muncie also tells her that Nyle does not have to stick up for her anymore with people like Ripley. Then, she introduces herself to the puppy. Nyle tells Muncie that she got the puppy a couple of weeks before and that he still does not have a name. Nyle does not tell her that the puppy belongs to Ezra. Soon, the cold gets to Muncie, and she leaves for home. Nyle then leads the puppy to the front pasture and locks him in there with the sheep. On only his second night out with the sheep, the puppy goes directly to the center of the sheep. The sheep offer their warmth and circle closely around the puppy, their new protector.

Chapter 20 Analysis

Ripley is definitely a bully. Even though it is not deer season, Ripley carries the rifle with him as a show of power. After Nyle leaves his property, Ripley reappears at the edge of the woods near Nyle's far pasture. Ripley begins to taunt Muncie and then sends an ice ball over toward Nyle. Intended or not, the ice ball hits Nyle on the cheek and takes her down. Just like a typical coward, Ripley runs away.

Another opportunity for Nyle to talk about Ezra appears, but she does not take advantage of the opportunity. Instead, Nyle chooses to keep the secret of Ezra from Muncie awhile longer.

Once Nyle is inside the house, Gran tells Nyle again that Ezra is getting better. Immediately, Nyle thinks that the Trents are ready to leave. This time, her fear of leaving comes in the form of disappointment rather than hurt or anger. What Gran tells her is



that Nyle is supposed to start going outside again. Gran enlists her help in getting that accomplished. Nyle decides on her strategy for the next day. The reader may now fully begin to question what plan Nyle has for introducing Ezra to Muncie and Ripley, who are often outside when she is.



Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

Gran gets a box of Gramp's winter clothes out from storage, but Nyle comes up with excuses for Ezra not to wear any more of Gramp's clothing. Nyle lets go of her fear and takes the box down to Ezra, telling him to pick out some warm clothes. Nyle grabs her coat and goes outside, calling after both Ezra and Caleb to help her check on the puppy. Ezra follows her outside. Questioning the air quality, Ezra asks if Nyle brought the detector with them. Nyle gives it to him and tells him to check it himself, but she assures him that it is safe. Then, Nyle tells him that they have sheep to tend and need to get going.

The first stop is the first pasture to let out the puppy. The puppy eagerly greets them as Nyle introduces him to the ewes. Nyle explains that they need to fill the truck with hay in order to feed them. Immediately, Ezra's eyes light up with excitement. When they get to the barn, Ezra sees all the farm equipment and is amazed. Ezra begins to help Nyle put bales of hay into the truck. Ezra's mask falls down, but either he does not care or does not notice. Nyle drives the truck first to show Ezra how to do it for his turn. When she arrives at the front pasture, Nyle gets out and unloads the hay.

Already, Ezra is too weak to do any more work. Nyle motions for Ezra to come into the pasture with her, but he pauses as if he is afraid of the sheep. After a little coaxing, Ezra joins Nyle in the pasture. After Nyle finished her chores in the front pasture, she calls out to Ezra that it is time for the next delivery. She asks him if he is ready to drive. Nyle gives Ezra another quick lesson, and away he goes. Nyle follows on foot. When they are finished with the deliveries, Ezra parks the truck in the shed. Nyle asks Ezra about naming the puppy, and he says that he has already been thinking about a name and asks if she thinks "Shep" is okay. Nyle approves, and they lead Shep back into the front pasture.

As the two teens walk back to the house for lunch, Ezra reflects on the scenery, and it brings back a memory of a hike he used to take with his friends. Ezra begins to talk about his pent-up feelings. Ezra tries to explain to Nyle how he feels about the accident and his father's death. Ezra talks more than he ever has, and Nyle, not knowing what to say, does the right thing by saying nothing and just listening to him. Ezra confides in her, and eventually he breaks down after she wraps her arms around him. Nyle tries to talk to him about her experience with death and tells Ezra the hardest part is letting go. Nyle reminds him of the phoenix and tells him that he *is* the phoenix. Until this moment, Nyle did not understand the need for him to leave and start anew. Gran knew long before she did, but now Nyle realizes how important it is to Ezra. By telling him, "Fly away and start again," Nyle is giving him permission to leave her.



Chapter 21 Analysis

As foreshadowed in a previous chapter, Ezra is indeed experiencing guilt. Burdened with the guilt of his father working for the nuclear company, of accusing his father of accepting nuclear money, of treating his father so harshly and of surviving when so many innocent people died, Ezra begins to let the guilt go as he talks with Nyle.



Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

Ezra and Nyle head for the farmhouse, feeling a connection that until then had not been existed as deeply as it does now. As they walk toward the house, Ezra tenses up, but Nyle comforts him, explaining that Gran is burning green wood. They stand there holding hands, and Nyle likes the feeling. Nyle tells Ezra that she needs to bring in more wood, and he offers to help, loading his arms with more wood than he should be carrying. Nyle loads the wood carrier, and as she opens the door to the kitchen, she sees someone in the driveway from her peripheral vision. It is Muncie. Once again, Nyle chooses to ignore the facts and pretend she does not see Muncie. She hopes that everything will be all right.

Chapter 22 Analysis

Nyle likes the way she feels when she is with Ezra. When they hold hands on the way up to the farmhouse after Ezra's breakdown, Nyle feels closeness to someone that she has not allowed herself to feel in a long time. Enjoying this feeling, Nyle senses the danger that it poses.

Nyle reflects back to the night of the accident when so many lives ended and turned for the worst. It was a night like any night for her, and she was oblivious to the accident and its effects. Nyle brings up a point about victims - people who lose their power and their voice. Nyle wonders who speaks for the victims. Until someone has walked in the shoes of a person who has experienced something horrific, one cannot know what it is like. This is the reason so many people speak out after surviving a rape, witnessing a crime or coming back from a disease.



Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

Running late, Nyle's morning is already off to a bad start. When she boards the bus, Nyle tries to sit next to Muncie, but Muncie blocks the seat off with her backpack. After Nyle sits down behind her, Muncie moves the pack and lets a seventh grader sit next to her. Nyle moves to the seat directly behind Muncie and attempts to get her talking. Finally, Nyle tells Muncie who Ezra is, why he is staying at her house and why Nyle did not tell her about him. Muncie does not give in to the story or to the apology. As the rest of the children get off the bus and head into the school, Nyle and Muncie talk about what they should have talked about weeks before. Muncie finally breaks away from Nyle after saying that Nyle is just like the rest of them - treating Muncie like a freak and not a person. Nyle realizes that Muncie is right.

Chapter 23 Analysis

Muncie is right. Knowing that each person makes up his or her mind, Nyle should have trusted her best friend to weigh the situation and come up with her own decision about Ezra. By keeping the secret, Nyle drives a wedge between her and Muncie. Nonverbal communication is just as important as verbal communication, if not more. By not addressing a problem, the affects of not dealing with it are often tenfold the size of the problem itself. Relationships are often destroyed by the aftermath of a problem or crisis, not necessarily the source of the problem. It is obvious at this point that Nyle has crushed Muncie by her actions.

Think back to when Muncie told Nyle that she did not need to stick up for her anymore with Ripley and the others. Muncie told Nyle that it did not matter what people like that said because they did not matter. Muncie said, "Only people who mean something to me can hurt me." Nyle matters, and she causes Muncie intense pain.

The author uses foreshadowing in the last paragraph when Nyle realizes the worst part of connecting with people - when the connections break. Nyle is thinking about her broken relationship with Nyle and the break that is sure to come with Ezra.



Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

The only constant in Nyle's life now is Ezra. He waits for her to come home from school every day. Together, they study, and sometimes, Ezra reads to Nyle. Nyle appreciates how easy it is to be with Ezra. One day, Nyle sings softly while doing her homework. Ezra recognizes the song and asks her about it. Ezra says he remembers her singing it to him when he was sick.

Now with Ezra well, he and his mother join Gran and Nyle at the dinner table each night. In fact, Miriam and Ezra do most of the cooking to the delight of all! After Ezra and Nyle go to bed, the two women sit up talking and laughing, enjoying each other's company. During dinner one night, Ezra tells the two older women about the song Nyle sang to him. Gran saw a flier that Nyle had thrown in the trash announcing a concert that night at the school. Gran and Miriam are determined that the four of them will attend. Nyle is afraid of taking the two of them out in public - afraid of the public's reaction. The night goes off without a hitch, though, and they all have a great time together, despite the cramped feeling when they are all inside the truck.

The following week, Gran tells Nyle that she is going to drive Miriam and Ezra to Montpelier to see if they can get some governmental assistance. Nyle fears that Gran will return alone. While Gran and the Trents are gone, Nyle remembers that Gran said that Miriam might fit into her clothes, so Nyle goes through her closet and dresser and finds things that she wants to give to Mrs. Trent. Nyle takes them downstairs to the back bedroom and puts them in the dresser for Mrs. Trent. Then, Nyle takes in as much of Ezra as she can by lying in his bed and smelling his scent.

When Gran and the Trents arrive back at the house, Nyle is relieved to see them and to hear that they will remain on at their house for an undetermined time. This good news is met with some rather nerve-wracking news as well. Gran, Miriam and Ezra have decided that it is time Ezra returned to school. Nyle is not sure how she will handle the situation of introducing Ezra to the kids at school without causing rejection or fear. Mrs. Trent, understanding Nyle's trepidation, takes Nyle's hands in her own and tells her how much she appreciates Nyle's contribution to Ezra's recovery. Then, squeezing her face, Mrs. Trent kisses Nyle gently on the forehead.

Chapter 24 Analysis

While one friendship suffers, another flourishes. The relationship with Ezra and Nyle continues to develop into a closeness that warms the heart. Just as Nyle and Ezra strengthen the bond of their friendship, so do Gran and Miriam. The two older women spend the evenings talking and laughing, giving each other a release that they both



need and enjoy. On the other hand, Muncie holds true to her words that she is finished with Nyle.

When the co-mingled "family" decides to venture out to the concert at Nyle's school, Nyle is the one stricken with fear. Even Ezra is excited to get out and experience life. Nyle fears not so much for his safety but for the reaction they might receive out in public. Nyle wonders how she will handle the introduction as well if anyone sees her with Ezra. Why does it still matter to Nyle what others think? Is Nyle afraid for Ezra, or is she afraid that "the public" will also reject her? The evening turns out to be enjoyable, and Nyle admires how easily Gran introduces Miriam to her friends and those around her.

When Nyle learns that Gran is driving Ezra and Miriam to Montpelier to try and get some governmental assistance, Nyle fears that Gran will come home without them. Nyle knows they will leave when they are ready, but Nyle is torn between Ezra getting well and Ezra leaving. To busy herself while she awaits their return, Nyle remembers that Gran told her that Mrs. Trent would fit into her clothes. Nyle goes through her closet and dresser and finds clothes for Mrs. Trent. Nyle takes the clothes downstairs and puts them away in the dresser for Mrs. Trent to find them.

Gran finally returns with Ezra and Miriam, and Nyle is relieved to see them. The assistance that may come does not materialize in the first trip, so the Trents will stay at Nyle's house longer, which of course, makes Nyle very happy. Ezra announces that they have all decided that he is well enough to return to school and that he will be going to Leland and Gray with her. Again, Nyle is torn. Nyle is happy that he is well enough to go to school but concerned about how she will explain their relationship. More importantly, she is afraid that after meeting others at school, Ezra will no longer depend on her. Ironically, Nyle is insecure in her friendship with Ezra just as Muncie is with Nyle. Sensing Nyle's fears, Mrs. Trent comforts her as a mother would a daughter.



Chapter 25

Chapter 25 Summary

Ezra and Nyle are late getting to the bus stop on his first day at school. Fortunately, it takes Muncie awhile to get on and sit down, so Nyle and Ezra make it. Muncie tries to busy herself while Nyle and Ezra board so that she will not have to look at them. Nyle and Ezra sit all the way in the back. One senior girl takes notice of Ezra with Nyle, cuddled together in the seat. When Nyle whispers in Ezra's ear that the girl thinks they are "going together," Ezra responds wisely. Nyle is not sure if he is joking or not.

When the two arrive at school, Nyle takes Ezra to where he needs to register, and then she shows him to his first class. Nyle sees Ezra periodically throughout the day, and when she does, girls surround him.

On the bus ride home, Ezra tells Nyle about his day. Ezra is happy to report that he solved the brainteaser that the teacher puts up each week but that no one ever solves. Ezra then describes all the people that he met during the day, describing them so well that Nyle knows who they are even when he cannot remember their names.

Muncie does turn in the direction of Nyle and Ezra, but Rudie starts talking to her and then pulls her attention back to their seat. Ezra notices Nyle's heavy sigh and then looks from Nyle to Muncie to Nyle again. He does not say a word, though.

Chapter 25 Analysis

Ezra's fear of going outside is long gone by the time he attends his first day of school at Leland and Gray. Nyle is not afraid so much of Ezra's presence at school but more her ability to explain him without causing concern. As Nyle observes Ezra respond to inquiries, she admires his ability to handle it without going into too much detail. For example, when kids ask where he is from, Ezra simply replies with "down south" and says nothing else.

Teenage love is simple but complicated. Teenagers expect little from each other in a relationship. This makes it simple, but because so many things go unsaid, it also complicates things. For example, when Nyle whispered to Ezra about the girl on the bus assuming they are "going together," Ezra replies in the affirmative in the form of a question and then jokes with her about them going to school together in the same bus and same seat. Neither Ezra nor Nyle wants to jeopardize whatever it is their relationship has become by talking about such a commitment. At school, when Nyle sees girls always accompanying Ezra, she naturally feels a pang of jealousy.

The wedge between Muncie and Nyle is still prevalent. Knowing Nyle and Ezra are coming onto the bus, Muncie looks for something to do so she does not have to watch them get on the bus and walk by her. Muncie pretends that they are not there and that

their presence does not affect her, but it does. If it did not, then Muncie would not go to the trouble of "busy"ing" herself.



Chapter 26

Chapter 26 Summary

Every night Ezra and Nyle work on their homework at the kitchen table. One night when Ezra has completed his homework, Nyle tells him about her history assignment. Her teacher has told her to write a letter to someone in history who has had the greatest impact on her. Thinking along the lines of WWII, Nyle has chosen Anne Frank. Before she can even begin, Ezra takes out a sheet of paper, and he begins writing. Nyle asks what Ezra is doing, and he tells her that he is doing the assignment also. When Nyle finishes, she asks Ezra if she can read hers to him. When Nyle finishes, Ezra takes his paper, wads it up and then throws it in the trash. Its tone of death, fear and prejudice is more than Ezra can bear, and he stands up to go to bed abruptly. Ezra asks if he too has to die in the end in order for her to remember him. Nyle apologizes for hurting him unintentionally, but he goes to bed anyway.

When Nyle is certain that he will not be returning, she retrieves his crumpled letter from the trash. Nyle reads it and rereads it many times. Ezra wrote to Nyle about all the ways he admires her, how she has helped him heal and how she provided him with the motivation to want to live.

Chapter 26 Analysis

When Ezra takes the sheet of paper out and quickly begins writing, the author hints strongly at what is to come. Nyle, in her naivety, takes the assignment at face value. On the other hand, Ezra takes it from his heart and writes about Nyle. In his letter, Ezra opens up to Nyle, as he has never done before. Ezra writes about all the things that matter in life and what a difference Nyle has made in his life. In fact, without him, Ezra believes he would be dead.

Nyle tries to explain to Ezra that she thinks he is courageous and full of spirit, too. When Ezra asks if he too has to die in the end for all to remember him, Nyle finally gets it. Ezra wants to live and wants Nyle and others to remember him for who he is, not necessarily why he got sick and certainly not because of the accident. The reader will question how Nyle will handle this wedge in her friendship to Ezra. Nyle has one friendship down the tubes already. Is this one doomed, too?



Chapter 27

Chapter 27 Summary

The second week that Ezra is at school, there is an early thaw. The road that leads to their farmhouse is muddy every afternoon. One afternoon, Ripley approaches Ezra, Nyle and Muncie. As usual, Ripley begins his taunting. This time Ripley directs his taunting at Ezra *and* Muncie. Nyle cannot take any more of Ripley's bad behavior and lunges toward him. Ripley overpowers her and takes Nyle down to the ground. Ripley sees Ezra approach, and he shoves Nyle out of the way. Immediately, Ripley goes after Ezra, takes him down and pummels him until he is nearly unconscious. Ezra lies there face down in the mud taking each punch. Nyle attacks Ripley, but he takes her attacks while he continues to assault Ezra. Finally, Nyle scratches his face, and she realizes she must have gotten his good eye because Ripley stops hitting Ezra. Ripley tells Nyle that his dog has gone missing again. Nyle tells Ripley that it is not her or Ezra's fault that his dog ran off. Then Ripley tells her that the border guards found him dead. The officials opened him up and saw that he died of radiation poisoning. Ripley begins to cry. This is why Ripley attacked Ezra. Ripley truly believed that it was Ezra's fault.

Just then, Muncie hits Ripley hard with her backpack, and Ripley flips forward and rolls off her. Nyle cannot figure out what happened, and then she remembers that Muncie is there, too. Muncie gladly helps Nyle get Ezra to the house. Ezra is a bloody mess. His face is streaming blood, and he can barely walk. Gran and Mrs. Trent meet them, and they take him into his room and try cleaning him up and tending to his wounds. Gran orders the girls upstairs to clean up and change clothes so Muncie does not get in trouble at home. While the girls are up in Nyle's room, Nyle faintly hears a truck outside. When Nyle goes downstairs to check on Ezra, she finds that he, Mrs. Trent and Gran have all left. Muncie goes home, and Nyle is alone. Nyle busies herself with the chores, but when the chores are done and her strength is gone, she just "sat on the stump staring at the empty house" (p. 171).

Chapter 27 Analysis

Closed-mindedness and anger surface as Ripley takes out his hate and anger on innocent Ezra. Ripley believes that his dog, the dog that he loved, died because of Ezra's presence. Ripley has a closed mind and does not believe that evacuees can be harmless because his world is based on fear. With each punch, Ripley is letting off his steam until the point when he finally breaks down to tears. Nyle is surprised to see Ripley crying. Perhaps it is the first time Ripley has cried since he was a small child.

Protecting others is a theme that runs throughout this story and is present here. Ripley cuts down both people that Nyle cares for deeply, and she cannot take any more of it. Nyle attacks Ripley in an attempt to stick up for Ezra and Muncie. When Ezra sees Ripley attacking Nyle, he steps in to stick up for her. As Ripley pummels Ezra, Nyle



once again tries to defend Ezra by attacking Ripley. Finally, Muncie comes to the ultimate rescue and hits Ripley so hard with her backpack that she knocks him over and then finally retreats. Together, Muncie and Nyle help Ezra back to the house.

As the women tend to Ezra and the girls change clothes and try to clean up, Nyle discovers her abandoned doll and a photograph of her family in Gran's dresser. She wants to keep it a secret, but Nyle knows that she must not keep any more secrets from Muncie. She explains both of them.

When Nyle discovers that the older women have taken Ezra away, Nyle feels terrible. Nyle's fear of Ezra being taken away from her creates such a sad feeling that she can do nothing but try to keep her mind occupied with heavy labor. Finally, her body can take no more work, and Nyle rests on the stump, waiting.



Chapter 28

Chapter 28 Summary

Like a true friend, Muncie comes over to Nyle's house to check on her. Muncie finds Nyle sitting outside in the cold and convinces her to go inside the house. Muncie puts on the coffee, but Nyle cannot sit in the house. The two go outside together. In the shed, Nyle tells Muncie everything. Muncie tells Nyle that Ezra is dying. Muncie says that they are all dying. Together, they sit on the chopping block waiting for the truck to reappear. Nyle begins to confide in Muncie about her fears of not saying goodbye to Ezra and questions why her grandmother did not give her that opportunity. Then, the headlights of the truck slowly appear.

Chapter 28 Analysis

Loyalty between friends is the best attribute. Muncie knows how concerned Nyle is about Ezra, so she returns to check on Nyle. When she finds Nyle sitting alone outside, Muncie tries to comfort her. Muncie listens while Nyle talks, and like a good friend, she does not make one judgment. Separated from Ezra, Nyle feels like she is not being there for him this time, and she is upset with Gran for taking that opportunity away from her.

Talking about death and accepting death are difficult tasks for most people. Nyle refuses to believe that Ezra is dying, but in reality, every day that a person lives a person is that much closer to death. Muncie makes a point that "We're all dying..." but Nyle resists subscribing to that belief. It is at this moment that Nyle realizes that Muncie, despite her physical weakness, is much stronger than she is.

Muncie predicts that Ezra is dying. The effects of the nuclear accident are going to have profound and lingering effects on all of them, but they will hit harder on those directly affected by the exposure. Muncie knows that Ezra is dying.



Chapter 29

Chapter 29 Summary

Gran and Nyle are traveling to the hospital to visit Ezra. The fight with Ripley caused the profuse bleeding, but the leukemia is what is making Ezra so weak and sick. When Gran warns Nyle that seeing Ezra sick again is not going to be easy, Nyle nods in agreement. Then, Nyle expresses her blame of Ripley for causing the problem. Gran, always ready to help Nyle see things differently, tells her that it is the accident, not Ripley, that is killing Ezra.

The two slowly make their way to room 804, Nyle glancing in all the hospital rooms she passes. When they arrive at Ezra's room, Nyle notices that the curtains are drawn. Mrs. Trent stands to receive them and opens her arms to Nyle. Nyle runs into her arms for comfort. Mrs. Trent then calls to Ezra so he will wake up and see Nyle. Nyle can hardly believe that the person lying in the bed is indeed Ezra, but his scar confirms it.

Nyle presents her gift and then opens it for Ezra. Then, she begins reading to him again from *Slake's Limbo*. Finally, Ezra musters enough strength to ask Nyle how she is doing. Ezra uses the same name he had when he first addressed her. Ezra asks Nyle to open the curtains. When the sunlight pours into his room, Ezra tells Nyle that he waited for her. Nyle takes his hand in hers, and the two of them look into each other's eyes. When Nyle gently touches the bandanna on his head, Ezra asks her to take it off for him. With her fingers, Nyle slowly examines the features of Ezra's face, stopping at the scar above his eye. Ezra announces that he is tired, and Nyle tells him that she knows that. Then, Ezra tells her that he has to leave. Again, Nyle nods. Ezra asks her if she will be okay after he leaves. Nyle tells him she will be okay. A tear escapes his eye, and then Nyle takes her hands in his and presses herself into Ezra. Then, Ezra dies.

Gran and Nyle talk on their way home about why all of this had to happen. Nyle recalls how her teacher assigned the students to write a letter to the lawmakers about the accident. Gran says that something will be done because of it, but Nyle is not so sure. Gran encourages her to be the voice for those whose voices are gone. Knowing it is too late for Ezra, Nyle decides it was not too late for others.

As Gran drives closer to the farm, Nyle sees Uncle Lemmy standing in the middle of the sheep. He, Aunt May and Bethany moved into the back bedroom the previous month. Bethany is improving, slowly. Lemmy is feeling right at home with the animals. Shep greets Nyle when she gets out of the truck, and she buries her face in his fur. Nyle discovers that he no longer smells like a puppy. Finding Ezra's scent on her, Shep nuzzles Nyle, taking in all that he can of Ezra. Always there when Nyle needs her, Muncie appears at the edge of the woodlot and waves to her. Nyle waves back at her best friend, who never leaves her.



Chapter 29 Analysis

Pain and suffering start and end this chapter and story. After the fight, the doctors discover that Ezra has an advanced stage of leukemia. When Nyle finally gets to see him at the hospital, it is the last time she sees him. The two share a short but deep conversation. Ezra understands Nyle's fear of people leaving her, and he wants to make sure that she will be okay after he leaves. When Nyle reassures him that she will be, she is really giving him permission to die. Nyle hangs on to him as long as she can and sends everything good she has in her to him, but it is too late. Ezra dies shortly after.

To overcome such illness only to be defeated by it in another attack is debilitating. Ezra finds the strength to win the first time but knows that there was nothing he can do this time. Ezra accepts his fate but wants to make sure that Nyle will accept it too. Ironically, cancer causes all three losses Nyle copes with.

Recalling the assignment to write the lawmakers, Nyle decides that even though it is too late to help Ezra, it is not too late to help others. As the story closes, the reader presumes that this will become Nyle's purpose. As in the letter to Anne Frank, Nyle does not, will not and cannot forget Ezra, although she feels that so many people have already.

Through thick and thin, Muncie and Nyle pick up their friendship as if nothing ever came between them. As Nyle explains earlier in the story, Muncie never leaves. Right at the end, Muncie is there for her just as Nyle needs her.



Characters

Nyle Sumner

The main character, Nyle, is a thirteen-year-old girl who is orphaned and living with her grandmother on a sheep farm just outside of what used to be Cookshire. Nyle describes herself as "thorny," but she is also wise. In the first controversy with Ripley Powers and his dog, Tyrus, Ripley warns Nyle to back off her anger after Tyrus kills one of her ewes. Nyle knows that it is best to cool down and not "mess with the likes of Ripley Powers" because he is too big and too strong. Despite knowing better, Nyle is tempted to fight him, but her friend Muncie pulls her back. Nyle realizes that it is probably best not to fight.

When Nyle allows herself to remember her father, the reader learns why she and her mother came to live with Nyle's grandparents. Nyle comments that her father was the first to leave her but surely was not the last. Nyle admits that she does not like remembering her father, as she has much disdain, hurt and probably anger about him leaving her.

Nyle has many unresolved issues relating to people "leaving her." In Chapter 2, Nyle alludes to the anger about her father leaving her, and then it becomes apparent when she claims she won't "make friends with a dead boy" that she is really afraid to get close to someone who will die. It is clear that Nyle fears people leaving her.

When Ezra and Mrs. Trent first move in with Nyle and Gran, Nyle adamantly defies Gran and says she will not visit Ezra. Nyle's defiance abates as each day passes, and soon it turns to anticipation as Ezra strengthens. The two become friends. As Ezra heals, Nyle does as well. Nyle learns that not all who stay in the back bedroom are doomed. She begins to accept things in life and become more flexible.

As Nyle and Ezra become friends, he teaches her about patience and combating prejudice. As their friendship grows, Nyle's emotional wounds slowly begin to heal. By the end, when she realizes that Ezra must leave, Nyle understands, despite her pain and loss.

Gran

A woman who has led a hard life, knowing the pain of losing a daughter and then a husband, Gran marches onward. Gran's face is round and wrinkled, but her heart is soft and sweet. Despite the losses in Gran's life, she does not look at life as if she holds a grudge against it. Instead, she is a wise woman. Gran continues through life strong because she lets go of the anger inside her that can sour a person. When Nyle asks Gran about whether or not she's ever had so much anger in her that "you could see the blood inside your eyes," Gran simply replies: "That kind of anger's not good for you." This statement demonstrates how this woman continues to tackle the hardships in life



without letting it get to her soul. When her husband died, the next day she went out and moved fences on the property.

Gran decides that doing the right thing includes bringing Mrs. Trent and Ezra home with her. Gran explains to Nyle the importance of treating others well and spending time with them, even when and especially when they are dying.

Muncie Harris

The small child or "runt" of the Harris family, Muncie has straw-blond hair, blue eyes behind glasses, a big head and short arms and legs. Her physical deformity is not the only problem she faces; she is also very short of breath. Walking and talking is too difficult for her, so when she is walking with Nyle, there is no conversation. Despite her deformities, Muncie is very strong and quick. Muncie is faster at most things than Nyle, which amazes Nyle.

Muncie is Nyle's best friend, but Nyle strains their friendship when she chooses not to tell Muncie about Ezra and his mother living with them. Instead of doing homework with Muncie, Nyle reads to Ezra. When Muncie sees the two figures in the back bedroom window the day Ezra allows them to open the curtain, Muncie and Nyle's friendship suffers again. Muncie has a closed mind about the people who are sick with radiation poisoning. For this reason, Nyle is reluctant to tell Muncie about Mrs. Trent and Ezra. In a way, Nyle is trying to protect Muncie, not necessarily from radiation exposure but so that Muncie still has a friend. Nyle knows that if Muncie and her parents know about the Trents, then Muncie's parent will not allow her to play with Nyle. Then, Muncie will have no friends at all.

When Muncie discovers the secret, she is so upset with Nyle that she cuts her off totally. On the bus, Muncie sits with Rudie and pretends not to see Nyle board. She also ignores Nyle at school. When Ripley starts beating Nyle and Ezra up, though, Muncie comes to their aid. From that moment onward, Muncie and Nyle regain their friendship.

Muncie's parents rent a house from Gran high on their property above the back pasture, at the edge of the upper woodlot.

Ezra Trent

The night of the accident, Ezra could not reach his father and ran over to the nuclear plant to find him. As a result, Ezra took a lot of radiation. Ezra is deathly ill, and the doctors can do no more for him. They discharged him from the hospital to make room for others. Ezra and his mother move into the back bedroom at Nyle's house.

Each day, Ezra lies motionless on the bed breathing laboriously to stay alive. Nyle notices that as each day passes, he shrinks more. One day when Nyle is crying, Ezra watches her and speaks to her. This small positive action creates hope within Nyle and Ezra both. Slowly, Ezra regains his strength until one day he is able to stand using the



help of the two canes that Gramp carved before his death. Eventually, Ezra regains enough strength so that he can walk around the room. Ezra could walk further, but he refuses to leave the room. Unable to conquer his fear, Ezra continues to wallow in self-pity and allow himself to sacrifice truly living. Tension builds between Ezra and Nyle, as he gives in to his fear.

When Nyle gives Ezra a puppy, he screams to get it away. First, he yells out that the puppy is radioactive, and then he whispers to Nyle not to bring him anything to love. It is obvious that Ezra is not only afraid but confused as well. Ezra has been deathly ill. Although he overcomes his illness, he has not dealt with the death of his father or come to terms with his fear of living. Perhaps he is even feeling guilty for living. Regardless, Ezra cannot cope with allowing himself to take any amount of risk whatsoever and bans himself to the back bedroom.

Eventually, Ezra recovers fully, or at least he seems to. Ezra begins school at Leland and Gray with Nyle and helps with chores when he is strong enough to do so. After Ripley attacks Ezra, Mrs. Trent and Gran take him to the hospital to stop the bleeding. The doctors discover that Ezra has leukemia, in an advanced stage, brought on by the radiation exposure.

To the end, Ezra and Nyle share a tremendous bond. They both allow themselves to get close to someone and to love someone. Both Ezra and Nyle lost loved ones and know what a risk it is to love someone, and yet they choose to allow themselves to love each other.

Mrs. Trent (Miriam)

Miriam Trent is in her late forties or early fifties and has just a few wrinkles around her large, green eyes when Nyle first meets her. Mrs. Trent's hands are soft and well manicured. Mrs. Trent speaks with elegance, has an accent and uses formal language. Since Mrs. Trent had to leave all contaminated items behind, she is wearing a threadbare housedress, which someone in the community donated, that looks noticeably out of place on her body.

A devoted mother, Mrs. Trent tends to her dying son's every need. When Ezra is in his comatose state, she does not leave his side in case he awakes and needs something. The only time she leaves his side is when Nyle comes in to visit with Ezra. Eventually, Mrs. Trent becomes ill from the radiation poisoning, but she recovers fully.

When Ezra is in the hospital dying of leukemia, Mrs. Trent sits next to his bedside and stays with him until Nyle comes to visit, just as it was in the back bedroom. Mrs. Trent and Nyle develop a close bond, a nurturing relationship similar to that of a mother and daughter. Mrs. Trent takes Nyle's face into her hands and then kisses her cheek after she thanks her for the important task of bringing Ezra back to the living. As Ezra lies dying in the hospital, Mrs. Trent opens her arms to Nyle, knowing the pain and suffering



that she is feeling. The embrace of comfort is something that Gran does not provide in their "tough love" environment, so Nyle appreciates these moments.

Bayley

Bayley is a black and white cat, belonging to Nyle, who likes sleep by the stove in the kitchen and curl up in Nyle's lap. Bayley is a very affectionate cat, licking Nyle, which Nyle says is "softening her up," and purring loudly when she pets him. Bayley provides comfort and is a source of strength for Nyle.

Aunt May & Uncle Lemmy

Nyle's aunt and uncle live just twenty miles east of Nyle. Whereas Nyle's town escaped much of the radiation fallout in North Haversham, Aunt May and Uncle Lemmy's area was not as fortunate. The radiation levels in the area where Aunt May and Uncle Lemmy live is sickening herds and people.

Aunt May and Uncle Lemmy own a Holstein farm, a dairy farm, on Old Putney Road. Before the accident contaminated their land, Uncle Lemmy had hundreds of prized Holsteins. After the accident, Uncle Lemmy forces himself to get rid of the herd because of all the contamination. The government reports that his herd and farm are clean, but Lemmy's detectors tell otherwise. Lemmy's sick family and dying daughter prove his detectors right. In doing the right thing, Lemmy cannot, and will not, sell contaminated milk. The government twice denies high readings of contamination on their farm and then accuses Lemmy of taking advantage of a bad situation.

Aunt May and Uncle Lemmy used to laugh easily, but now their hearts are heavy. Nyle recalls how Aunt May and Uncle Lemmy were filled with shame after Nyle's father (Aunt May's brother) left her and her mother, but they did not feel this badly.

Aunt May and Uncle Lemmy have seven children, including Bethany, the youngest and sickest. In the end, Aunt May and Uncle Lemmy bring Bethany to live with them at Gran and Nyle's home. Bethany, still sick, slowly improves in the back bedroom, just as Ezra did.

Nyle's Mother

Nyle does not share much about her mother, but the reader learns that when her mother became ill, Nyle's father could not bear to watch her die. He brought his wife and daughter to live with Nyle's grandparents. Nyle's mother died of cancer in the back bedroom. In the end, Nyle finds a picture of her parents in her grandmother's dresser. Nyle's mother is holding her, and her father is standing there next to her mother. Nyle's mother is smiling and looking at Nyle in the picture.



Nyle's Grandfather

Gramp died in the back bedroom, too. Nyle would visit him each day after school and stay with him into the evening. Nyle would chop ice cubes into slivers and put them in his mouth after he stopped eating. Nyle talked and talked, trying to entice him into staying alive. When Nyle left him each night, she always told him to wait for her and that she would be back in the morning. He died anyway, of cancer. While he was fighting his battle, Gramp carved two wooden canes, although he never used them himself.

Bethany

The radiation soars in the town where Nyle's little cousin Bethany lives and causes her to be sick. Initially, Bethany spends time at the hospital, but as the number of affected persons rises, Bethany returns home despite her condition being contagious. Bethany spends her time hooked up to tubes and monitors and lying in a hospital bed in the family's living room. No one knows why Bethany got sicker than the others did, and no one thinks she will live through the first month, either. While Ezra is in the hospital, Bethany and her parents come to live with Nyle and Gran in the back bedroom. Slowly, Bethany's condition improves.

Tyrus

Tyrus is a dog that is always running away. The author introduces Tyrus only after he has already killed one of Nyle's ewes. Nyle yells after him to shoo him away, but it is already too late. In the first chapter, the reader learns that this dog has killed six of the Sumner family sheep already this year. Karma gets to Tyrus. In the end, Ripley's refusal to keep Tryus on a chain kills him. The border-crossing guards find Tyrus dead. With the new laws requiring an autopsy on all dead animals, the officials reveal that Tyrus has died from radiation exposure.

Ripley Powers

Ripley is always yelling, as if he has no other voice to use. The author introduces Ripley to the story when he is trying to get his dog, Tyrus, under control. Ripley is a large fifteen-year-old boy who lives on a neighboring farm near Nyle. Known for his rebellious attitude, Ripley is the only person Nyle knows who refused to wear his protective mask all the time. Despite a warning from Red Jackson, Ripley does not chain his dog up after the killing of the ewe at Nyle's place. As a result, his dog ends up going where he should not. Learning of his dog's death due to radiation exposure, Ripley attacks Ezra, trying to take out his anger and hurt on him.



Red Jackson

The elected "town officer," Red is known for protecting the people. In the case of the power plant explosion, he makes sure the townspeople receive the necessary protective equipment. Agriculturally, the townspeople report all sheep killings to Red, and he deals with the situation accordingly. If the lamb dies due to a coyote, the farmer is out a lamb. If a dog killed the sheep, the town reimburses the family for the loss of the lamb.

Caleb

Caleb is the silky black and white Border collie "watch dog" that belongs to Nyle. Caleb is low to the ground, very fast and obedient. Caleb is not only the sheep-herding dog but also Nyle's companion. Caleb also breaks the ice for Ezra and Nyle as they form their relationship.

Mr. Sobel

The science teacher at Nyle's school, Mr. Sobel tapes the news each night and then plays it for the children at school so that those who do not have cable can see the news.

Nyle's Father

When Nyle's mother got sick, Nyle's father said he loved her too much to watch her die. He took Nyle and her mother to Gran and Gramp to live. In Nyle's opinion, he did not care enough, and she admits that she does not like remembering him.

Mr. Perry

The principal at Nyle's school, Mr. Perry advises the children that as long as the wind is blowing away from North Haversham, the residents do not need to wear their radiation masks outside.

Mrs. Haskins

Mrs. Haskins teaches history at Nyle's school. On her first day after her leave of absence, Mrs. Haskins assigns the students to write a letter to their congressman about how their lives have been affected by the nuclear leak and asking the congressman what the government is going to do about it.



Shep, the New Puppy

Ezra rejects the wonderful gift of a new puppy from Nyle and Gran. Despite the little puppy's cute almond-shaped eyes, which droop and match those of Ezra, Ezra rejects him. After the puppy has been with Nyle's family one month, he will be able to spend the nights outside guarding the sheep.

Eventually, Ezra names the puppy. Ezra chooses "Shep" and asks Nyle if that is okay with her. Since this is the same name that Ezra first called Nyle, the name makes her feel good inside.

Cousins Lou and Maxine

Lou and Maxine, daughters of Aunt May and Uncle Lemmy, are close in age to Nyle. When Nyle would visit their dairy farm, the three girls would play outside, rarely, if ever, going inside the house. When Nyle visits their farm for the first time after the accident, Nyle tries to get the girls to go outside and play. Their fear holds them hostage in their living room.

Rudie

When Muncie severs her friendship with Nyle, Rudie enters the story. Rudie becomes the school bus seatmate for Muncie, and Nyle sits elsewhere. Rudie is the buffer between the two girls at times and the force that prevents them from working through their issues with each other.



Objects/Places

Cookshire

The residents of this small town near a nuclear plant evacuate after the nuclear leak occurs.

Cookshire Nuclear Plant

Mr. Trent, Ezra's father, is an executive at this plant. The night of the nuclear leak, Mr. Trent receives a call and goes to the plant. Ten days after the accident, workers seal the leak.

Mask

Made from various articles of clothing in Catherine's family, Catherine wraps up some food in the mask and leaves it at the phantom's stone for the phantom to keep warm.

The Curtain

At the beginning of the novel, someone closes the curtain in the back bedroom of the Sumner home, a rare occurrence. As Nyle approaches the house, she notices the curtain's position and stops.

The Back Bedroom

Nyle refers to the back bedroom in the Sumner home as the "dying room." Nyle's mother and grandfather died in this room. This same room houses Mrs. Trent and Ezra after the nuclear accident. As the story progresses, this room changes from being "the back bedroom" to Ezra's room.

Radiation Detector

Red Jackson makes sure that all residents have the proper protective equipment. The radiation detector measures the amount of radioactive waste in the air. Mr. Perry, the principal, also uses a high-quality detector each morning before the buses leave to pick the children up and before school dismisses the children.



Wood Carrier

Every day after school, Nyle fills the wood carrier and brings it into the kitchen to fill the wood box. Nyle is doing this when she discovers that the curtain in the back bedroom is drawn.

One-Pot Something

During the winter, Gran always made a "one-pot something" to serve for supper. The one-pot something simmers all day on the stove.

Compost Bucket

The compost bucket is used to collect food wastes that decompose and can be used as fertilizer. Compost buckets and bins are common on farms and among gardeners.

Newspaper

Mrs. Haskins brings in a newspaper on her first day back at school. It isn't the usual *Boston Globe* that she would always read because Boston is empty, devastated by the radioactive leak.

Wooden Canes

Gramp carved two wooden canes before he got too sick. However, Gramp died and did not use them. Mrs. Trent finds the canes in the closet and gives them to Ezra to use as he regains his strength.

Manchester

After the nuclear accident, Gran takes Nyle to Manchester to shop for Christmas. Accompanied by Muncie, the two girls spend the day shopping and eating lunch. Surprisingly, they run into many of their classmates.

Gramp's Clothes

Mrs. Trent finds Gramp's clothing in the back bedroom closet. Ezra wears Gramp's clothes, since he had to leave all of his clothes behind due to the contamination.



Leland and Gray

Leland and Gray is the school that Nyle attends. During the aftermath of the accident, many teachers take a leave of absence. Ezra attends this school after he recovers. The music department of Leland and Gray puts on a magnificent concert each year, and this year, the concert is important to Nyle, Ezra, Miriam and Gran because it marks the first time Mrs. Trent and Ezra leave the house after their arrival.

Slake's Limbo

Nyle first reads this book to Ezra when she visits him in the back bedroom after his arrival. It is also the last book she reads to him as he dies in the hospital from leukemia.

Setting

Grant is much more interested in her characters and the interaction among them than she is in the settings that serve as backdrops for the interaction.

Basically, *Phoenix Rising* inhabits the world of San Francisco Bay Area suburbia—complete with comfortable middle-class homes, shopping malls, grassy parks and occasional trips to rock concerts and Bay Area/San Francisco nightclubs.

Helen and her boyfriend, Bloomfield, visit the beach; she and Jessie baby-sit a little girl, Sara Rose Harris, who lives next door. Helen visits her doctor, Dr.

Yee, and attends the meetings of a cancer patient support group, and Jessie sees a therapist, Dr. Shubert. Both Helen and Jessie visit the gaudily pretentious home of their sometimes raucous, sometimes endearing friend, Bambi Bordtz. However, apart from a passing description of Bambi's mother's nouveau-riche choice of furniture, the settings these visits entail are almost totally ignored by the two girls in whose words the story is told.

Jessie is beset by a number of troubling dreams (eight of them, to be exact), often set in somewhat surreal landscapes—a devastating earthquake, a runaway car attacked by a dead-eyed hitchhiker, a burning house, a funeral, a deserted hospital (all, save the last, reflections of Jessie's terror, guilt and loss). These bizarre nightmare landscapes are as striking as any of *Phoenix Rising*'s other settings.



Social Sensitivity

For a novel dealing with as potentially grim a subject as a teen-age girl's death from cancer, *Phoenix Rising* is impressively tasteful and upbeat. It is also informative in that it sets forth clearly the many ways people react to death—both when facing it themselves or when responding to the death of a friend or family member. Grant's thoughtful presentation of such issues could lead to a number of valuable discussions. Indeed, aside from a few minor expletives and a little petting, it is hard to imagine anything in *Phoenix Rising* offending anyone—except, perhaps, the young urban reader who lives so close to the ongoing death-by-violence found in our inner cities that he or she will find death-by-cancer in a comfortable California suburb relatively inconsequential.

Literary Qualities

Grant's strength as a writer shows clearly in her ability to parallel Jessie's breaking free from the prison imposed on her by her sister's death and Helen's coming to terms with her deadly disease. She is also impressively able to make her characters speak and think like the otherwise typical middle-class teen-agers they are.

Appropriately, *Phoenix Rising* is written in short paragraphs and contains many of the flip one-liners that make up today's teen-age banter. As a result, the book is filled with irreverent, smart-mouthed remarks that bring a joking, upbeat quality to an otherwise grim subject.

Finally, Grant seems to have a kind of fascination with the difference between the enormity of the universe and the small particulars of daily life.

Whether or not the great expanse of space that both Helen and Jessie sense surrounding their lives is God remains an unanswered question. Early on in the novel, when Jessie is feeling down, she finds "the big blue sky . . . as empty as a promise. We're all down here on our own, alone, trying not to bump into the furniture." On the other hand, Helen, who says she believes in God, considers the universe and the "million stars" overhead and concludes: God is the feeling I have sometimes that we're, all of us in the world, connected; part of something large that we're too close to see, like those paintings made up of tiny dots that take shape only at a distance.

One of the most curious instances of a character's confrontation with such enormity occurs when, during a group therapy session, Helen is asked to imagine herself diving to the bottom of the sea and retrieving a chest which she is asked to pull "toward the surface, toward the sky" and open: I had a hard time describing the treasure I was seeing. It crowded all the words from my mind. It.

was light, golden, glowing light, radiating warmth, growing brighter and brighter. Is it scary? asked the therapist, and I said no. The light was coming from me.

Again and again during the novel Grant conjures up similar reminders of the immense and incalculable universe we all inhabit, as if to suggest, however tentatively, that the infinite dwells within the individual just as much as the individual dwells within the infinite, and that the enormity that surrounds us is filled—not with darkness, but with light, a light we help make shine forth by accepting the unavoidable and by living intensely, positively, and eagerly—one day at a time.



Themes

Acceptance

Nyle learns early in life the importance of accepting people for who and what they are, despite fearing what others think. Gran's decision to bring Mrs. Trent and Ezra to their home when they are down and out with no home, no money and no family is contrary to popular opinion. Most people are afraid that the Trents carry radiation on them, and because of that, people reject them.

The children at school do not accept Muncie for who she is either. Muncie's legs are short and malformed, and her respiratory system is weak, too. Despite these problems, Muncie is strong physically and strong willed. When the kids and even adults tease her, Muncie stands her ground.

Nyle withholds information about Ezra from Muncie because Nyle is afraid that Muncie will not accept him, for fear of the radiation. When confronted with the secret, Muncie is appalled that Nyle did not think that she would be fair and considerate. After all that Muncie takes for her appearance and weakness, Muncie tells Nyle that she would be the last person to judge someone else.

Fear

Fear plays a crucial part in the overall tone of the story. Fear is what prevents characters in the story from living. In the beginning, fear prevents Nyle from wanting to go to the back bedroom. Fear keeps Ezra from allowing the curtain to be open in his room. Fear keeps Ezra from leaving the room and then the house. Nyle's fear of being left prevents her from accepting that people do leave, whether intentionally or not. The fear of going outside without checking the radiation levels or without a mask paralyzes people in their living rooms, like Lou and Maxine.

Fear is what drives people apart and divides them. Some people fear change, but in this story, the public fears the effects of radioactive exposure more than anything. People not directly affected by the radiation exposure fear contamination by those who were exposed. This fear prevents them from reaching out to the evacuees. This fear prevents them from helping others.

Gradually, Nyle's fear of leaving dissipates. It changes. With experience comes wisdom, and Nyle certainly has plenty of experience with leaving. With the help of Ezra, Nyle experiences a "come back" story. As Ezra recovers from his radiation exposure, Nyle's thought process begins to mature as she learns that not everyone who is ill will die. By the time Ezra is dying in the hospital, Nyle understands that there is a time for dying and that it can be okay. When Ezra dies, Nyle does not fear him leaving her.



Loss

Losing a mother at the young age of seven is an incredible loss. By the age of eleven, Nyle has already lost two close family members to cancer. With Ezra's death, that count goes to three. Three deaths, three cancers - Nyle experiences all by the age of thirteen.

Mrs. Trent and Ezra know about loss, too. Mrs. Trent lost her husband, and Ezra lost his father right after the accident. Mrs. Trent then loses her only son. Faced with nearly losing him after the accident, Ezra makes what appears to be a complete recovery only to succumb to a final illness brought on by the radiation exposure. Mrs. Trent then suffers the permanent loss of her son.

Gran also knows the loss of a loved one. After Nyle's mother died, Gran's husband died. In response to her pain and suffering, Gran went out to the pasture and moved fences even during the time when all the visitors were at their house. Gran does not dwell on the past; instead, she accepts it and moves on.

Even cold-hearted Ripley knows about loss. Ripley's manner of grieving is to take revenge out on other people in the form of physical fighting.

The characters do not only deal with the loss that comes with death, but also the loss that comes with broken relationships. For example, Nyle loses her father, but not to death. Nyle's father chooses to run away from the notion of losing his wife. By doing so, he leaves Nyle fatherless. For a time, Nyle and Muncie lose their friendship. Students and their families leave the area after the accident, which results in far fewer students attending the school. The lack of money, supplies, fuel and safe food is also another way the characters in the story suffer from loss.

Grief

Dealing with grief is a personal matter and one that is not easy to digest. Some react by working hard physically, as in the example of Gran moving fences the day after Gramps died. Others use physical force to work out their grief, as Ripley did with Ezra. Some never fully process their grief, and they become hard in the heart, refusing to allow themselves to get close, as Nyle and Ezra do. Some just accept it quietly, like Mrs. Trent.

Learning to trust and learning to love again is part of the healing process. Until a person heals, he or she cannot experience joy. Without joy in life, the outlook is gray, dark and unhappy. Once death and loss are accepted, living continues. Gran advises Nyle: "'Look,' Gran said, 'it's good to be with people, Nyle, even if they aren't going to be around for long. *Especially* if they're not going to be around for long. Makes being here on this earth worthwhile'" (p. 19). Human connections make each moment worthwhile and filled with a purpose.



Responsibility

Nyle learns a valuable lesson about responsibility. In life, one must frequently do things that one does not want to do. Beginning with letting the Trent family stay with them, Nyle performs a string of actions that she does not want to. She goes into the back room, then she reads to Ezra and she even puts sweet water to his lips.

Nyle is very responsible when it comes to the chores on the farm. Nyle never complains despite the weather conditions. When it comes to doing things she does not want to do for people instead of for the farm, she is much less responsible. However, as the story evolves, Nyle matures in her thinking and her emotions. Certainly, Nyle does not want to let Ezra go, but she knows that it is the right thing to do. Nyle thought that eventually she would need to let Ezra leave the house and move to another area for a fresh start. The thought of letting Ezra go to death is not in her mind after he shows such a marked improvement. By preparing herself that Ezra needs to leave, Nyle in a way prepares for his permanent departure.

Friendship

Muncie and Nyle enjoyed a special friendship until Nyle allows Ezra to come between them. As events unfold in the story, the girls' friendship eventually is rebuilt. In the end, Muncie is right there for Nyle as a true friend.

When Ezra arrives, Nyle wants nothing to do with him. Nyle does not want to "make friends with a dead boy." Doing something she does not want to do paves the way for an incredible friendship with Ezra. The two teens share their grief, their fears and their triumphs. Nyle and Ezra develop a deep relationship not often experienced at their age.

Mrs. Trent and Gran also develop a close relationship. Each night while Nyle sits with Ezra during his illness, the two older women sit and talk over coffee. Later, after Ezra recovers, the two women sit up late after the children have gone to bed. They talk and laugh. Just as Ezra helps Nyle to heal, Mrs. Trent offers the same to Gran. Nyle notices the toughness of Gran softening up as her friendship with Miriam evolves.



Themes/Characters

Phoenix Rising's characters would be completely unremarkable were it not for the tragedy they have to confront.

White, comfortably middle-class, of average intelligence, they are raised above being mere sit-com stereotypes by the pain, reflection, and eventual growth Helen's death forces upon them. Throughout their trials and adjustments, they remain true to their backgrounds and natures. Indeed, it is a mark of Grant's ability that the reader never doubts he is looking at the world of middle-class California suburbia through believable teen-age eyes.

Jessie is Phoenix Rising's central character and the one most seriously (and dangerously) affected by her sister's death. Not only does her tendency to idealize her dead sister make her feel unattractive and worthless, her feeling that she failed to reach out to Helen and talk to her about her illness makes Jessie shut herself off from others who need her: her mother, her friend Bambi, Helen's boyfriend Bloomfield (who suffers from a guilt like Jessie's), and little Sara Rose next door. As the novel moves toward its climax, Jessie not only stops eating, she also shuts herself off more and more—ultimately refusing to leave her room.

Jessie's brother Lucas is, at heart, a kind of family philosopher. On the surface, however, he plays the role of a rebellious youth whose predilection for loud rock music (he is, in truth, an exceptionally good electric and acoustic guitarist) puts him at odds with his father, with whom he engages in noisy arguments at the slightest opportunity.

Like Lucas (and the rest of the family, for that matter), Jessie's hard-working architect father seems fixated on his role as family provider and Lucas antagonist. Jessie succinctly observes: "My father thinks he won't cry as long as he keeps shouting." It is as if he and the other family members have been so traumatized by Helen's death that a kind of static role-playing is easier for them than facing their world and moving on with their lives.

Jessie's mother seems simply to have been bludgeoned into a relatively passive being who can do little more than keep up with the necessary household chores, weep for her daughters (the dead Helen as well as the self-destructive Jessie), and tipple glasses of wine to dull her pain.

There are two other important characters. One is Bloomfield (always called by his last name), Helen's boyfriend.

The other is Bambi, both sisters' plump, loudmouthed, and mildly sexcrazed boyfriend. As Jessie reads further into Helen's journal, she comes to discover that Bloomfield is not the fairweather friend she has criticized him as being. Similarly, there is more to Bambi than meets the eye. Brought up by lazily overindulgent and hypermaterialistic parents, she is at once laughable for her affectations (the false fingernails that cover her



chewed-to-the-quick natural ones; her boyfriend's initials tattooed over her left breast) and admirable for her down-to-earth, common-sense ability to cut through the silliness that often surrounds her.

Helen, whose thoughts and feelings we discover by reading her six-monthlong journal over Jessie's shoulder, is a vital young woman dealing with cancer, chemotherapy, and death—not to mention her relationship with Bloomfield, her worries about her sister (whom she sees as too much in her own shadow), and her thoughts about her family and schoolmates. Like many people facing death (and undergoing the ordeals of chemotherapy), Helen experiences a wide-ranging variety of moods. Indeed, her responses to her disease are strikingly believable and could serve as a textbook on teen-age responses to cancer.

Like many a good cancer-patient therapist, Helen's high school English teacher has suggested that Helen pour her thoughts and emotions into writing—into her journal, as well as into poems and stories for the school literary magazine. For one assignment, Helen is asked to write about a mythical beast and passes up dragons, griffins, and unicorns in order to choose the phoenix, the mythical bird that rises from its own ashes. This, then, becomes the central metaphor for Grant's novel. Helen is the "phoenix" whose spirit will rise out of her own ashes if (and this is the novel's main point) her friends and family make her life part of their own, leave their lifedenying grief behind, and return—with energy and hope—to the world of the living.

This notion arises at several points in *Phoenix Rising*, especially toward the end, when, as if Jessie has finally heard her mother's comment that "people we love become a part of who we are," she leaves her grief-filled bedroom/prison.

Indeed, she escapes her "prison" twice.

First, in a dream about visiting Helen in the hospital, she discovers that neither she nor Helen need remain incarcerated there: "I walk down the empty hall and step into the elevator. The hospital is only a dream. Helen and I are free to leave." Second, back in the real world of her home, she escapes her personal prison for good: Outside, Sarah Rose is calling. I lean out my window. She smiles up at me, bright as her scarlet sweater.

"Jessie, can you come out and play?" she says.

And this time Jessie says yes.

Just as Jessie achieves final release, so does Helen, who, despite the fact that she has barely a week to live, writes in her diary: I'm trying to live each day as though it were my last. Not because of the Big C, but because you never know, really. Today is all we have . . . Happiness is just around the corner, if we don't give up, if we keep moving forward . . . There is so much I want to say.



Style

Points of View

A fictitious thirteen-year-old girl tells the story through her point of view. This point of view allows the reader to get inside her emotions and reactions to the things that she reports. For example, the reader learns about her deceased mother and grandfather through events that remind her of them. This first-person account of the story provides an avenue for the author to hook the reader. The reader becomes a friend to the characters because of all the emotion that the characters share with the reader. The story would not be as touching or memorable had the author chosen to use a third-person narrator.

Setting

The story takes place in New England, near the small towns of North Haversham and Cookshire and the larger cities of Boston and Montpelier. Cookshire, south of North Haversham, is the site of the nuclear plant and the nuclear accident that occurs the day before the story begins. Many people die from the radiation, from Cookshire all the way to Boston.

Much of the story takes place at the home of Gran and Nyle, with most of the emphasis on the "back bedroom." This is where Nyle's mother and grandfather died, so when Ezra and his mother arrive and take refuge in that room, Nyle instantly believes that he is a "dead boy." Nyle goes to visit Ezra nightly during his illness and then provides the motivation for Ezra's fight to live. Nyle is the force that gets Ezra to leave the back bedroom and then eventually to go outside.

Instead of Nyle and Ezra meeting each night in Ezra's room, Ezra climbs the stairs to Nyle's room, and they spend their evenings talking, doing homework and petting the animals. When Ezra recovers his strength, he returns to school. A lot of the action in the story takes place on the bus, at the bus stop or en route to or from the bus stop. The kitchen is also an important setting in the story, since it is the place that many conversations take place between Gran and Nyle about Ezra. The kitchen is the setting for the friendship that grows and develops between Gran and Miriam. Room 804 at the hospital is another important location because that is where Ezra dies, not in the back bedroom.

Language and Meaning

Sheep herding jargon is prevalent throughout the story since the main characters live on a sheep farm. Words like *cull*, *card* and *mucking* are not familiar to most readers, especially city dwellers. When Nyle teaches Ezra about sheep farming, the reader learns all about the way of life on the farm.



Other than the farm jargon, most of the language used in the story is everyday, common language. This use of common language aids in the processing of the themes and symbolism throughout the story. Instead of alienating readers with unfamiliar words or obscure language, the author is able to reach out to the readers to draw them into the story.

Structure

Phoenix Rising has twenty-nine untitled chapters that describe the period of time that Ezra and Mrs. Trent are in the lives of Nyle and Gran. Some chapters are short, filled with incredible amounts of meaning. Other chapters are longer, providing the timeline of events to keep the story moving.

The story progresses in chronological order, although the author employs flashbacks to fill in information about Nyle's past. Some chapters reflect only a day, while others encompass a longer sense of time. The author generally ends a chapter by dangling a carrot before the reader to entice the reader to continue the story in the next chapter. This enticement provides momentum to the story and keeps the reader engaged, wanting to continue to the next chapter instead of putting the book down.



Quotes

"Gran, did you ever feel so angry you could see the blood inside your eyes?" Chapter 2, p. 15

"That kind of anger's not good for you." Chapter 2, p. 15

"Let it go, Nyle. Come on down and eat something." Chapter 2, p. 15

"At least he hadn't died here." Chapter 2, p. 17

"...But sometimes you *have* to do things you'd rather not." Chapter 2, p. 18

"Well, I'm not making friends with a dead boy." Chapter 2, p. 18

"'Look,' Gran said, 'it's good to be with people, Nyle, even if they aren't going to be around for long. *Especially* if they're not going to be around for long. Makes being here on this earth worthwhile.'" Chapter 2, p. 19

"I had a dog." Chapter 3, p. 23

"I don't know. I just don't want them near me." Chapter 4, p. 27

"'His father spoke too,' she said, gripping my arm. 'Once. And then he died.'" Chapter 7, p. 46

"And I like the way the sheep are always there. I like how they never leave." Chapter 11, p. 66

"I feel like that bird. The phoenix. It burns up, then rises from its ashes." Chapter 11, p. 71

"It was the room that worried me." Chapter 12, p. 79

"Nyle, death isn't the only kind of leaving that hurts." Chapter 12, p. 80

"There are no guarantees in this life. You know that." Chapter 12, p. 81

"'Don't bring me anything to love,' he whispered. 'I don't want anything to love.'" Chapter 13, p. 89

"So, show me around, Nyle?" Chapter 17, p. 115

"'Night, Nyle.'" Chapter 17, p. 116

"'Fly away, Ezra,' I said. 'Fly away and start again.'" Chapter 21, p. 141



Topics for Discussion

1. In the course of *Phoenix Rising*, Jessie has a number of bizarre dreams.

What do they mean? How would a psychologist "interpret" each?

2. Grant speaks of herself as a "feminist." Does *Phoenix Rising* have a feminist bias?

3. The members of Jessie's family are clearly having trouble functioning.

Imagine you are a psychologist studying them. Using your own terms, write a "psychological evaluation" of each character, based on specific words and actions from the novel.

4. *Phoenix Rising* ends with at least five "releases": (1) Jessie's decision to go down and eat dinner with Bloomfield and her family, (2) Jessie's dream about leaving the hospital with Helen, (3) Helen's death, (4) Jessie's decision to go out to play with Sara Rose, and (5) Helen's final journal entry. Does the order in which these "releases" are placed make sense, or would you order them in a different fashion? Why?

5. Discuss Bambi and Bloomfield.

What are their good and bad features?

6. There are many smart-mouthed remarks and arguments in *Phoenix Rising*. Are such remarks and such arguments always negative, or can they help people? If yes, then how so?



Essay Topics

Radioactive fallout is unusual but not a phenomenon that never occurs. Nyle contemplates the consequences to her life after the accident in Cookshire. She wonders whether the animals will all die, what they will eat and if it will be okay for humans to touch one another. This rather apocalyptic thinking is very unusual for a thirteen-year-old. How does Nyle's point of view about the future differ from yours?

The stress that Nyle feels about her future is very real and very dark. Compare her stress and concerns to those of yours.

When Nyle wonders whether the attraction to the back bedroom the night she crouched in the hall was something "she'd rather not do," she decides that she will visit that room again the next day. What do you think changed in Nyle for her to accept freely that she will go visit the next day?

Create a Venn diagram that illustrates the similarities and differences between Nyle and Ezra.

How does the common fear that most people have affect their ability to act humanely towards the evacuees?

Where does Ezra's name come from? How does his name fit into the themes of prejudice and acceptance?

Put yourself in Gran and Nyle's shoes. Do you think you would be accepting and welcome Mrs. Trent and Ezra into your home? Explain your reasoning.

Discuss the importance of the title of the book.

What is the significance of Ezra calling Nyle by name (Chapter 17, p. 115)?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. People confronting their own or dealing with others' deaths are often said to move through certain "stages."

Learn about these "stages" and see if they apply to Helen's and Jessie's development.

2. Helen's journal describes her as working on a book called "How to Survive Your Life." Write down some of the points you would include in such a book were you to write it.

3. Encouraged by her English teacher, Ms. Tormey, Helen writes a number of poems and stories, some of which are mentioned or quoted in *Phoenix Rising*. Write your own stories or poems along similar lines, taking on Helen's subjects and assignments and treating them as your own.

Further Study

Commire, Anne., ed. "Cynthia D. Grant." In *Something About the Author*. Vol. 33. Detroit: Gale Research: 85-86. Includes a brief discussion of Grant's life and writing.

Review. *Horn Book* 65,4 (July-August 1989): 488-489. Summarizes *Phoenix Rising*.

Review. *Publishers Weekly* 235,6 (February 10, 1989): 73. Briefly summarizes *Phoenix Rising*.

Review. *Wilson Library Bulletin* (November 1989): 511. Contains a brief review of *Phoenix Rising*.



Related Titles

Many books (for example, *My Brother Sam Is Dead*, by James L. Collier and Christopher Collier, 1974) deal, in passing, with the death of a close relative or friend. Some books deal with such deaths in more concentrated ways.

Two, written for slightly younger readers, include Jim Naughton's *My Brother Stealing Second* (1991) and Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977).

Danny Santiago's powerful *Famous All Over Town* (1984) deals, among other things, with the death of a friend in L.A.'s Mexican Barrio and, like *Phoenix Rising*, is written in the first person.

Cynthia Voigt's *Izzy, Willy-Nilly* (1986) deals with a young woman who must come to terms with permanently crippling injuries from a car accident—much as Helen must come to terms with her disease. William Blinn's *Brian's Song* (1983) tells the true story of athlete friends (one black, one white) and the cancer death of one, while John Gunther's *Death Be Not Proud*, about the death of his son (1949), is a minor classic.

There are also an increasing number of informative and helpful nonfiction books dealing with death and young people who must face it. Jill Kemetz's *How to Fight for Your Life* contains brief autobiographical accounts written by teen-agers in life-threatening situations. One of these, Elizabeth Bonwich's "Osteogenic Sarcoma," is an uplifting autobiographical account written by a sixteen-year-old girl suffering from something very much like the disease that kills Helen. Also moving is Paul Newman's *I Will Sing Life* (1992), which is about children at the sponsored treatment center for children with life-threatening diseases. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's *On Children and Death* (1993) is a broad-ranging study by an acknowledged expert in dealing with death, discussing and containing examples of creative writing (poems, prose accounts) as a way of dealing with death or suicide. Two other books are Katherine Fair Donnelly's *Recovering from the Loss of a Sibling* (1988), which contains a good bibliography, and Donna A. Gaffney's *The Seasons of Grief* (1989).



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996