

# **Queen Sugar Study Guide**

## **Queen Sugar by Natalie Baszile**

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# Plot Summary

NOTE: This guide refers to the paperback copy of *Queen Sugar*, written by Natalie Baszile and published by Penguin Books, New York, USA, 2014.

Charley and her daughter Micah drive from Los Angeles to Louisiana to start a new life after Charley inherits a sugarcane farm from her father. They move in with Charley's grandmother and she gets down to the farm work right away. Charley is at a disadvantage; she knows nothing about farming in general, much less the specifics of sugarcane and her crop manager quit months before her arrival without telling her. Some of the other farmers in town expect her to sell, take the money, and run, but her father's trust does not leave that as an option. She must work the fields and make them profitable in order to create a stable legacy for herself and her daughter.

Charley's half-brother, Ralph Angel, also moves back to Louisiana and expects part of the inheritance. He refuses to do manual labor. Despite finding a number of jobs, including one working for Charley on the cane farm, he gets fired from each within a day. Miss Honey feels guilty for Ralph Angel's erratic work life. Because of her, his father did not marry his mother when she was pregnant. When Ralph Angel moved to live with Charley's family for a short time in California, his mother committed suicide back home.

Both Charley and Ralph Angel are also raising children as single parents. Miss Honey helps them with childcare. Micah wants to go back home; she is not accustomed to the cultural differences, namely the racism, of the south. Blue, Ralph Angel's son, becomes a brother figure to Micah.

Miss Honey's continued defense of Ralph Angel bothers her adult children, Violet and Uncle Brother. They warn her of his instability, his criminal ways, and of his violent nature, but she always looks the other way. After he shoots his cousin and takes off with Charley's expensive sculpture, she can no longer overlook his behavior. The policeman who pulls him over for speeding does not overlook his behavior. With the gun he shot his cousin with in the seat beside him, Ralph Angel refuses to get out of his car as instructed. The officer shoots and kills him.

With a lot of hard work and two very resourceful partners, Charley's sugarcane crop is a success despite the odds. She even adds a romantic interest to her life, a white farmer named Remy.



# Chapters 1 - 2

## Summary

Chapter 1 is told in the past tense from Charley's third person, limited point of view.

Charley Bordelon and her 11-year-old daughter, Micah, left their home in Los Angeles to move to St. Josephine Parish, Louisiana. Charley inherited her father's sugarcane business there. After spending the night with her grandmother, Miss Honey, the three left the next morning to drive out to Charley's sugarcane crop. Miss Honey directed Charley along the route, but as they progressed into the middle of nowhere, Charley regretted not taking a map instead of relying on her elderly grandmother's memory. Charley feared being late for her first meeting with the property's manager.

As they made their way down an old trail, Miss Honey assured Charley they were going the right direction. She said they were on the old Indian trail. Micah told her that "Indian" was offensive and she should say Native American instead. Honey told her that all the Native Americans she knew were proud to be called Indians (5).

Miss Honey said she did not know why her son, Charley's father, wanted to buy the 800 acre cane field out in the middle of nowhere when he could have bought a business in town instead. She said a white man had bought an old bank and was turning it into a hotel. "There's no one out here but a bunch of crackers," Miss Honey said (7). The comment reminded Charley of something that had happened the day before they arrived in St. Josephine Parish. A white teenager driving a pickup truck harassed her on the road by tailgating, riding along side of her, then finally pulling over right in front of her so that she had to apply her brakes and fall back. She told Micah not to look as the driver was doing this and warned her that it is hard to know what people will do.

When they finally found Charley's property, the manager was not there. She worried that he left because she was late. Then she looked around. The cane crop did not look like all the other thriving crops she had passed on her way there. Charley was relying on the property manager, Mr. Frasier, and even though she knew nothing about sugar cane, it was obvious no work had been done on the farm in months.

Micah began taking pictures and pointing out where the cows and goats could go. Her mom reminded her this was not that kind of farm. While Micah was roaming around to take pictures, Mr. Frasier finally arrived, almost an hour late for their appointment. He told her he took a job on an oil rig and had stopped working her fields. Even though the two talked frequently by phone, he did not tell her because he felt like he should quit in person, he said. He also wanted to give the rig job a try before deciding whether or not to quit it. Mr. Frasier also said when the previous owner's kids took over the crop, they did not plant enough to make good money. Charley's dad convinced him to stay and work for him, but after his death, Mr. Frasier did not want to work for another person trying to resurrect the farm. He returned the paychecks that Charley had sent him. He



also told her, at that point in the crop season, everyone worth hiring was already working elsewhere. He gave Charley a few instructions – how to start the tractor, where to buy parts, fuel, the inventory of tools, etc. Charley wrote down the notes, but had no idea what any of them really meant. Then, he left.

Charley reflected on her losses. Six years ago, her husband was killed in a holdup and she almost lost her daughter in an undisclosed incident. She lost her father to cancer, and now she lost the manager who was going to help continue his dream business. She cried while sitting with her grandmother in the car. Micah brought her Polaroid pictures back to the car and saw her mom had been crying. Miss Honey just told her that her mom was having a bad day.

Chapter 2 was told from the point of view of Ralph Angel, also in the third person limited point of view and in past tense. Ralph Angel and his 6-year-old son, Blue, were driving to Montana from Arizona in a stolen Chevy Impala. While Ralph Angel drove and pondered the new identity he would create for himself, Blue played with his Power Ranger toy. Ralph Angel amused his son by talking with him about all the different kinds of foods they would eat as cowboys in Montana.

During the drive, Ralph Angel's thoughts revealed some of his back story. He and his son have been homeless for six months, when he got evicted. Since then, they stayed at a motel room that he rented weekly. His wife, Gwenna, had died.

Ralph Angel stopped at a convenience store and left Blue in the car. He tucked his shirt and zipped his jacket halfway before going inside. He paid for two bottles of water, but shoplifted a number of snacks. When a foil package slipped out of the ankle elastic of his sweatpants, he begged the cashier to just let him pay for it instead since his son was in the car. Instead of waiting for the cashier to decide, he bolted back to the car and took off, forgetting that Blue had to use the bathroom.

When Blue reminded him that his Power Ranger toy had to use the bathroom, Ralph Angel gave him an old cup in which to urinate. The boy did not know what to do with the full cup. His father told him to throw it out. As the boy held the cup up into the wind, he realized that Blue had tried to pour the urine into the wind. It all blew back on him. He was soaked. Ralph Angel cursed and was mad at Blue. His reaction reminded him of his own shame from bed wetting as a child. He took off his jacket and gave it to Blue to wear instead of his urine-soaked clothes.

As they continued driving, Ralph Angel thought of a phone call he received from his grandmother, Miss Honey. She asked him to come home to see Charley and help her with the farm. He revealed that he and Charley have the same father and that she got the whole inheritance. In his flashback, Miss Honey reminded him that if he had paid his father back, he might have gotten part of the inheritance. He decided to turn the car in the opposite direction and head for St. Josephine Parish.



## Analysis

When Charley reflects on her losses at the end of Chapter 1, it is clear that she went to St. Josephine Parish for reasons other than claiming her inheritance. Her reflection foreshadows that the reader will learn more about Charley's reasons as her story continues. She admits that she needs the farm and the second chance it offers her (8).

As Charley, Micah, and Miss Honey drive to the farm under Miss Honey's directions, Charley notes that they wander like "three blind stooges" (12). The simile combines two references – "three blind mice" and the Three Stooges. The "three blind mice" reference brings to mind the next line of the nursery rhyme, "See how they run." The three women were driving all over the place – down paved roads, gravel roads, and trails of all sorts. They were, like the mice, very scattered. The reference to the Three Stooges implies how comical they appear.

The discussion between Micah and Miss Honey about the inappropriateness of the word "Indian" shows a generational and cultural difference between the two. The generational difference between Miss Honey and her great-granddaughter is expected. The cultural difference between Los Angeles and rural Louisiana may not be. Micah has been raised in a community that teaches political correctness. Miss Honey's rural upbringing is a different experience. While Micah does not personally know any Native Americans, Miss Honey does, indicating the diverse cultural differences between the two.

"Miss Honey's use of both the French language and traditional southern phrases positions her as a border crosser. She occasionally speaks in French. She calls Micah "chere," which is French for dear (35). These words reflect the French ancestry of the state of Louisiana and its Cajun dialect. She also uses phrases that are traditionally southern. For example, when she says she does not know Frasier "from Adam's housecat," she is using a regional saying that means she is not familiar with him (9). Her involvement in both cultures gives her a position from which to critique both cultures. As a border crosser, one who traverses between two distinct entities, she is able to engage with both cultures, but never fully immerse herself in either."

Miss Honey notes that a white man bought the bank and is turning it into a hotel. She says there are a "bunch of crackers" there now. The term cracker is a derogatory term for white people, indicating that Charley, Micah, and Miss Honey are African Americans. Charley's flashback about the white teenage boy further solidifies the racial tension in St. Josephine Parish (7). The experience makes Charley wonder what on Earth her father was thinking by leaving a sugar cane farm in that racially tense community to her, a black woman.

The reader is not told specifically how much Charley's race or gender had to do with Mr. Frasier quitting before he even met her, but there is indication that they did have an impact. The previous owner's kids were not interested in cane and spent too much time partying. Her position as a female who knew nothing about sugarcane or the Louisiana culture does not help her situation. Mr. Frasier worked for Charley's father, an African



American man, indicating that he did not have a problem working for a black person. The bigger problem for Mr. Frasier may have been in working for an African American female.

In an instance of situational irony, Charley worries about being late to her meeting with Mr. Frasier. It is important to her for him to know that she takes the business seriously and that she is professional. He, however, shows up an hour late and informs her that he quit months ago.

Another example of irony in Chapter 1 is the loss Charley discovers while seeking a new opportunity. In addition to losing her husband, giving up her charitable career, and losing her father to cancer, she loses the only life she has ever really known in Los Angeles to take her inheritance in Louisiana. She sees that the crop is basically lost. She faces the loss of running the business without a manager that she has also just lost. Ironically, her chance for a new life has turned into more loss.

Chapter 2 tells that Charley has a brother, one that is apparently quite different from her. While Charley works to be professional and responsible in Chapter 1, Ralph Angel in Chapter 2 is a thief who does not act responsibly. In addition to stealing a car and shoplifting snack food, he does not plan for the trip by bringing extra clothes for his child or food and drinks for the trip. As revealed in his flashback conversation with Miss Honey, he also never repaid a debt he owed his father (25).

Like Charley, however, Ralph Angel also needs a second chance. He has also lost his spouse and is left as a single parent. The main difference between the two is that Charley had both a mother and a father in her life. Ralph Angel was largely ignored by his father because they lived in different states. Once his father remarried, he was even less available to Ralph Angel. Without a father figure in his life when he was a child, Ralph Angel relies on images to guide him toward what a father should be. The reader learns this in the way he examines the imagery of a magazine article that he read a month previously. The photograph was a back view of a father and son in a canoe. Their body language showed them leaning toward each other in their matching vests. Their oars were in unison, symbolizing that their relationship was likewise in unison. The splashing water symbolically represented the purifying nature of their father-son relationship. He recalls the water as "White, of course, rugged and sturdy, but still." (17) His reference to white is not clearly referring to the water, the people, or possibly both. Regardless, white as a symbol of purity indicates that Ralph Angel feels less than pure, possibly because of his own color. His self-concept is not necessarily due to his own feelings about himself; they are more likely due to his upbringing in rural Louisiana during a very tense racial era. Ralph Angel really wants to have that relationship with his son, but having no family role model to base that kind of relationship on makes him feel inadequate.

There is irony in Ralph Angel's name. The narrator never refers to him as simply Ralph, so Angel is reinforced with every mention of his name. The man is no angel; he has stolen a car and shoplifted junk food from a convenience store.



On their trip, Blue does what young children do – he plays. His imaginative play personifies his Power Rangers action figure in a number of ways. He says Zach (the Power Ranger) has to use the bathroom (19), when he was really the one that had to urinate badly. He also makes Zach talk in key Power Rangers catch phrases.

In his reference to Miss Honey, Ralph Angel occasionally refers to her as 'Da. No explanation of the name is given, but given its punctuation, it is an abbreviated term of endearment.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Compare and contrast Charley and Ralph Angel.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Identify and discuss one example of racial prejudice expressed in Chapter 1 or Chapter 2.

## **Discussion Question 3**

What is the weather like in St. Josephine Parish? Refer to three specific instances of imagery used by the author in Chapter 1 to give the reader a vivid idea of what the weather is like.

## **Vocabulary**

tropical, instincts, stooges, groves, freeway, relentless, dabbed, momentum, preposterously, rig, replacement





## Chapters 3 - 4

### Summary

The story returned to Charley's point of view through a third person limited narrator in Chapter 3. Charley dropped in on a man named Prosper Denton although Miss Honey cautioned her to call first. Before retiring, Denton ran the biggest farms for the area's white crop owners. When she finally got him to the door, Charley introduced herself and apologized for not calling to make an appointment. He invited her inside and talked with her about her farm. Their discussion revealed more about Charley's father. Her father had owned a lot of rental property in the Los Angeles area – including an apartment complex, condo, and duplex. When he died, she expected to inherit some of that rental property. Instead, she learned from her father's attorney that he had sold all the rental units to buy the sugarcane farm in Louisiana. Denton saw the desperation in Charley's situation. She knew nothing about sugarcane or farming, had no farm manager, was new in town, and was a young black woman. She asked what being a woman had to do with anything and he did not answer.

She hoped Denton would work for her to get the farm back in order, but he said he was retired and at 71 years old, he wanted to enjoy fishing and other. He estimated that since her manager had not been working the fields, she might get 5 tons of cane per acre, hardly worth her time or effort. He also gave her a basic schedule for how the crop should be worked. His biggest advice was that she needed to know the business inside and out, to live it. He also told her about a time when his combine went out and a nearby white farmer cut the last rows for him so he could get it to the mill on time. He suggested that she sell the farm. Charley explained that was not an option. Her father put the land in a trust. She would earn the profits left after the bank was paid. If she did not work the farm, it would be given to charity. When Charley left Denton's home, she went back to Miss Honey's where her grandmother was teaching Micah how to cook a recipe called Dirty Rice.

Chapter 4 is also told from Charley's point of view in the third person limited style. Charley and Micah were shopping in a discount store. Micah asked if Miss Honey was poor. Charley explained that Miss Honey does not have a lot of money, but that no one has ever gone hungry in her house. She recalled her father using a similar phrase to describe his childhood: "poor but not hungry" (39).

The trip to the discount store gives Charley and Micah a chance to talk alone. Micah complains about the heat and the car having no air conditioner, which leads to her saying she wants to return home to Los Angeles. Charley blames Micah's attitude on hormones and on the fact that she had touched Micah's scar on her arm. It was instinct for Charley to reach to touch it whenever she saw it, a reminder of how she almost lost Micah, too, in the holdup that killed her husband.



Micah wants to go live with Lorna, her grandmother (Charley's mother). She is wealthy and likes to shop and take Micah on vacations. Charley said no and tried to explain how satisfying it would be to own the fields (43). Micah said she wanted to live in a city. Charley's hands were swelling from the heat and humidity, so she took off her wedding ring and slipped it in the ash tray. As they argued, Micah put the ring on her finger and asked why Charley wore it. Charley said she wore it because it reminded her of her husband, Davis. Micah took off the ring and jiggled it around in her hand. Charley told her to put it down, but Micah would not. Micah refused and made two derogatory comments in French. When Charley scolded her for doing so, Micah insisted she wanted to go back with Lorna and accused Charley of being jealous. She said that Charley was a fish and she and Lorna were sharks. Angry, Micah threw Charley's ring out of the car. Micah showed no remorse as her mother got out of the car to search the field for her ring. As Charley waded deeper into the cane field, Micah grew scared because she could not see her. When Charley thought about the pickup truck with the white teenagers that passed them days before, however, she rushed back to the car to protect Micah. Micah apologized for throwing the ring. She apologized again later that night, and also apologized for calling her a fish. As Micah sat on the porch swing with Miss Honey, she vowed not to fail Micah twice.

The next day, Charley went to her workshop. She looked through old papers and bills and realized some of her inventory was not there. Around 11 a.m., Jacque Landry pulled up. He was from St. Mary's Sugar Cooperative. He told her she was the talk of the town for coming all the way from Los Angeles to revive the old plantation. When he asked if she had everything she needed, Charley was suspicious. He revealed that he had been driving through her fields and had heard about her losing her manager. He mentioned that it was a shame the previous owner's children did not take better care of the property. He also told a story about how the previous owner, LeJeune, had "his man" wash his car for him every Saturday. He also said that some people prefer the old ways (50). As he was leaving, he told Charley to call him if she wanted to sell the place.

That afternoon, Charley went to visit NeNee Desonier. She found her name on paperwork at the workshop and was hoping she might want to work for her. When trying to talk with NeNee, it became obvious that she had trouble speaking English. NeNee's granddaughter arrived and told her that NeNee was 77 and did not need to work cane anymore; it's too physically demanding for her. The granddaughter told Charley that NeNee had nothing to show for her 60-plus years of working cane. The woman had no retirement, healthcare, or a decent home because former cane employers cheated and cut corners to their own benefit. The granddaughter insulted Charley by saying she bet she'd be worse to work for than a white man (54). She expected racism from Landry, but not from another black woman.

## Analysis

In Chapters 3 and 4, the reader begins to see the extent of discrimination Charley faces. While Charley seemed to expect to deal with racial discrimination in rural Louisiana, she apparently did not expect gender discrimination. In Chapter 3, Charley wonders what



Prosper Denton means when he says that, in addition to all her other shortcomings, she is also a woman. Even though she asks for an explanation, he offers none, choosing instead to dismiss her request for information. It seems as though he, too, dismisses her ability because of her gender. Even so, his passion for the sugarcane business does not affect his willingness to share valuable information with her. She is thankful for the information even though she has no way to implement it herself.

In her discussion with Denton in Chapter 3, Charley reveals much more about her father and her situation. She expected to inherit several Los Angeles properties upon her father's death. Instead, she learned he sold them all for the chance to buy the 800-acre sugarcane farm. Instead of giving it directly to her to do with as she pleased, he put the farm in a trust and required that she work the farm or it would be given to a charity. Charley recalls her father saying that he would give her what he wanted her to have, not what she wanted. She wonders why he wants her to have this farm. The reader, knowing that Ralph Angel is traveling her way, senses that Charley's father wanted her to have the farm to get in touch with her roots, to get to know his life and upbringing, and to build stronger family ties.

Some language in Chapter 3 requires knowledge of blues music to fully understand the imagery. When Charley describes Denton as "older than old school," she refers to Sonny Boy Williamson (29). There were actually two Sonny Boy Williamsons, both blues harmonica musicians who were very popular. The second Sonny Boy Williamson took on the name after the first Sonny Boy's death, making them Sonny Boy Williamson and Sonny Boy Williamson II. Referring to Denton as Sonny Boy Williamson, not Sonny Boy Williamson II, emphasized the idea of "older than old school." Both of the blues musicians, along with the guitarist mentioned, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, used simple four-beat rhythms in their popular songs. This simplistic beat symbolizes steadiness and "old school" since it did not feature fancy technology or altered rhythm.

The language in Chapter 3 also creates imagery in some of the sayings Denton and Miss Honey use. As in real life, the elders are passing along their culture to the next generation by sharing these sayings. In one, Denton says that Charley getting caught up and ready for grinding season will be "like licking honey off a blackberry vine. (32)" This simile, to those who have seen a blackberry vine, paints a grim and painful picture. Wild blackberries generally grow in thickets and have prickly vines. Licking one would be quite difficult and painful. Miss Honey also works in sayings that share her culture. She says something happened "before anyone could say Jackie Robinson.... (37)" Robinson was the first African American to play major league baseball.

Chapter 4 gives further details about just how much discrimination Charley faces in St. Josephine. The narrator describes the neighborhood in which Miss Honey and most of the other African Americans live. Railroad tracks separate the white and black neighborhoods, proving that segregated housing still exists in the parish. The community is obviously culture shock for Micah, who misses city life. Her mother blames hormones, but it sounds as if Micah is genuinely unhappy about the move. She wants the comforts of her home, not the challenges of her grandfather's sugarcane property. Micah and Charley both call Charley's mother Lorna. This is very different from



the Louisiana culture in which they are now immersed. No reason is given for this, but it seems more progressive than the rural Louisiana upbringing her father had.

When she is angry with her mother in the car, Micah reverts to French phrases she learned in her private school to express her displeasure. The terms are derogatory (44). “Tu me fais chier” means “you piss me off” and “merde” means “shit.” Micah is ironically using the education her mother provided against her.

As Charley sorts through her workshop, she wonders what Paraquat is. It is an herbicide created by Chevron. Jacques Landry, a white businessman from the co-op, stops by and his questioning re-emphasizes for the reader just how little Charley knows or understands about sugarcane. He takes a jab at her self-confidence after suggesting that she gets some water pumped out of the field soon, but follows up with a comment that she probably already knew to do that.

Landry’s reminiscence about LeJeune also gives Charley a look into the prejudiced mindset of the region. In the story about LeJeune’s car, Landry said the former owner had “his man” wash it each week. Generally, “his man” or “his boy” would have been a derogatory way to refer to a black employee. Then, the narrator notes the dreamy tone of voice Landry has when he sighs and remarks that some people prefer the old ways (50). The underlying message Landry is conveying is that the farmers of that region like their landowners to be white men, not black, not women, and certainly not a black woman. Before leaving, Landry tries to manipulate Charley by wishing her luck and telling her that she needs it. Right on the heels of that comment, he suggests she might want to sell the land to him some day.

Charley encounters more French when she visits NeNee (52). The woman cannot speak English well, but speaks the French regional language. When she says “Ma petite-fille,” she is pointing out “my granddaughter.” NeNee’s granddaughter gives Charley an earful about the sugarcane industry from a worker’s standpoint. She says the cane plantation owners cheat employees so they can make more money. Since most of the cane owners have been white men, the granddaughter assigns this stereotype to all white men. It is an insult to Charley when the woman says she bets Charley is worse to work for than them.

Charley expected understanding and sympathy from another young black woman, but got none from NeNee’s granddaughter. The young woman does not respect or sympathize with land owners, outsiders, or people who don’t know the business. She wants nothing to do with Charlie. It seems that Charley’s outsider status and plantation ownership portrayed her as a white man in the eyes of NeNee’s granddaughter, which foreshadows the discrimination Charley must overcome.

## Discussion Question 1

Identify and explain two similes in Chapter 3. How do they create imagery for the reader?



## Discussion Question 2

In Chapter 4, Micah calls Charley a fish and adds that she and Lorna are sharks (45). What is the symbolism of this statement? Is it true? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Explain the discrimination Charley experiences from NeNee's granddaughter in Chapter 4. Why is it so devastating to Charley?

## Vocabulary

trellises, irises, condensation, notches, protestation, inheritance, pursed, tattered, accusatory, impulse, gurgling, aqueous



# Chapters 5 - 6

## Summary

Chapter 5 was told from Ralph Angel's point of view in the third person-limited style. He decided to take a quick detour to Corpus Christi, Texas, to take Blue to the beach. The trip included a ferry ride, which reminded him of a trip he made with his own father, Ernest. After getting the car across on the ferry, Ralph Angel and Blue had fun on the beach. Ralph Angel recalled fondly his trip to the beach with his father. His father told him all about California and Ralph Angel asked when he could go live with him. He said Ralph Angel had to be a little older, maybe the following year. The next year, however, Ernest married Lorna, an ophthalmologist in Los Angeles. A year later they had a baby girl named Charlotte, Charley for short. Three years later, Ernest flew Ralph Angel out to California. Ralph Angel remembered the details of his flight instructions written by his father. As his mother was tearfully saying goodbye, he offered to stay with her. She insisted he go and he noticed her hands shaking as she gave him his ticket.

The memories also make Ralph Angel think about his mother, Emily. She and his father were high school sweethearts. She was very smart and had scholarships to attend Louisiana State University and plans for law school. She got pregnant with Ralph Angel, however, and could not attend. She seemed on the verge of mental breakdown, but raised her son in a shack just outside of town. She was never able to keep a job. When Ralph Angel left to see his father in California, Emily became paranoid and started drinking heavily.

Ralph Angel remembered that his first few months in Los Angeles were good. He had his own room, a new bed, clothes, and a bike. He became jealous, however, of how his father treated Charley and Lorna. He began acting up to get attention. In one incident, he forced 2-year-old Charley to drink water from a baby food jar. As the water bubbled out her nose, she thought she was drowning. Lorna insisted that Ralph Angel be sent back to his mother immediately.

Before leaving the beach, Blue made an angel in the sand. He got so much sand in his hair that they had to stop at a café to wash his hair in the bathroom sink. Ralph Angel noticed a funny sign outside the restaurant. Blue told him he liked being on the trip with him and Ralph Angel wonders how different his relationship would have been with his own father if Charley had not been born.

Chapter 6 was told from Charley's point of view in the third person limited style. A week had passed since her conversation with Denton. Charley returned from her weekend ritual of visiting places where men hung out to see if she could find someone who wanted to work. She went dressed in field work clothes instead of dressing in business attire. Headed home after a fruitless attempt, she even considered hiring some drinking, pot-smoking guys hanging out on a street corner.



After changing out of her work clothes, Charley heard Micah on the phone leaving a message for Lorna. Micah's message said that things were going okay so far. When the answering machine cut her off, Micah called back to leave another message. She was disappointed that Lorna did not pick up. Charley thought about her last talk with Lorna, who objected to her daughter and granddaughter moving to the South. Lorna offered to let both of them move in with her. Apparently, Charley's phone was disconnected for nonpayment. Lorna knew Charley had a hard time making ends meet after Davis' death and on her salary from the nonprofit for which she worked. Lorna also offered to pay off all of Charley's loans if she allowed Micah to stay with her instead of going to Louisiana. When Charley declined, Lorna told her she was selfish for dragging the child away from all her friends.

Violet, Charley's aunt, stopped by. The two had not seen each other since Ernest's funeral. Violet invited Micah to Bible school the next week, but she declined to make a vegetable garden. When Miss Honey got home from church, she heated leftovers and set the table for three. As Violet, Charley, and Micah ate, they talked about Violet's role as first lady of the church and her husband's calling to preach. They also talked about Charley's woes with the sugarcane inheritance.

The women also discussed the decline of the African American lifestyle, noting that many young black men are in prison instead of working (69). Ralph Angel's name came up. Charley recalled the despair on her father's face when she learned that Ralph Angel had dropped out of school but continued cashing the tuition checks Ernest sent him for a few years. Micah picked up on the cue that the adults wanted to talk, so she excused herself from the room. Charley learned that Ralph Angel pushed Miss Honey down the last time he visited three years ago. The incident caused Miss Honey to break her arm. Miss Honey would only say that he came by his problems honestly because his mother was never right in the head. For the first time, Charley realized that Ralph Angel had been omitted from her father's will. His name was not mentioned again after Ernest discovered his dishonesty with the tuition money. She suddenly felt uneasy about getting the whole inheritance.

Miss Honey informed everyone that she planned a family reunion for the following Saturday to welcome Charley and Micah home. Charley said she needed to work seven days a week until the cane grinding. Violet tried to support Charley by saying she could not rearrange her schedule on such a short notice. Miss Honey said she was acting like a white lady (73). Miss Honey told Violet to leave her house.

The next morning Charley prayed for a sign that she was doing the right thing. At breakfast, Miss Honey and Micah watched a Shirley Temple movie that co-starred Bojangles, an African American tap dancer. Charley was sickened by his simple character and asked if they could watch something educational. Miss Honey called her out for watching a police show the night before with lots of violence. It was too much for Charley and she finally admitted she was not okay.

Charley was surprised that Violet came to pick them up after being thrown out the day before. Violet just laughed off the whole incident with her mother. Violet convinced her to



go along since it was Sunday and no way to get work done since the farm stores were closed. They went to a place called Sugar Town, two shacks separated by a tarp. They bought fresh gulf fish there.

When they got home, Charley admitted to Violet that she fell apart after Davis died. Charley admitted that she is to blame for Micah's arm scar. Charley was so depressed after Davis' death that she asked Micah to cook dinner. Some cleaner got too close to the stove and ignited, catching Micah on fire. Micah's severe burns required a skin graft. After confessing all this to Violet, Charley had a restored appreciation for getting the opportunity to be Micah's mother and to take care of her.

Charley recalled a memory from her childhood. Her father bought an 18-inch bronze sculpture called "The Cane Cutter." He was proud of it – a black man, strong and muscular, cutting cane. Lorna told him to put it in the den and he threatened to break all her crystal if she moved it out of the living room. Her parents eventually divorced and of course, Ernest got custody of the sculpture. She remembered seeing him stare at the sculpture during his second round of chemotherapy for his cancer. Together, they admired the muscles and defiance in the sculpture. One day, after Micah's accident, Charley was not only depressed, but guilt-ridden. Her father dropped off the sculpture at her house without a note. She knew the sculpture was meant to tell her to get up, fight, be strong, and defy what life was handing her, just like the cane cutter. It inspired her to do just that.

Micah asked her mom if they were going to lose everything, which she heard Charley say that morning. Charley told Micah that her job is to have fun and to let her worry about the rest.

## Analysis

Chapters 5 and 6 show the different memories that Ralph Angel and Charley have of their father and the challenges they face as single parents. In Chapter 5, a flashback reminds Ralph Angel about his first ferry ride with his father. He shares that experience with Blue. The author uses similes and metaphors to create imagery of the sights during their impromptu beach trip. For example, a bird has a beak that is "thin as a needle (56)." His father also described California beaches as having sand "as fine as cornmeal (57)." The author also uses personification when saying that the wind worried a picnic blanket (57).

The reader gets a good description of Ralph Angel's mother in Chapter 5. She was not mentally stable and never could hold down a job. She earned a full scholarship to Louisiana State University, but had to give up on going to school to be a lawyer when she got pregnant. At this point in the story, it is not determined if his mother, Emily, had mental issues before she gave birth or if her distress was a depression caused by her breakup with Ernest and her lot in life to be a single parent.





Even though she was not a stable parent, Emily did insist that Ralph Angel give life with his father a try in California. Ralph Angel recalls in his flashback that when he offers to stay with her, she bravely insists that he go. This act exemplifies the old adage, “If you love something, set it free. If it comes back, it’s yours. If not, it wasn’t meant to be.” The only difference is that Ralph Angel does not go back to his mother out of love; he is sent home because of his bad behavior.

Ralph Angel says he identifies with the sign he sees outside the café which reads, “LOST DOG – BLIND IN ONE EYE. MISSING RIGHT EAR. TAIL BROKEN. RECENTLY CASTRATED. ANSWERS TO THE NAME LUCKY” (60). Ralph Angel is that man in many ways. He is “blind in one eye” because he does not have the foresight to plan for their trip. Getting evicted was like falling on his behind, similar to getting his “tail broken.” With his wife’s death, he no longer hears the voice of reason (missing his right ear, the one that tells him right from wrong). He is “recently castrated” with two important elements of his manhood recently taken from him – his wife and his home. And like the dog in the sign, Ralph Angel’s name is also ironic. With the actions he admits to in Chapter 5, along with stealing the car and shoplifting, he is not an angel.

In Chapter 6, Charley admits much about herself in the way of a confession to her aunt, Violet. Her severe depression led to an accident that left Micah with burn scars for life. The child almost died from her injuries. She also finally admits that she’s bitten off more than she can chew in regards to the sugarcane crop. Confessing both helps Charley begin to heal from the guilt.

In her confession, Charley explains how she used to wear Davis’ robe all the time after his death. Even after the fire that almost killed Micah, Charley clung to that robe. One day, she finally decided to give up the robe and set it on fire in her back yard. In this section of the story, fire serves as two very different kinds of symbolism. The fire that burned Micah symbolized literal destruction and figurative Hell in the guilt that it caused to burn in Charley. However, the fire that burned Davis’ robe was purifying and symbolic of freedom.

Chapter 6 is also full of imagery, even descriptions that appeal to taste. The author describes the relationship between Violet and Charley with food descriptions (68). Violet is metaphorically syrup and bacon grease; Charley is a stack of pancakes and a piece of white bread. Ironically, some of the locals compare Charley to white people in previous chapters.

Miss Honey explains to Charley that saying many of the area’s young black men are “in the Bahamas” is another way to say they are in prison. This denotes the idea that the young men look at prison as a vacation from their real lives in poverty.

When the women begin talking about Ralph Angel, Charley gets uneasy. Suddenly, she realizes her father left him out of his will. Hearing that he violently pushed Miss Honey and caused her to break her arm, she feels concerned for her safety. This foreshadows their future meeting. She does not know he is on his way and Miss Honey does not tell her she invited him.



Being immersed in rural Louisiana culture has made Charley sensitive to black stereotypes. That's why she does not approve of the Shirley Temple movie that features Bojangles, a tap-dancing black man that is portrayed as a buffoon. The actual movie name is "The Little Colonel," not "The Littlest Colonel" as noted in the book. The original movie, made in the mid-1930s, portrays a wealthy white family that is served by African Americans. The stereotype of blacks serving whites makes Charley mad because overcoming this stereotype is one of the challenges she faces in her new business.

While the Bojangles stereotype disturbs Charley, the Cane Cutter sculpture does not. Both cast a stereotypical image of African Americans, but the difference is in the core of the purpose of each. Bojangles, the dancer in the movie, portrayed a servant who was there for the entertainment whims of his white boss. The Cane Cutter, however, may have served a white boss, but it was through hard work, which better represented the life of African Americans of the plantation era. Bojangles was a loveable buffoon, but the Cane Cutter was a strong, hard-working man.

The Cane Cutter sculpture means a lot to Charley for another reason, though. It reminds her of her father. From it, she is reminded that he wants her to be hard-working and strong like the man portrayed in bronze. When Charley first saw the sculpture when she was younger, she thought it looked like her father. Lorna said she hoped not, indicating a clear difference in their values. As a medical professional, Lorna's idea of hard work was in a more professional world instead of a cane field. Ernest, however, clung to the idea of hard physical labor as a symbol of strength, will, and endurance. The difference in the husband and wife could have been their own personal experiences. The reader knows Ernest comes from a cane community, which explains his infatuation with the strong image of the statue. The reader does not know Lorna's background. Perhaps she was from a region where cane was not grown and where professions were stressed over hard labor. The difference could have also been related to gender. Maybe as a woman, Lorna valued professional labor, while Ernest, a man, admired physical strength and endurance. Charley also notes that the sculpture has an air of defiance, a characteristic she will need herself to beat the odds against her in the cane business.

The bronze sculpture also reminds Charley that she is a parent and is in control. When Micah worries that they will lose everything, Charley draws strength from the small statue and tells Micah her job is to have fun. She feels like she has the strength to provide for her daughter's future while also making her father proud.

## Discussion Question 1

When Ralph Angel went to live with his father in Los Angeles, how does he get his attention? Is this a good idea? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Charley wear work clothes when she goes to town?



## Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast Charley's relationship with Miss Honey to her relationship with Aunt Violet.

## Vocabulary

rookeries, homestead, juttred, verge, tenant, hesitated, beamed, wearily, winced, laborer

# Chapters 7 - 8

## Summary

Chapters 7 and 8 were told from Charley's point of view in the third person limited style. In Chapter 7, she searched for a manager to no avail. At Miss Honey's encouragement, Charley decided to try a restaurant called the Blue Bowl. When she arrived, it was full of white male farmers. Other than the waitresses, she was the only female. Other than the kitchen staff, she was the only African American. She sat at a table alone and listened to the farmers talk. Their discussions only brought up more questions for her, more things about sugarcane that she did not understand. She was surprised when Prosper Denton walked in and asked if he could join her.

Prosper told her that the white farmers were successful because they stuck together. He had thought about that a lot after meeting her. He offered to help, only if she would put all her trust in him. Naturally, she accepted his offer. He warned her it would be a lot of hard work, but Charley said she was up for the challenge. At this point, they had only four months until grinding time.

The Saturday family reunion took place in Chapter 8. Miss Honey scoffed at the idea of eating raw vegetables and fussed over the potato salad Violet and Charley were making. Guests included Charley's Uncle Brother, her father's brother, and his son, John. They lived in Texas and made the trip for the reunion. John offered to take Micah and Charley fishing. Uncle Brother brought a dead turtle to make turtle soup. Other guests included Great Aunt Rose, Uncle Oliver and Aunt Madeline, and cousins Screw Neck and Joe Black, Buzzard Gravy and Maraine. Instead of worrying about the farm, Charley enjoyed the day.

A man named Hollywood arrived at the reunion. He appeared to be in his 40's and arrived pushing a lawn mower. Miss Honey said she was glad his mother let him come to the party. Charley was surprised when he referred to her as Ralph Angel's little sister. Charley and Micah learned that Miss Honey hired Hollywood to clean out the back room for them. The room was bigger and Miss Honey was sure they would love it. Charley and Micah, however, saw the junky room and knew it had been infested with vermin. They did not want to live in that room. The small room they were staying in was Ralph Angel's old room.

All the food was gone except Charley's healthy vegetable snacks when Ralph Angel pulled up. Charley remembered that she had not seen him since she was 12 and he was 19. Uncle Brother insisted on knowing why Ralph Angel was there. Miss Honey finally admitted that she called and invited him. She insisted that the family welcome him. Everyone left except Charley, Micah, Miss Honey, Ralph Angel, and Blue. Hollywood came back and saw the party had ended. Charley told Micah to let Miss Honey know he had arrived and she swore in French. Hollywood understood the French and scolded her in the language as well.



Hollywood said he wanted to go to Hollywood to take a bus tour by Marvin Gaye's old house. Hollywood is surprised, but not so happy, to see Ralph Angel despite Miss Honey saying earlier that the two were best friends. Charley sensed Hollywood's uneasiness. Ralph Angel called him Peanut several times and Hollywood asked him to stop. Ralph Angel then went on to ridicule him for charging only \$5 to mow an entire yard. Hollywood decided to leave and Charley walked him outside. She apologized for Ralph Angel's behavior and he told her that Micah was a good kid and not to worry about her occasionally acting up.

At the end of the night, Ralph Angel started harassing Charley about her inheritance. Not sure how to take it, she told Micah it was bedtime. Instead of ending the confrontation with Ralph Angel, however, this only opened a new one. He wanted his old room and wanted Charley and Micah to move to the back one. Miss Honey said he could have that room only if Charley agreed to swap with him. Charley decided to stand her ground, especially after the way she saw Ralph Angel treat Hollywood. Ralph Angel surprised Charley by saying the room was all hers and that he would find another way she could repay him for it.

## Analysis

In Chapter 7, Charley continues to immerse herself in the sugarcane industry by placing herself in situations with other farmers. She hopes that by seeing her, they will begin to see she is serious about the business. Unfortunately, she is not welcomed by the close-knit group of white farmers in the region. Prosper Denton's willingness to work for her comes from his recognition of this close-knit group. He knows the white farmers have been so successful because they stick together. His experience in the cane business has shown him that there is no one who will help Charley. He comes out of retirement to help her, to stick with her like the white farmers stick together.

When Denton offers to work for her if she will trust him, Charley jumps at the opportunity. There is no reason not to trust him; he is really the only chance she has. She knows he is knowledgeable and that he is a good person. She is happy to trust him as her business manager. Denton knows she is eager to jump at the opportunity now, but cautions that she may question his methods in the future. This foreshadows that Charley will see some of his decisions as not logical in the future. He is clear that his agreement to manage the property does not mean Charley will escape hard work. She does not mind hard work, something that Denton respects.

The family reunion in Chapter 8 gives the readers a chance to know more about Charley's family. They are proud of John, who is a prison guard. Charley enjoys time with her Uncle Brother, who reminds her very much of her father. In addition to this being a family reunion to welcome Charley back, it is also a celebration of sorts for Charley finally finding a crop manager.

Charley is not sure what to make of Ralph Angel's return. She thinks he will be there for a couple of days then leave. Violet's reaction, however, reflects what the reader already



suspects – Ralph Angel is home for a reason and he will stay until he gets whatever it is he wants. Even though Charley is not sure how to take Ralph Angel, the rest of the family is. They leave when he arrives; they want nothing to do with him. Charley wants him to be a protective big brother, but she is afraid of him because of the way he caused Miss Honey to break her arm.

Ralph Angel's return to Miss Honey's house adds to the rising action of this story's plot. With Denton agreeing to serve as Charley's crop manager, there was a chance this story would resolve with everyone living happily ever after. Now, that storybook ending is not so certain. Judging from her family's reaction and from what the reader already knows, Ralph Angel brings additional conflict to the plot. The first conflict that arises is that the entire family leaves upon his arrival. The second is the conflict he starts with Hollywood. The third is the conflict that arises over Miss Honey giving Charley his old bedroom.

Hollywood is an interesting character. At age 40-something, he still lives with his mother and push mows lawns to make money. He also wears a helmet. He enjoys working and only charges \$5 per job. It appears as though Hollywood has some kind of disability, and not a physical one since he can mow yards. But he also speaks French and catches Micah cursing her mother. When her mother asked her to go get Miss Honey, she responded with "Tu me rendes dingue. Va je foutre. (106) This translates to "You make me crazy. F--- you." Hollywood made her apologize to her mother. Both Charley and Micah were shocked with his understanding of French. Perhaps he was schooled in it at some point, but they seem to have forgotten that French was the base of much of the regional dialect in Louisiana.

Ralph Angel refers to Hollywood as Peanut, a name that does not please Hollywood. Hollywood asks him not to call him that, but Ralph Angel continues to do so anyway. This symbolizes a bully-victim type relationship between the two and foreshadows that more will be learned about that relationship in the future. Charley sees Ralph Angel's bully-like ways when he begins congratulating her on the inheritance. His congratulations are not sincere and are riddled with digs about her close relationship with their father. Despite being afraid of him, she does not cave to his demand for his old room. Doing so would only reinforce his selfish, bad behavior. At the end of the chapter, he happily "gives" Charley the room (although Miss Honey had already done so), with the caveat that he expects something from her in return. This foreshadows events that will come in the story.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss at least two reasons that Denton has for wanting to help Charley.

## Discussion Question 2

Why do Charley's relatives react the way they do when Ralph Angel arrives? Why do they react the way they do when they learn Miss Honey invited him?



## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the irony of Ralph Angel's statement that the plantation is something Charley can "fall back on (112.)"

## Vocabulary

perimeter, gumbo, wavered, boudin, crudites, fatigues, fawning, dryly, stakes



## Chapters 9 - 10

### Summary

Charley and Denton checked inventory and the land at the beginning of Chapter 9. Like the previous chapters, these two chapters were told in the third person limited point of view and was from Charley's vantage point. Charley tried to make notes as Denton talked, but he told her to stop writing and to start living the crop. The only way she could learn about sugarcane was to live it, he said. Part of learning included tasting the soil. Denton tasted it first. He said it was not too sandy and did not have too much clay. He deemed the soil perfect. When Charley tasted, she did not taste anything. On her second taste, she noticed much more.

Denton also said they needed to buy more mother stalk. He explained the stages of sugarcane. First, mother stalk, then those shoots grow into the plant crop. The shoots from that crop are called first-year stubble the following year, then second year stubble, third year stubble, and four years stubble for the subsequent years. After the fourth year, the original cane must be dug up and replaced. He suggested they use local labor to dig drains and fill ruts as needed. He also gave her an estimate of money needed for equipment repairs and purchases. He estimated \$156,000. Charley only had \$91,000 between her savings and what was left in her father's operating fund. She was afraid he would quit, but instead he told her to get ready to be creative.

She was thankful Denton decided to help her regardless of her inadequate funding. She spent the rest of the day cleaning the workshop. Denton said he would try to get a part for the tractor the next day. As Charley drove home, it began to rain, then rain harder, before finally stopping just before she arrived home.

At home, Charley learned that Micah spent the entire day working on making her garden. Charley was proud of her hard work but felt guilty for not introducing her to nice kids with which to play. In the kitchen, Charley had a short rant about how stupid she is for trying to make this farm work. Miss Honey told her that her father worked on that farm one summer when he was young. This information surprised Charley. Miss Honey said those were tough times and Ernest, then 13, said he wanted to work cane. The owner hit him with a shovel when he tried to get a drink during their break. He was told to let the whites drink first. He kept the job because he wanted to help his family with money. He only told his mother shortly before he moved to California at age 17. Miss Honey wished she could tell Ernest how proud she was of him for buying that very plantation.

That night, Charley couldn't sleep for thinking about how to raise more money for the farm and the brutality her father had faced there as a young boy. She got up and went to the kitchen and found Ralph Angel there eating a bowl of cereal with water. He asked Charley for an administrative job on the farm. She said she really did not have anything, but would think about it. He told her to take her time because he was going nowhere.





In Chapter 10, Denton and Charley cleaned up the rows using a modified plow he cobbled together. He showed her how to run the tractor to get rid of vines of morning glory that threatened to take over the cane crop. She noticed the crop had a different view of her farm from the tractor's seat. She finally saw its beauty.

As they ate lunch, Denton told her that everything about the cane industry had increased in cost except for the cane itself. He said this was the worst time to get into the business. Charley told him she was determined not to be stopped and he was happy to hear it. It took ten days to get the fields in order. He also warned her that plenty could still go wrong with the crop weather-wise.

That afternoon, Charley called Violet and asked her to visit. She offered to visit on the sidewalk since Violet was protesting Ralph Angel's presence. Violet remained firm to let her mother know she did not approve of her inviting Ralph Angel to be a guest. Charley also asked her advice about whether or not to hire Ralph Angel.

At home, Hollywood had finished cleaning out the back room. He waited for Charley to get home to ask her out. Just as he was about to ask, Ralph Angel barged in. He had taken Blue and Micah to the park and he was tired. He told Hollywood that he needed some adult playtime and asked him to hit the bars or go fishing the next day. Hollywood, however, said he had to work the next day. Even over the weekend, Hollywood did not want to hang out at their old favorite places because they were dangerous now. Miss Honey interrupted and said that Hollywood was there to ask Charley on a date. Ralph Angel acted offended, but then made fun of Hollywood for being nervous. Charley was just about to decline when Ralph Angel began teasing about being worth a whole lawn for the \$4 date Hollywood asked her on. She told Ralph Angel he was being cruel to Hollywood and he said she was being cruel, too.

## Analysis

When Denton said he would teach Charley the cane business, he was not joking. In Chapter 9, Denton has Charley working right beside him. The two drive together through the fields and Denton points out to her the stages of each crop, how cane grows, and the importance of replanting after the fourth year. He also insists she taste the dirt. Some might see this as a simple hazing ritual or a way that Denton is having a little fun with Charley, however he is really helping her get to know her land. By tasting and consuming the two soil samples, Charley literally became one with her land. She also took control of it; she could eat the soil, but it could not eat her. This underlying concept of control is especially important to Charley when the land seems so very much out of her control. While she cannot discern the clay taste like he does, she now has a control tool to know what good soil should be.

Denton wants Charley to live the cane business, not make notes about it. The reason is that cane growers must know how to adjust to accommodate many situations, like flood, drought, etc. It is not enough to go by the book. A cane grower must understand the



needs of the cane and the possible threats it faces. These threats pop up unexpectedly and do not follow a formula or a procedure, so notes cannot effectively cover it all.

When Denton suggests they hire local labor to do some drainage work on the farm, he explains that he means “black folks. (119)” This foreshadows events to come later in the story, especially after Ralph Angel’s request for a job at the end of Chapter 9. Of course, he wants to do administrative work, not hard labor.

With her savings and the operating fees her father left her, Charley only has \$91,000 to get this crop to market. The problem is that she needs \$156,000 just for equipment and repairs. When Denton tells her they are about to get creative, he does not explain what he means. The reader may think that Charley has to get a job to supplement the farm’s income or find some other source of money. Instead, Denton literally gets creative. He takes an old plow and some scrap pipe and makes a three-row plow to dig up the vines and morning glories that threatened to smother the crop. Charley is appreciative and impressed. She sees that with ingenuity, the job can get done. She also sees that Denton is committed to making her farm profitable. Still, she has her doubts about whether ingenuity and commitment are enough for this abandoned cane crop.

As Charley drives home after her first day of work with Denton, the skies darken, then rain begins to pour. By the time she makes it home, the shower is over. Rain is always symbolic of troubled times. In this case, the storm is short and ends on a high note – her car looks freshly washed and waxed. This rain symbolizes to the reader that Charley’s troubles are not over yet, but that there is something good that will come out of them.

Micah has been working to make her garden all day. Charley is happy to see her drive, but feels guilty that she is not playing with other kids her age. With all her focus on the farm, Charley has not made time to help Micah meet new friends. She is certainly concerned about the culture and social norms in the area that are so exclusive and anti-black, which may also be a deterrent in her finding other kids for Micah to meet. Micah’s values and upbringing differ greatly from the kids her age in St. Josephine.

Charley is surprised to hear that her father worked in the cane field for LeJeune one summer. She is heartbroken to learn that he was a victim of racism there. Despite being hit with a shovel and made to go to the back of the line for water, Ernest kept going to work so he could help his family with money during the rough time. As soon as he finished high school, Ernest wasted no time getting out of St. Josephine. But it seemed to be his lifelong goal to buy that sugarcane property. He came full circle – went from working for the abusive, racist owner to buying that very farm. This was an act of defiance, like the one he and Charley noticed in the face of the sculpture of the Cane Cutter. She is more determined than ever to honor her father’s struggle by keeping the farm alive and profitable.

When Ralph asks Charley for a job at the end of Chapter 9, it is clear he really does not want to work. He wants to be an administrator and knows nothing about cane. When he says he is not going anywhere, Charley knows his intentions are to stay on at Miss Honey’s house.



In Chapter 10, Charley gains a new appreciation for her crop when she sits in the driver's seat of the tractor. Physically, the tractor sits high above the ground and gives her literally a new perspective of the land. Her appreciation has a figurative meaning as well. When she sits in the tractor seat and takes control of the steering and plowing, she appreciates the land that belongs to her. She gets the full experience of property ownership while working on the land.

When Hollywood stops by to ask Charley on a date, Ralph Angel bullies him again. Charley tells him he is being cruel but he says she is cruel also. Perhaps he means that she is being cruel to Hollywood for trying to reject his offer, or for being cruel to him for not giving him a job. Either way, Ralph Angel is trying to manipulate Charley, much like one might expect to see in younger children.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why does Denton insist that Charley must live sugarcane? How does he help her do that in Chapters 9 and 10?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Discuss the similarities between Micah and her mother, based on the girl's experience with the vegetable garden she is starting in Chapter 10..

## **Discussion Question 3**

Explain how Ernest's experience as a 13-year-old boy working on the LeJeune farm makes Miss Honey, Violet, and Charley feel and why.

## **Vocabulary**

homey, aroma, veil, kamikaze, debutante, plow, kudzu, hitch, lurched, spikes



# Chapters 11 - 12

## Summary

The section called July begins with Chapter 11. This chapter is told from Charley's third person, limited point of view.

After 12 straight days of rain, Charley and Denton were finally able to get back to work in the fields. Charley learned that the rain brought with it the chance of borers, small insects that ate the sucrose out of the cane, basically rendering the crop worthless. Denton had a high school science teacher who did crop testing on the side to check it because he knew the man would do the work for cheap. The tests were positive for borers, meaning the crop had to be dusted with herbicide. The teacher's brother, Bradley Thibodeaux, said there would be no charge for this round of spray. Charley objected, but Bradley said they would be doing business again in September when it was time to spray ripener.

Chapter 12 was told from Ralph Angel's point of view in the third person limited. He was surprised to read in the paper that there had been a shooting in the bar district where he had tried to get Hollywood to go with him. Miss Honey reminded him that Hollywood knew what he was talking about. She was dressed up to take Micah to a garden show and to buy a new slow cooker. On her way out, she asked Ralph Angel to carry boxes of garbage to the dump and to get Blue out of the house for some fun. He snapped at her that he would think about it and it reminded him that he had gotten snappy with her the time he pushed her down. He felt guilty about it.

Blue was sitting in their room going through the contents of a big glass jar he found. It contained marbles, Civil War bullets, buttons, mini cups and saucers, and other small trinkets and toys. The contents were all things Ralph Angel had found when exploring cane fields after harvest. When Blue told him he found it in a box outside, Ralph Angel went to see if any other old treasures had been tossed in. It was all junk except for his two old fishing poles and tackle box. He decided to take Blue fishing. The fishing trip would serve two purposes – it would get Blue out of the house and show Charley that he wasn't just sitting around looking for a handout.

Despite seeing an alligator in the bayou, Blue bored quickly with fishing. His dad told him to go play with Zach, his Power Ranger action figure as he continued fishing. When a barge passed by, Ralph noticed Blue had gone into the edge of the water to get his toy that had fallen into it. However, as the barge passed, it would release water quickly and the area where Blue stood would flood with water under swift current. Ralph Angel knew he had to act quickly even though he could not swim. He thought about how his previous hesitation caused him to lose his wife, Gwenna, but no specifics were given of that incident. As the water refilled the bayou, splashing Ralph Angel in the face and up his nose, Blue fought the current and swam to him. Ralph Angel was able to get his son to safety.

## Analysis

In Chapter 11, Charley's work relationship with Denton is proving to be even more valuable. Not only does he have the experience she needs to run the farm, he also has plenty of good contacts. Herbicide spray that would have cost her \$6.35 per acre (a total of \$5,080) cost her nothing due to Denton's relationship with the Thibodeaux brothers. Denton also solidifies Charley's image as a serious businessperson to Bradley Thibodeaux. Upon meeting Charley with Denton, Bradley asked what a young girl like her was doing with an old man like Denton. Denton immediately changed the topic back to business by explaining that he was working for her.

The chapter began with the sentence "What could go wrong (143)?" Charley is thinking about the day she thought the crops would be fine after the vines were pulled up, but Denton cautioned her that more could happen. Now she understood. It wasn't enough to have the vines cleared away because the weather brought its own set of problems, like borers. The foreshadowing of Denton's comments in a previous chapter about other things that could happen comes to fruition in Chapter 11 with the heavy rain and borers.

In Chapter 12, Miss Honey tells Ralph Angel to "be a good friend" and carry off boxes of trash for Hollywood (147). Ralph Angel looks through the boxes to see what was discarded, but does not carry them to the dump. So far, Ralph Angel has not exhibited signs of being a good friend to Hollywood. He has ridiculed him for the price he charges for lawn work, made fun of him for not seeming confident when he asked out Charley, and now Miss Honey is noting that he should do something to be a good friend. While fishing with Blue, Ralph Angel calls Hollywood his best friend, then he has a "pang of longing for his old friend (152)." Since Ralph Angel has recently seen Hollywood, this idea of a pang of longing symbolizes something deeper, perhaps a change that occurred to Hollywood between childhood and adulthood that changed him or a pivotal point in their relationship that changed things for the worse. It also foreshadows that the reader will learn more about the relationship between Hollywood and Ralph Angel as the story progresses.

The reader also learns more about Ralph Angel's deceased wife, Gwenna. He believes she died because he hesitated, because he was afraid to try to help her. No specifics of Gwenna's death are given at this point.

Despite not knowing how to swim, Ralph Angel sets out to save his son from drowning. Blue can dog paddle, but Ralph Angel cannot swim at all. When the water starts splashing in his face and up his nose, Ralph Angel panics, but still calls Blue to him. He notices the fear and the determination on Blue's face as he swims toward him. Ralph Angel is proud of the determination he sees in Blue and he certainly understands the fear. Blue's fear and determination were for both himself and his father. In addition to being afraid as the water began to rise with swift current, he could see his father's panic. In a way, Blue was saving himself and his father.



## Discussion Question 1

What reasons does Ralph Angel site for wanting to go fishing? Does his fishing trip achieve these goals? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

How does Denton's knowledge of sugarcane help Charley in Chapter 11? How does his knowledge of the community help her in the same chapter?

## Discussion Question 3

Explain why borers are so devastating to sugarcane.

## Vocabulary

superstitious, borer, infestation, linoleum, appraise, dingy, contribute, remnant, conveyor, clench, bobbing



# Chapters 13 - 14

## Summary

Chapter 13 took place in the middle of July and was told from Charley's viewpoint in the third person limited style. She met Denton at an equipment auction where they hoped to pick up some inexpensive tools for the farm. Denton and Charley were the only black people there. Charley was the only woman, except for the two working clerical duties for the auction.

Everyone at the auction seemed to know and respect Denton. Charley noted how the younger people looked up to him and the older people seemed to have a brotherly affection for him. Then, Jacques Landry and his boss, Samuel T. Baron, came along when Charley went to register for the auction. She noticed that Denton was no longer relaxed and seemed uncomfortable around Landry and Baron. She learned that Denton once worked for Landry's father. Landry called Denton by his first name and told him he was disappointed that he would mislead Charley into thinking she could become a cane farmer. Charley stepped in and reminded Landry to call him Mr. Denton, not by his first name. Denton did not respond.

Landry suggested they all move into the shade. He asked Charley if she had surfed when living in California. She said she had and he referred to her as a "black surfer chick (160)." Then, he eyed her up and down, from breasts to crotch, saying he was trying to picture her in a swim suit. Furious, she told him she was trying to picture his small, pink penis. The comment shocked Landry and before he could respond, Baron suggested they all got off on the wrong foot and apologized for Landry's behavior. He asked Charley to promise to give them first shot at buying the farm when she realized she was in over her head. She assured them she and Denton would do fine as partners.

Charley apologized to Denton for speaking on his behalf but he changed the subject. The bidding was about to begin. He told her which equipment to bid on and helped her know how much to bid. He spotted a man in the crowd who was driving up bids and told Charley to hold off bidding on a particular tractor. She bid anyway, but thankfully was outbid by someone. She thought he would quit because she had not trusted his judgment as she'd promised. He disappeared into the crowd for the rest of the auction.

When the auction was finished, Charley ran into Denton at his truck. He opened the door and told her to get in. She asked no questions and was thankful that he was even speaking to her after the auction. He drove her to the back of the auction lot and spoke to his friend, another farmer named Remy Newell. Charley congratulated Remy on his auction purchases. He was excited to have bought so much for so little money. Then she found out that the items did not belong to Remy. Denton asked Remy to bid for Charley so Baron would stop driving up the prices with the rainmaker.



Chapter 14 focused on Ralph Angel and is told in the third person limited point of view. He listened to his son playing and quoting rap lyrics and thought he should probably play other kinds of music around the boy. Blue had a stomach ache and would not take the Pepto Bismol after Micah said it tasted like vomit. When the boy jerked away and spilled the medicine on Ralph Angel and the sofa, his father cursed and yelled at him. Miss Honey took the boy in her arms and scolded Ralph Angel for losing his temper. She offered to get a hot water bottle for Blue instead. Ralph Angel took Blue from her and said he would read him a bedtime story. The only book in the bedroom was a Bible, so Ralph Angel used it to tell the story of Noah's ark. Ralph Angel also fell asleep while reading to Blue. When he woke up, Ralph Angel sneaked out of the house to go drive around.

Ralph Angel went to a nearby casino and met a waitress there. When he left, she was sitting on the curb and said her ride home did not show. He offered to take her home. She kept inching closer to him in the car and eventually, as Ralph Angel pulled over on a secluded road, the woman began undressing.

Back on the road again, it was not long before Ralph Angel was pulled over for speeding by a state trooper. The officer checked Ralph Angel's license and noted it was from California. He explained that he was in to visit family and that the car was a rental. Throughout the encounter, Ralph Angel was mentally counting. The officer let him go with a verbal warning.

The encounter with the state trooper gave Ralph Angel a rush, similar to the one he felt on his last night with Gwenna, his late wife. They were illicit drug users. She was trying to get clean, but Ralph Angel convinced her to shoot up with him one last time. They bought heroine and went into an old abandoned house to use it while leaving Blue, who was a baby, in the car parked out front. The drugs killed her. He left her lying in the floor of the abandoned house.

When he dropped the waitress off at her house, Ralph Angel offered to take her out to dinner some time. She said no and thanked him for the ride.

He decided that when he got home, he would ask Charley to cut him in on the farm because he did not have time to wait for a blessing from a God that he really did not believe in anyway.

## Analysis

In Chapter 13, Charley erroneously takes Denton's silence as a sign of weakness. He was taking the disrespect and harassment from Landry because he knew that fighting it would result in an auction battle. With his silence, he was using their ignorance against them. Landry and Baron knew Charley had little cash for operations and no experience with cane. They use demeaning racial and sexist language to try to discourage her. When she lets Landry know she will not take his demeaning remarks by insulting him with remarks about the size and color of his penis, she actually does exactly what





Denton is trying to avoid. Her remark about his penis being pink serves as a double insult since pink is widely accepted as a feminine color. Denton suspects Baron and Landry will sabotage Charley's bids and has her make a bid on some unwanted equipment to test his theory. He was right. Landry and Baron are bidding against the rainmaker to drive up costs for Charley. But smooth, smart Denton finds a way around their antics by getting Remy to bid on items on Charley's behalf. His scheme works out well for three reasons. Firstly, it makes Landry and Baron believe they got the best of Charley and will perhaps keep them off her back for a while. Secondly, it gets Charley the equipment she needs at low prices. Thirdly, it teaches Charley to listen to and trust Denton, like she promised she would do.

Charley assumes that Denton wants her to bid on a John Deere tractor that she finds him standing next to when she arrives at the auction. Instead, he has a whole different tractor picked out. Denton explains that the John Deere is auctioned for a man who needs money to cover his wife's medical expenses and he took good care of his equipment. Denton does not explain his method, but has attended many auctions before. Perhaps he does not want Charley to bid on the tractor so the farmer can get more money from someone else. Perhaps he is standing by the tractor to convince other people it is what he is there to bid on, to steer them away from what he really wants. Remember, everyone there knows and respects his cane farming knowledge.

When Charley meets Remy, she ironically congratulates him on his auction haul. He got a lot of good equipment for very little money. Remy is surprised that she does not know about Denton's scheme.

In Chapter 14, Ralph Angel deals with his anger management issues in very intentional ways. He realizes his decisions are rubbing off on his son when Blue starts quoting lyrics from rap music. Ralph Angel decides he needs to intentionally expose Blue to other kinds of music, like pop or blues. He deals with his mild anger with Micah by using sarcasm when he thanks her after she says the medicine tastes like vomit. His first real sign of intentionally trying to manage his anger comes when Miss Honey scolds him for cursing and yelling at his son. When she takes Blue in her arms, it reminds him of how her nagging made him push her down that time. He recalls that he was trying to be good when that happened too. He reveals that he pushed her after she said she was disappointed in him, the same thing his father said right before sending him back to Louisiana as a child.

The next time he tries to manage his anger in Chapter 14 is when the state trooper pulls him over for speeding. The narration shows this through Ralph Angel's counting of seconds as an anger management method – one Mississippi, two Mississippi.... He is able to keep his cool and the traffic stop ends better than it should considering he is in possession of a rental car that he never returned.

Chapter 14 also focuses on the death of Gwenna, Ralph Angel's wife. Their drug addiction caused them to lose their home and to become junkies. They never meant to get hooked. He remembers how they just wanted something to give them a warm feeling, a buffer between them and reality. Gwenna had been hospitalized many times



for her drug abuse and was making steps to get clean. Her next step was to get rid of the negative influences in her life. The biggest negative influence was Ralph Angel. He remembers convincing her to do heroine with him one last time, the time that killed her. He is haunted by the memory of leaving her alone in that abandoned house and of being the reason she died.

Despite being a bad influence on Gwenna, Ralph Angel really seems to have loved her. Everything about the waitress that he drives home reminds him of Gwenna somewhat. He compares their skin and even notes that their hair has the same floral scent. After intimate time with the woman in his car, he is reminded of Gwenna's favorite poem and he remembers every word of the free verse.

His close encounter with the state trooper, memories of Gwenna, and his desire to be a better father for Blue make him decide to ask Charley again the next morning to be included in the sugarcane farm venture. He knows he does not have the best of luck and he does not believe in God, so he decides he has to make good things happen for himself.

## Discussion Question 1

Explain while Denton disappears after Charley bids on a tractor he advises her against.

## Discussion Question 2

Does Ralph Angel take responsibility for pushing down Miss Honey? Explain why or why not.

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the racist and sexist remarks Landry made to Denton and Charley at the auction. Explain why the remarks are derogatory.

## Vocabulary

archaeological, defeated, hyena, limply, premium, buttery, lynchings, Jim Crow, kowtowing, gangly, techno, junkies



# Chapters 15 -16

## Summary

Chapters 15 and 16 are told from Charley's point of view. In Chapter 15, Denton proposed a work cooperative with a man named Alison Delcambre. Alison was a white farmer who had been ripped off by the cane mill operated by Landry and Baron. He was losing his farm as he grew deeper in debt. He agreed to work for Charley using his equipment for 15 percent of their profit. Charley and Denton each gave up 7.5 percent of their 60/40 arrangement. Alison is happy to enter into the agreement to help Charley succeed against Landry and Baron.

Charley went to visit Violet after work one day. Violet lived in an integrated subdivision called Holiday Hills. She said Miss Honey was angry when they bought the house there; she wanted her to stay in their old neighborhood and buy a house just down the street from her. But Violet wanted to meet new people and have a new way of life. Violet asks Charley what she will say if Hollywood asks her out again. Charley wishes she had enough money to pay someone to tell her she thinks of him only as a friend. She does find comfort in him and enjoys his companionship, but is not romantically interested in him.

In Chapter 16, Charley is rattled by Micah taking pictures of the gates of Heaven with her Polaroid camera. Micah insisted she can see the gates, but Charley did not. She tried to reason with the girl, but she insisted Miss Honey said the gates were there. Instead of arguing about it, she told Micah to get her shoes on and they would go get snow cones. While Micah was inside, Ralph Angel went out to speak to Charley. He pointed out Micah's garden and said manual labor is too hard. He always talked about being an engineer, but his last job was reading meters for a water company. Then, he asked Charlie if she had decided to hire him yet. Micah and Blue went out onto the porch, saving Charley from having to answer. The kids argued over whether or not they could see the gates of Heaven in the photos; Blue said he saw a tiger instead. Ralph Angel calmed both the kids and Charley was impressed with his diplomacy. Ralph Angel quoted memorized Bible verses for the kids at their request, again impressing Charley. Micah asked if Blue could go with them for snow cones. Ralph Angel had no money, but Charley said it was her treat.

After Blue was tucked in that night, Ralph Angel stopped by Charley's room to talk with her. He noticed the Cane Cutter sculpture and Charley told him it belonged to their father. After a little small talk, Ralph Angel told Charley they were a lot alike – both had lost spouses and ended up at Miss Honey's house. He thanked her for taking Blue for a snow cone. He also asked again about partnering with him on the farm. She said she already had a partner and did not have enough money to pay Ralph Angel anything. He said he would be willing to drive a tractor until she could figure out a way to cut him in as a partner. She thought about the long hours she and Denton were putting in, and then Alison when he joined them. Charley tried to level with him. She only got enough



money to buy gas and her share of groceries for the house. She told him she was not even sure there would be any profits at this point. She looked in her purse and found a \$20 bill. She gave it to him and said she was sorry that it was all she had to give him. He said he thought they had an understanding. She was confused and asked him to explain. He reminded her that he gave her a chemistry set for Christmas one year plus \$10 cash. He said they were supposed to take care of each other. Then, he accused her of giving him the runaround. His anger grew. He told her he knew she bought a lot of equipment and that he could drive tractors just like she could. She reminded him that he did not like manual labor. Ralph Angel told her that it was hard on him growing up to know that their dad loved her more and gave her more. He asked why their dad did not give him part of the inheritance. Charley said she did not know; she only knew herself after his death. He accused her of telling their dad to disinherit him. Charley told him that idea was crazy. She told him maybe it was because he stole money from their dad that was supposed to be used for tuition. Ralph Angel said their dad owed him that money. She asked him if he spent the money on drugs and if he meant to break Miss Honey's arm. She said she saw the way he treated Hollywood, someone who was supposed to be his best friend, and knew what kind of person he really was. He grabbed her wrist and squeezed hard, but Blue came in and interrupted. When Ralph Angel left to tuck Blue back into bed, the fight was over. Charley knew she could never trust him.

Charley woke in the middle of the night and realized Micah wasn't in bed. She was in the bathroom and Charley could hear her talking. She was afraid Ralph Angel was in there hurting or abusing her so she walked in. Micah was alone and praying. She had made a shrine of sorts with her gate to Heaven photos and was praying for God to make her pretty, to remove her burn scars. Charley grabbed her and hugged her and Micah burst into tears. Charley felt guilty and prayed for forgiveness after Micah fell asleep.

## Analysis

In Chapter 15, Denton brings another partner in with him and Charley and she does not question whether or not it is a good idea. She learned her lesson from not trusting him at the auction. Her concern is whether or not the crop will be profitable enough to stabilize them all. Denton's idea to bring Alison and his equipment on board shows another way that Denton finds to be creative in regards to financing. Charley also considers the fact that her business is benefitting from the misfortune of others. First, she got equipment auctioned by farmers who were trying to pay their debts. Now, she is partnering with a man who wants to get even with Landry and Baron for the way their sugar mill has cheated him over the last few years. He is a white man like they are so race is not the root problem in Alison's situation. Instead, greed is the root problem. The mills keep more money for themselves by paying out what they owe to the local farmers. This payment system is killing many small farms like Alison's. That's why Alison is more than happy to sign on with Charley and Denton.



Alison makes a reference to CAFTA, the Central America Free Trade Agreement. He said it was bad for business (192). The agreement allowed for sugar imports from several Central American nations. President George W. Bush signed the law into effect in 2005.

At the end of Chapter 15, Violet asks Charley what she will do if Hollywood asks her out again. She said he is a sweet man but a little slow. Posing this question foreshadows another date request by Hollywood.

Chapter 16 is about family disagreements. Charley decides not to argue with Micah over the idea of gateways to Heaven. A glance at Micah's growing garden serves as a reminder that her daughter is growing up and can do things like the garden on her own. She decides to slow time down a little by treating her daughter to a snow cone and enjoying some time with her.

Another family disagreement begins between Micah and Blue. They argue like siblings over what they see in Micah's photos before Ralph Angel calms them. Later that night, Ralph Angel and Charley have a big disagreement, one that proves to Charley that she cannot trust him. Before the argument, Ralph Angel is respectful of Charley's Cane Cutter statue. His careful attention to the item foreshadows that he may harm it in the future, especially after learning the sculpture was originally their father's.

Since first asking Charley for work at the cane farm, Ralph's language has changed. He has gone from wanting an administrative job to wanting a cut as a partner. Ralph Angel is clear with her that he does not do manual labor. Charley works all day doing very hard manual labor, but he expects a cut to be given to him for much less work. He believes their father owes him a cut of the inheritance. Perhaps this thinking is why their father did not leave him part of the inheritance. Ralph Angel acts as though he is owed something while Charley is willing to work – and work hard – for it. She tries to explain her predicament, but he gets mad. The rage takes the better of him and he gets physically abusive, grabbing and squeezing Charley's wrist.

When Charley hears Micah talking aloud in the restroom, she assumes Ralph Angel has her in there abusing her in some way. She is surprised to find Micah praying for God to make her pretty by healing her burn scars on her arm. Charley has a flashback, reminding her of the sight of Micah was burned in the kitchen. She is heavy with guilt as she comforts her sobbing daughter. Although she said at the beginning of the chapter that she did not like Miss Honey convincing Micah of her religious beliefs, she broke down and prayed herself and asked God for forgiveness.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the similarities of Denton, Alison, and Charley.



## Discussion Question 2

In Chapter 16, Ralph Angel tells Charley they are just alike (203). Are they? Explain your answer by comparing and contrasting the brother and sister.

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Ralph Angel keep insisting on a job at the sugarcane farm after Charley has told him she has no money to pay him?

## Vocabulary

exhaust, lubricant, sputtered, ambled, eccentric, delicately, aligning, disrespectful, righteousness, brittle, anxious, sliver



# Chapters 17 - 18

## Summary

Chapter 17 is told from Charley's point of view in the third person limited. At lunch, Denton proposed another creative plan for getting more help on the farm. He knew they needed to hire laborers later in the season and knew if they offered the same hourly wage as other farms, the black and Mexican laborers would end up working for the white farmers. He said even if they offered an hour for lunch and the white farmers offered only 15 minutes, somehow the white farms ended up with the labor. Alison, a white farmer himself, realized what Denton said was true but admitted he had never thought about it. Denton proposed they hire labor at \$8 an hour instead of the local rate of \$7.25. He added some caveats to his plan to make sure they got the most out of the laborers. Initially, they would be paid \$7.25 an hour. But, if they did not miss work (unless sick or for a funeral), if they did not quit before the end of December, they would be paid the additional 75-cents per hour. Only the ones who stuck to their promise would collect the additional money and Charley would not have the expense up front. Alison and Charley thought it was a great idea. The narrator revealed that Alison had a Ph.D. in agriculture and an MBA from Louisiana State University. During their lunches, he "lectured" about Louisiana agriculture history.

Remy drove up during a brief afternoon thunder shower and dropped off three bags of shrimp – one for Denton, Alison, and Charley. Charley and Remy talked about business for a while. She learned that Remy leased his farm acreage, a total of 2,100 acres. Remy was nice. Charley figured he was married and had several children. When Charley told Violet about Remy stopping by, she suggested Remy was interested in Charley. Violet suggested she ask Remy out, but Charley was uncomfortable with the idea of asking a man out on a date.

Chapter 18 is told from Ralph Angel's perspective. Miss Honey sent Ralph Angel to put gas in her car. He drove to Charley's farm and, from a distance, watched her work with Denton and Alison. With the money left over from getting gas, he stopped to buy a fresh loaf of French bread at the local bakery. The bakery owner, Johnny, recognized him as a former classmate and they struck up conversation. Johnny lamented that his best employee had just quit. Johnny said he was normally in the office but had to work on the floor since the other guy quit. Ralph Angel offered to work for Johnny. Johnny took him up on the offer and refunded him the money he had just paid for two loaves of bread. As he drove away from the bakery, he went over a bridge where an accident had occurred long ago. A man on a bike was run off the 30-foot bridge by a truck. Despite breaking several bones in the fall, the guy was able to swim back to the bank. The story reminded him that some people were born survivors. Ralph Angel took the refund and bought a nice shirt and tie at a thrift shop.

Ralph Angel arrived for work at 1 a.m. as instructed by Johnny. He thought that was too early to start office work. Johnny was surprised to see Ralph Angel dressed up. There



was a misunderstanding. Ralph Angel thought he would be working in the office since Johnny was doing the other guy's work. Johnny needed someone to mix bread. Disappointed, Ralph Angel said he would keep his word and help Johnny. He saw how the other employees worked together and teased each other and Ralph Angel thought about how great it would be to work in a place where everyone was friends. Ralph Angel was carrying a box of dough that had risen for two hours to the oven. He lost his balance and his grip and 100 loaves of bread that were ready to bake fell to the floor in a big doughy mess. He offered to stay until they remade the dough he'd lost but Johnny sent him home. Johnny tried to pay him for his time, but Ralph Angel would not accept the money. On the way home, Ralph Angel stopped his car on the high bridge and wondered if he would always be a survivor. He recalled almost drowning when he was trying to save Blue at the bayou and the sense of relief he had when he thought he might. He knew he could not leave Blue all alone, though, and had to find a way to keep going. He threw his new shirt and tie into the bayou.

## Analysis

In Chapter 17, Denton finds a way to pay laborers more than the other farmers even though they are on a tight budget. He does this to set their operation apart from those run by the white farmers in the area. Alison notes that their operation is already different since the partners are an old black man, an old white man, and a black woman. He said they were like "Barnum and Bailey as it is" meaning that the operation is like a circus already (212).

Denton outlines a unique situation. He says that black laborers will choose to work for a white farmer over a black one even when the benefits are better in the black operation (213). This symbolizes a plantation mindset, showing the reader how deep seeded the idea of segregation is and how even the local African American population tends to fall back into the rut of hard labor associated with slave times because it is simply the way it has always been done.

The reader learns that Alison holds a Ph.D. and an MBA from the local state university. He is a very bright man, learned academically and in the fields. His credentials show he is a valid partner with a lot to offer Charley's farming operation.

Charley enjoys visiting with Remy when he stops by to drop off some shrimp. Violet picks up on her interest in the man and suggests she asks him out on a date. This conversation foreshadows a budding relationship between the two cane farmers.

She learned from Remy that farmers named their fields after their children. She decides to keep the tradition and name her biggest field Micah's Corner. It is ironic that while her farm is breaking some traditions – such as her unique partnership with Denton and Alison and their creative business dealings – she finds a tradition that she wants to incorporate into her farm.





In Chapter 18, Ralph Angel drove out to Charley's farm to watch the work, from a distance, before going to buy bread and to land his own job. He was proud to get the job, but not as interested when he realized it was not an office job. Ralph Angel has no concept of work, or working into a promotion. He expects to start at the top because he supposedly took a few college classes in engineering. In a previous chapter he said he was just a few credits away from a degree, but there has been no proof that is true. No one has said how long he went to college before dropping out but continuing to collect tuition payments from his father. Ralph Angel's attitude of entitlement stems from his jealousy of Charley throughout her life. He was jealous of the time his father spent with her when he stopped going back to St. Josephine for the summers. He was jealous of Charley when he went to live with his father in California. He feels like he is entitled to everything Charley has, despite her hard work and dedication to the farm and to her father.

Despite not being the job he wanted, Ralph Angel did learn something from the few hours he spent working at the bakery. He wanted to work at a job where everyone liked each other and was friendly. He did not have anyone who wanted to cut up with him and tease the way the other employees did.

When Ralph Angel fell on the job and dropped all the loaves of dough, he failed at his job. Not only did he not help his old classmate stay caught up on the orders he needed to do for a big job, he actually set him back several hours.

On his way home after getting the job, the bridge symbolizes survival to him. He recalls the man who fell but was still able to swim to the bank. After losing his job at the bakery, the bridge reminded him how he wanted his pain and stress to end, but that he had to survive for Blue. He threw his work shirt and tie into the bayou as a symbol of letting go of his dreams of being an administrator.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Denton say in Chapter 17 that it is important their cane operation has something to set them apart from the other farms?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the misunderstanding between Ralph Angel and Johnny in Chapter 18 that leads Ralph Angel to think he will be working in the office. Did you have the same understanding that Ralph Angel did? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the importance of the 30-foot bridge to Ralph Angel in Chapter 18 for both times he drives over it.

## Vocabulary

frank, ton, tenderly, agriculture, retrieve, swapping, swooped, proofed, corrugated, flashy, machinery



# Chapters 19 - 20

## Summary

The section called August starts with Chapter 19. It is told from Charley's perspective in the third person limited point of view. The laborers were on the farm to plant new mother cane. Many were migrant workers who spoke little or no English. First thing that morning, one of the laborers got sick. Charley took him to the doctor, then home with his medicines. When she got back to the farm, she saw how much of the planting was getting missed with just one worker gone. She ran to fill in and spent the day doing hard labor just to get her cane in the ground. Denton was impressed; he thought she would quit after just one row.

Charley was proud of the section of land she named Micah's Corner. At first, it was the worst field on the farm. Their hard work turned it into the most beautiful section.

At the end of the day, Denton told them a hurricane was headed their way. Charley did not understand the impact of the news. Denton said the high winds and heavy rain could ruin their crop. They thought about sending the migrant workers to Arkansas for safety until the hurricane was over, but the hurricane was downgraded somewhat and it was not necessary.

Remy showed up to drop off a new variety of mother cane released by the local station. Charley knew it cost about \$300 per pound and offered to repay him. He told her it was a gift. While he was there, he also patched a tractor. She offered to buy him three beers – one for giving her the shrimp earlier, one for the cane, and one for fixing the tractor. Remy invited her to go dancing and Charley accepted. As he drove away, she noticed his truck radio was tuned to NPR, her favorite station.

Knowing St. Josephine was in the path of the hurricane, Charley's cousin John showed up to help her board up the windows at Miss Honey's house. When Ralph Angel realized John was there, he tried to pick a fight and tried to get John to let him hold his gun. John refused and, instead, concentrated on boarding up the house.

Chapter 20 is told in the third person limited style from Charley's point of view. Ralph Angel left the house during the hurricane despite Miss Honey's warning about the weather. Charley, Denton, and Alison toured the fields after the wind calmed. Charley was devastated to see Micah's Corner underwater with cane that had been battered by the heavy winds. Denton insisted that the crop could recover with pumps to drain the water from the field – another \$28,000 worth of repairs. Charley did not have enough money on hand for such a big expense. Denton asked her if she had something she could sell. She called her mother, who suggested Charley send Micah back to live with her so she could get a second job. Charley said no, and her mother wished her good luck and reminded her that she was resourceful and would figure out something. Charley tried getting a bank loan, but couldn't without a co-signer.



Charley went back home, worried about money. When she got home, Miss Honey was worried about Ralph Angel. She snapped at Charley and told her she only thought of herself. Miss Honey explained to Charley that when Ernest got Emily pregnant, she was the one who convinced Ernest to leave. He wanted to stay and marry Emily, but Miss Honey did not want him to give up his dream, especially after he had been abused by LeJeune on the cane farm. She gave Emily's family \$2,000 to keep her away until Ernest left town and promised him that she would help Emily care for him. When Emily found out Miss Honey had bribed her family, she refused to let Ralph Angel be with Miss Honey without Ernest also being present. Despite living in the same town, Miss Honey only saw her grandson in the summers when her son visited. Miss Honey said she is responsible for Ralph Angel's circumstances.

Charley saw Hollywood on her way to work and asked him if he would clean up the damage caused by the hurricane. That night, he had cleaned all the damage. As a thank you, Charlie drove Hollywood to Morgan City so he could try Shoney's. When she took him home, he told her until that night, he had never been outside of St Josephine Parish.

## Analysis

In Chapter 19, Charley admires the work she and her crew have completed. Charley has named her most promising patch of land after her daughter, fitting with the tradition Remy told her about in a previous chapter. In a subtle way, the author personifies the patch by symbolically linking it to Charley's daughter. She is very proud of that patch, just like she is proud of her daughter. The patch, with hard work, becomes the farm's most beautiful section even though it started out as the worst. Raising her daughter, too, is a lot of hard work but she sees that Micah is becoming a beautiful person, not just physically, but emotionally as well. When Charley learns that the patch of land was flooded in Chapter 20, she is devastated because it has become very personal to her; it is like seeing her daughter die or fail.

If the hurricane in Chapter 19 had not been downgraded to a level 2, Charley and her partners were going to send their migrant workers to Arkansas for safety. Since Arkansas is further inland, the migrant workers would have been safe. They would also be there and in place for their next job picking apples. Most communities in Louisiana, especially the most southern areas, have planned evacuation routes specifically for hurricane weather. To weatherize a home to prepare for a hurricane, wooden panels, often made of plywood, are screwed over the windows on the house. This is what John comes to help Charley complete before the storm hits. The fact that John has to drive over to perform the task when Ralph Angel has been sitting at home all day is a testament to Ralph Angel's character. Even when he sees John and Charley putting up the boards, he does not offer to help. John and Charley have worked all day, but Ralph Angel is too lazy to lend a hand in taking precautions for himself and Blue, who also live at the house.



Ralph Angel picks a fight with John, but John avoids a physical attack. Ralph Angel's continued pleas to hold John's gun foreshadows that the gun will be important in a future chapter.

Remy drops off a new variety of cane for Charley as a surprise. He says it is a gift and she knows the market price for the new variety is \$300 per pound. The narrator does not share how many pounds he gave her. He invites her to go dancing, indicating his interest in her. The narrator foreshadows how the two will ultimately hit it off when Charley notices that he, too, listens to NPR, her favorite radio station.

In Chapter 20, Ralph Angel leaves the house despite hurricane conditions and does not return home during this chapter. Miss Honey is worried about him when Charley gets home from work that afternoon. It's bad enough that Charley has to find a way to come up with \$28,000 to save her farm after the hurricane damage, but Miss Honey adds to her frustration by telling her she is selfish.

Miss Honey's confession explains her continued efforts to forgive Ralph Angel and to give him chance after chance. She feels guilty. Miss Honey encouraged Ernest to go to California even after he learned Emily was pregnant. Miss Honey promised Ernest she would help take care of the baby. After Emily finds out that Miss Honey bribed her family to keep her away from Ernest, however, Emily does not allow Ralph Angel around Miss Honey. After learning that Emily committed suicide by jumping off the bridge (268), the reader gets a fuller understanding of Miss Honey's guilt. Not only did her actions keep her son and grandson from having a sound relationship, it actually cost a life. By protecting her own son, she harmed her grandson and his chance at a normal, healthy life.

Charley is shocked to learn that Emily, Ralph Angel's mother, is dead and that she committed suicide by jumping off the bridge. This is the same bridge that Ralph Angel ponders in Chapter 18. In Chapter 18, the reader saw that the bridge symbolized being a survivor to Ralph Angel. In Chapter 20, the reader gets the full impact of that concept. His mother ended her life by jumping off that bridge and he was a survivor – her survivor. Knowing how he felt without his mother and without his father keeps Ralph Angel determined to do better for Blue.

Charley enjoys Hollywood's company and is impressed with his work ethic. She is happy to take him to Morgan City for dinner. She learns that he has never been outside of St. Josephine. Hollywood's lack of out-of-town travel is a reminder that some things stay the same because of lack of exposure to new things. After having this new experience at the Shoney's buffet, Hollywood's world is influenced by his new experience. This is an eye-opener for Charley, who is very aware of her racist surroundings in St. Josephine. It explains why white people and black people there alike subscribe to the same old prejudices from the Jim Crow South – they simply have not, as a whole, been exposed to new cultural ideas.



## Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast John and Ralph Angel. Are they more alike or more different? Supply evidence from the book to support your claim.

## Discussion Question 2

Explain why Miss Honey always defends and encourages Ralph Angel.

## Discussion Question 3

Hollywood explains that Ralph Angel's mother died by jumping off a bridge when Ralph Angel was living in California. Why does that information have such a big impact on Charley in Chapter 20?

## Vocabulary

producing, core, decent, resistant, judgmental, footage, sludge, compensate, resourceful, lushness



# Chapters 21 - 22

## Summary

Chapter 21 started the new section titled “September.” It was told in the third person limited point of view from Charley’s perspective. She was surprised to see that after a week of dry weather, some of the cane was already straightening itself. The cane they planted earlier in Micah’s corner was ruined and it was still too muddy to replant.

Denton announced that the mills postponed grinding season until the middle of October to give farmers time to recuperate after the hurricane. With the good news came bad – she needed another \$8,000 for tractor parts. Charley decided to sell the Cane Cutter statue at auction to cover the expenses.

Charley went on a date with Remy. She learned that he liked children, but had none of his own. When they got to the small rural café, Charley expressed concern. She was a black woman going into a rural café/bar and worried about the atmosphere inside. She was also there with a white man. He assured her that the people there did not care about race. Inside, Charley saw that the crowd was very diverse. They had a good date and when Remy took her back to her car, he offended her by saying she was smart and hard-working, nothing like the local blacks (282). Charley left abruptly, saying little to him. She went directly to Violet’s house and woke her up at 2 a.m. to tell her about the night. Violet told her that Remy sounded like a nice guy, one who needed to learn that what he said was insensitive. She said he could be capable of learning that and Charley should not avoid him. Then, Violet reminded Charley that God had given her what she needed – a child and fields to tend to; and with God’s help, she would be fine.

Chapter 22 is told from Ralph Angel’s perspective in the third person limited point of view. Ralph Angel had left the night the hurricane hit and was gone for five nights. He got drunk and high, but when he sobered up he realized nothing about his life had changed. He decided to go find a job. At first, he applied for management jobs. A cover letter expressing interest in a job focused on his engineering experience, none of which has been documented throughout the story. Then, he applied for security guard and fast food positions and was also rejected for them. Through a job training program, he finally got some work pulling crawfish traps for a German fisherman. His pay was \$7.25 per hour. His supervisor was a white kid much younger than he. Ralph Angel encouraged the young man to get an education, like he did even though Ralph never did.

Ralph Angel’s crawfishing job was hard work, nasty, and smelly. After his first day of work, he asked his boss for an advance so he could buy gas money, but the boss refused. He ran out of gas and had to walk the rest of the way home. When he arrived home, he announced that he had a job managing the crew. He said the boss was going to move him into an office job once he understood how the whole operation worked. Miss Honey was very happy. She gave him \$40 for gas money and Charley drove him to get gas. Ralph Angel struck up small talk about work in the car. Charley offered



sincere congratulations on his job. He thought about telling her the truth – how hard the job was and how mean the boss was.

At the gas station, Ralph Angel did not want to spend \$7 for a gas can so he bought a large plastic drink cup and filled it with gas. He also bought a bottle of water, but shoplifted a pack of gum. Charley was mad that he put the cup of gas in her car. Despite her protest, she took him back to his car. She saw him spill half of the gas out of the cup since it did not easily pour into the gas container. He used the rest of his cash, \$35, to play slot machines at the Indian casino. With only 15-cents in nickels left, he hit a \$50 jackpot. He went back to the Tee Couteau bar district and bought heroin. To make sure he was early for work the next morning, he drove back to the job sight and slept in his car after using the heroin.

The next morning, the manager's truck woke up Ralph Angel. The main effects of the drug had worn off, but he still had some residual side effects of it. He told the manager, Jason, that he wanted to drive the boat instead of dealing with the traps. Against his better judgment, Jason allowed it, but warned the boss would be mad if he ran over the traps. It started good enough, but Ralph Angel dozed off while driving the boat and ran over many of the traps. The boss fired him immediately and paid him \$50 for the time he'd worked the day before.

## Analysis

As the cane begins to straighten itself again after the hurricane, the reader sees that Charley understands life is much the same. After a storm, we start to recover, recuperate, and grow again. This symbolizes that troubles are passing and that even after a storm, good times are ahead. The symbolism gives Charley hope for her crop and her family.

Charley's decision to sell the Cane Cutter in Chapter 21 shows just how serious she is about making the crop profitable. She never takes lightly the commitment of her partners, and she knows her father would want her to sell it if it could help make the farm a success. It was important to Ernest to rise above the racist treatment he received as a teen when he worked at that farm. Now, it is important to Charley to rise above the racist and sexist treatment she has received from the white farming community such as Landry and Baron.

Charley tries to have a social life outside of work and family by going on a date with Remy. They talk about business concerns they share, and eventually turn to more personal topics. She learns he likes kids, but has none of his own. After a fun night of dancing, Remy ruins the evening by saying something offensive to her. It starts as a compliment, but takes a turn. He told her she was smart and brave, not anything like the other black people around there (282). She finally recovers from her shock and tells him that she is just like them, no better and no worse than anyone else. He apologizes, but she leaves. Violet tells her not to be too hard on Remy because he is not perfect, because he can learn to be more sensitive.





In Chapter 22, Ralph Angel struggles for acceptance from others and himself. After being gone for five days on a binge of drugs and alcohol, he finally decides to get his life together. This begins with finding a job. He submits a number of applications for professional jobs for which he is not qualified. The book shows a cover letter he typed to send with one job application (287). The type faces are not consistent and it is full of lies even though it is just a few sentences long. Naturally, he is rejected. But when former places he worked will not consider hiring him back, the reader gets a glimpse into his work history. The laziness of Ralph Angel's present day must not be far from his past.

Ralph Angel wants a professional job, but he does not conduct himself in a professional manner in his personal life. He shoplifts, even when he has money to pay for things, which indicates he either likes the thrill of stealing or he wants to be caught and punished for the attention. He has said previously that as a child living with his father in California, he acted out to get attention.

The job program is Ralph Angel's best entrance opportunity into the workforce. Even when he was sent to the crawfish catching job, he tried to explain that he was a manager, not a laborer. After a full day on the job, Ralph Angel is worn out. He makes a new employee mistake on the first day of the job – he asks for an advance in his pay. Of course, the boss denies it.

Even though Ralph Angel says he wants to be respected and wants to have a good job, he does not act respectful. For instance, Miss Honey gives him \$40 for gas. He only buys what will fit in a plastic drink cup instead of filling up his car. He cashes in the rest to spend – win or lose—at the casino. Luckily, he wins \$50. Instead of gassing up his car then, however, he blows the money on drugs and alcohol. Ironically, he takes the drugs back to the work site so he can use them in his car, sleep in his car, and be at work early the next morning to make a good impression. From Jason's reaction to him, Ralph Angel does not make a good impression that morning after all.

Ralph Angel wonders if his boss inherited the crawfishing business from his father, as things seemed to go for lucky people. Ralph Angel's sarcastic tone is clearly making reference to Charley inheriting their father's farm. He sees her as a lucky person, but sees himself as a victim. The irony is that Charley inherited her business, but her hard work is making it operate. Hopefully, she will be profitable. Luck has nothing to do with it. Ironically, Charley feels far from lucky with her inheritance. Until she moved to St. Josephine, she knew nothing about crops, sugarcane, or farming. She sees it as an honor to keep her father's dream alive, but obviously it would have been easier to sell the place instead of having to run it as a profitable business.

The narrator refers to Ralph Angel's drug use in Chapter 22 as "chasing the dragon." This refers to the inhaling of a narcotic substance that is burned to create a small cloud or stream of smoke and then vapors are inhaled (300).



## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the symbolism of the cane imagery in Chapter 21.

## Discussion Question 2

What is it that makes Charley decide to sell the Cane Cutter statue? How does she begin her search for a buyer?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the irony in Chapter 22 around Ralph Angel's desire to be a responsible, working adult and his actions.

## Vocabulary

staggered, astonishment, balled, scribbled, handyman, flexible, boosting, bateau, underbush, exception



# Chapters 23 - 24

## Summary

Chapter 23 started the section called "October." It was told from Charley's perspective in the third person limited point of view. Charley's crop was looking good, but she still needed to sell the Cane Cutter at auction. Micah and Blue asked to go to the Sugarcane Festival. Micah wanted to meet Queen Sugar. When Charley said she was still too busy on the farm, Micah got mad and hacked up the only thing left living in her garden, a pumpkin. Charley decided to make time to take the kids to the carnival. At the carnival, she ran into Remy, who had two children with him. Charlie and Remy made small talk, but that was it. Back at home, Charley felt guilty for her reaction to Remy's comments the last time they were together. The next day at the boat parade they saw Queen Sugar and her court. Micah picked up on the lack of diversity representation in the royalty. Realizing she'd never get to be Sugar Queen because she was black, Micah got mad and threw away the photos she had taken of the court. Charley told her some things take a while to change, but that Micah would make a great Queen Sugar.

Charley ran into Remy at the Jimmy Broussard Jr. concert. Violet took Micah and Blue home so Charley could stay a little longer. Remy explained that Jimmy was a friend of his from college and the kids with him the day before were Jimmy's kids. He said Jimmy had an older daughter, too, and that he was their godfather. Charley told Remy about Micah chopping up the pumpkin and throwing the Queen Sugar photo away. He told her that her family life would improve once grinding was over for the farm and told her to hang in there. When he dropped her off at her house, he apologized for the insensitive things he said on their previous date and asked her to lunch. She said she would like to go.

As the family was getting ready for the parade the next morning, someone knocked on the door. It was Queen Sugar, asking if Micah could join her on their parade float as an honorary member of her court. Of course Charley agreed. Micah was so happy. The queen was Jimmy Broussard Jr.'s older daughter.

Back at home that night, Charley could not sleep. She saw Remy's old hat in her room and decided to return it to him. She got directions to Remy's house at a small store, then found her way there. He was surprised, but happy, to see her. She thanked him for making arrangements for Micah to ride with the Queen's court. He showed her around his house and they stopped in the bedroom. He quoted excerpts of his favorite gardening book as he undressed her. The quotes were about flowers blooming and climaxing.

In Chapter 24, also told from Charley's perspective, she was late meeting Denton and Alison for the Blessing of the Crops mass. Denton told her she looked different; that her skin was shiny. She remained seated while Denton and Alison took the communion sacrament. Charley was hoping for a miraculous, calming feeling after the church



service, but did not feel any different than when she entered. Denton reminded her that cane farming is a long process and not to give up yet.

After church, Ralph Angel was home. Miss Honey demanded Charley give him a job on the farm and to give him part of the inheritance. Charley tried to explain that she had no money to pay him, but Miss Honey wouldn't hear it. Miss Honey quoted Bible scripture about a curse and Charley thought she'd put a curse on her farm. Charley went straight to Violet for advice. Violet sent her to a *traiteur*, a healer. Charley went to see the healer, Mr. Guidry. He gave her a necklace was simply a string with nine knots in it, all spaced equally apart.

## Analysis

Micah was so excited about seeing and meeting Queen Sugar. Just like many people do when they meet an idol and realization that he/she is just another person too, Micah also experienced disappointment. In Micah's case, the disappointment centered on the rural Louisiana culture and race. Without seeing the queen and her court, Micah idolized them as beauty queens. When she saw there were no African Americans on the court of royalty, she was disappointed. An all-white court symbolized several things for Micah. First of all, it suggested that she was not beautiful because she was not white. The court set the standard for beauty -- all the prettiest local girls were on the royal festival court -- which basically implied that only white people can be beautiful. It also took away her hope. At age 11, she was too young to be a queen for the festival, but hope of ever being a queen was dashed when she saw no diversity among the court. It also reinforced to her that St. Josephine was very backward compared to her previous Los Angeles lifestyle.

The next day, Charley allowed Micah to ride as an honorary court member with Queen Sugar in the parade. As it turned out, Remy made arrangements with the queen to get Micah on the float. Queen Sugar was actually Jimmy Broussard Jr.'s oldest step daughter. Jimmy was a black singer. Jimmy married the queen's mother and raised the girl as his own. This situation tells the reader several things: not all white people are racist, one cannot judge someone's story or know their background from looking at the color of their skin, Remy's best friend in college was a black man, indicating that he is accepting of friendships/relationships regardless of race, and Remy cares about Micah and about race relations if he went to the trouble to make the arrangements for the parade.

Charley needs an excuse to go find Remy so she decides to return his old hat to him. As he shows her to his bedroom, she jokes about him memorizing his gardening book. He quotes excerpts from it using erotic phrasing such as "the climax of bloom," "Colors are deeper," and "We should make more of this season than we do" (322). When he speaks of the climax of bloom, he is talking about fall-blooming plants. However, the comment symbolically refers to their blooming relationship with sexual climax. When he says the colors are deeper, he is actually talking about the colors of fall-blooming flowers. As he is undressing her, it also refers to their skin tones. When he quotes the



part about making more of the fall planting season than most do, he was encouraging her to develop their relationship further, not just sexually and in this one moment. The narrator's mention of the stiff cane refers to Remy's erection.

In Chapter 24, the "shiny" face that Denton notices is the after-sex glow Charley exhibits. She did not remain seated when Denton and Alison took communion because of a racial difference. It is a standard Catholic practice that non-Catholics do not partake of communion. Louisiana's population is largely Catholic, but Charley is from Los Angeles and simply is not Catholic.

Charley is troubled by Miss Honey's demand to give Ralph Angel a job and to cut him in on the inheritance. It is not fair for Miss Honey to ask her to do this after Charley has put in all the work. Charley does not believe in curses, but she cannot take any chances at this point, so close to grinding season. Violet is careful to explain that Mr. Guidry is a healer, not a voodoo doctor, although there may not be much difference between the two.

## Discussion Question 1

Why was Micah so disappointed with the Queen Sugar court when she first saw them and why did she take it so personally?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the irony in Charley and Micah's assumption about the all white Queen Sugar court.

## Discussion Question 3

Other than demanding she give Ralph Angel a job, what does Miss Honey do in Chapter 24 that upsets Charley? Why does it bother her so much?

## Vocabulary

enchanted, pronounced, cypress, honorary, strutted, throngs, rhinestones, stilt



# Chapters 25 - 26

## Summary

Chapter 25 was told from Charley's point of view in the third person limited style. Charley hired Ralph Angel to work as a laborer in the field. He was late getting up for work on his first day. On the way to work, she told him he would be working with a planting crew that was particularly fast, to only take breaks when the wagon was empty, and that he would have an hour for lunch. He said he understood. The gloves she gave him were too big, but she explained they were the only size left and suggested he try to switch with someone else. Denton went over the plan for the day with the work crews and Alison led them in prayer. Charley worked on a planting crew, too.

Soon, Charley got a complaint about Ralph Angel. The rest of the crew refused to work with them. Not only was Ralph Angel complaining about the Mexican working speaking in Spanish, he accused them all of working fast to embarrass him. He also learned that he was making less than they were. Charley said he was making less because he had no experience. Ralph Angel told Charley that was no job, it was slave labor. She thought he'd quit, but did not. She assigned him to work with Alison and had him follow behind a combine and manually cut any stalks it missed. He complained about it, but did it anyway. He wouldn't cut closer to the ground like Alison told him, so Alison complained, too. Ralph Angel said it wasn't his fault; it was Alison's fault they didn't get along. After lunch, she sent him to work in the office sweeping floors and cleaning up dog excrement. He actually did a good job of this. At the end of the day, Ralph Angel was in the workshop when Remy stopped by to see Charley. He was going to kiss her but she moved away when Ralph Angel walked by. She introduced the two men. Remy thought Ralph Angel was joking about his menial labor job, thinking surely his sister would have given him something easy to do. After he left, Ralph Angel harassed Charley about dating a white man. He said she should date a black man and that surely she could find at least one black professional who lived up to her standards. He told her she was sleeping with the enemy and that white men like to have "a little dish of chocolate on the side (347)." She told him to drive himself to work the next day. He said she'd humiliated him by making him clean up after a cracker (Alison) and then cleaning up dog excrement. She said it was the only job left. He made a jab about her having sex with a white man and she fired him.

Chapter 26 was told in the third person limited point of view from Ralph Angel's view point. Rage took over Ralph Angel and he headed out to buy drugs. He went home and, after everyone was asleep, and took Miss Honey's money out of the jar in which she hid it. Charley was not home yet, but Micah was asleep in her room. Ralph Angel sneaked in and stole the Cane Cutter sculpture from Charley's dresser. As he was stealing the sculpture, he thought of Bible scriptures that helped him justify his actions.



## Analysis

The chapters are getting shorter as the end of the book approaches. Ralph Angel expects special treatment from his sister since she owns the farm, but she gives no special treatment to herself. She believes in hard work; he does not. When the first work crew complains about it, he says they are the problem. When Alison complains about him, Ralph Angel says he is a "cracker," a derogatory term for a white person. He also complains about how demeaning it is for Charley to position him in such a way that he is manually cleaning up after a white man. While Charley has been experiencing culture shock with how many black people are prejudiced against whites, she also has to deal with this kind of prejudice from some of the blacks toward the whites. Ralph Angel's prejudice is also evident when he harasses Charley about her relationship with Remy.

In Chapter 26, Ralph Angel's destructive pattern is evident. After every disappointment, he turns to drugs. He plans to commit petty theft by taking money from Miss Honey's wallet. This is considered petty due to the amount of money he was going to steal. Ultimately, it isn't enough so he has to raid her savings jar. Stealing the Cane Cutter statue is a different kind of petty; it is small-minded. As he is stealing it, he quotes a scripture: "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall (350)." Given his high self-esteem, it is unlikely that he thinks of himself as prideful. He definitely thinks of Charley as haughty. Ironically, a haughty woman would not likely have been working in hard manual labor right alongside of the men. He falsely predicts her fall, but actually does foreshadow his own destruction.

The chapter ends with Ralph Angel considering a phrase from the Bible: "Grace in the eyes of the Lord (350)." He considers that some people are worthy of God's grace and some are not. Then, he steps into the dark and crosses the line. This chapter ending has a symbolic meaning. First of all, given his hubris, it is surprising to see that Ralph Angel thinks himself unworthy of God's love. However, looking at his life more closely, one might see that he has felt unworthy for a long time. He feels like he was unworthy of all the jobs he got fired from, unworthy of love from his father, and unworthy of stability from his mother. He literally walks into darkness as he leaves Miss Honey's house in the night. But this, too, has a symbolic meaning. He is walking back into a darker side of his life, making the choice toward evil (represented by darkness). He crossed the line back into his old ways, and he crossed the line by stealing the Cane Cutter, the sculpture that Charley planned to sell at auction. The Bible scriptures shared are in *Italics* and are easily recognizable. Ironically, it is the Bible scripture that encourages Ralph Angel to steal. When he went into Charley's room initially, he was just going to take some change that she had lying around. When she had none, the sculpture caught his eye.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the irony of both sides of the racial situation Charley faces in St. Josephine.



## Discussion Question 2

Why does Charley actually fire Ralph Angel?

## Discussion Question 3

What does the narrator mean when he says that Ralph Angel stepped into the darkness and back across the line (350)?

## Vocabulary

haughty, goeth, humiliated, scrolls, chutes, crammed, hobbled, combine





# Chapters 27 -28

## Summary

Chapter 27 was written from Charley's viewpoint in the third person limited point of view. She, Miss Honey, and Blue woke Micah up on her birthday with a surprise birthday breakfast. Micah was not expecting to celebrate her birthday until the weekend, but Charley wanted to do something to celebrate on her actual birthday. Blue gave her Zach. Miss Honey gave her a new Bible engraved with her name. Charley gave her a better camera. Violet stopped by with doughnuts. Miss Honey said she wished Ralph Angel was there and said he was very upset when he arrived at home on the previous night. Violet wanted to see the Cane Cutter sculpture before Charley drove it to the auction house. Micah went to get it, but the sculpture was missing. They all began frantically looking for it and Charley naturally assumed Ralph Angel took it. Hollywood stopped by to wish Micah happy birthday and also helped search for the sculpture. Miss Honey forbid anyone to call the police because she was afraid they would hunt him down. She said it would be okay to call John, but not police. John and Brother arrived at 6 p.m. A little later, Ralph Angel went back to Miss Honey's Charley demanded to know where the statue was and he said he did not know what they did with it.

John reached out and took Ralph Angel's arm. When he wouldn't let go, a fight ensued. Ralph Angel grabbed John's gun and shot him with it. Then he held the gun on the rest of the family. He wanted to know why Charley always got everything. They could see John bleeding and needed to call for help; but no one moved since he was holding the gun. Finally, Hollywood stepped forward and asked Ralph Angel to put down the gun so they could get some help for John. Still holding the gun, Ralph Angel tells everyone, including the kids, how Hollywood got the nickname "Peanut" that he hates so much, despite Hollywood begging him not to tell it. He said their former boss, Mr. Sam, used to take the young black men home during their breaks and watch them have sex with his wife. Hollywood was scared and could not perform. The next day at work, their boss fired him by telling him to get his peanut-sized penis off the loading dock. On his way out of the house, Ralph Angel took Blue and apologized to Miss Honey for pushing her before. Charley asked him to leave Blue there and promised to take care of him. He refused to leave her the last thing that meant something to him, and walked out the door,

Chapter 28 was told from Ralph Angel's viewpoint in the third person limited point of view. He was pulled over for speeding by the same officer that pulled him over previously. He thought about Charley's sculpture that he'd wrapped in a towel and left in the trunk. When it came down to it, he could not sell it, but he wanted to scare her for a couple of days. When the officer saw John's gun in the front seat, he ordered Ralph Angel several times to get out of the car. Ralph Angel argued, however, and tried to explain that his son was in the back of the car. That's when he realized John's gun was beside him in the front seat. The officer shot and killed Ralph Angel when he moved his hands.



## Analysis

In Chapter 27, everyone suspected Ralph Angel of stealing except Miss Honey. She refused to call police because she said they always shot black men. This foreshadows the end of this chapter. Miss Honey thought when Ralph Angel arrived that it proved everyone wrong. When he said, however, that he did not know what they did with it, it sounds as though he has sold or given it to someone else, ironically proving everyone else right.

There is irony in the story about the former boss that took Ralph Angel, Hollywood, and other employees home for breaks to have sex with his wife. He previously ridiculed Charley for being Remy's "dish of chocolate on the side (347)," but in Chapter 27, he brags about having sex with his white boss' wife. They were both in the same situation, except Charley was actually developing a relationship with Remy; Ralph Angel was just a prostitute for his white boss. Ironically, he sees the white woman as a trophy, just like he said Remy would see Charley, a black woman.

Ralph Angel tells the story about Hollywood to embarrass him in front of Charley and to hurt her as well. He knows she admires his work ethic and thinks he is a good person, and he is jealous of the positive attention she and Miss Honey give to Hollywood. Ironically, the story actually works in Hollywood's favor. His inability to perform that day makes him decent and kind.

In Chapter 28, Miss Honey's foreshadowing from the previous chapter comes true when Ralph Angel is shot by the police officer. He, again, was managing his rage by counting. A sudden move of his hand, along with the gun in the front seat, caused the officer to shoot him, creating the climax of the story. The narrator does not say as much, but the police officer may have pulled Ralph Angel's car over after the family reported John's injury.

## Discussion Question 1

Explain Miss Honey's refusal to call police when Charley's sculpture is discovered missing.

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss what Chapter 28 shows about Ralph Angel's character. Use examples from the chapter to support your response.

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss two ways this chapter reveals more about Hollywood's character. What do these things reveal and why are they important?

## Vocabulary

gravel, emboldened, cantaloupes, baffled, dashboard, hovered, shifted, tense



# Chapters 29 - 30

## Summary

Chapter 29 was told from Charley's viewpoint in the third person limited point of view. She tried everything to save the farm, but never raised enough money even with all her friends and family helping. She was on her way to cut a deal with Landry and Baron when Hollywood stopped by to visit. They had not seen him since the night of the shooting. Violet, Charlie, and Miss Honey made him feel very welcomed.

Charley recalled in a flashback how devastated both Denton and Alison looked when she told them that she would not be able to get the extra money needed to finish the crop. Violet explained to Hollywood that Charley was losing the farm. She needed at least \$50,000 to stay afloat. Hollywood said he would give her the \$50,000 he had saved from his mowing jobs. Charley said she would pay him back even though he said she did not have to do so.

The last chapter in the book is Chapter 30. It is in a section called "April." Remy and Charley took Micah and Blue to the dam for a cookout and fun day outdoors. Remy taught the kids how to set crab nets and Charley tended to the grill. While the children played, Remy and Charley talked about Blue's last doctor visit. He had not spoken since the night his father was killed. He had been in the back seat and saw and heard everything. The doctor said he just needed time and love to heal.

Charley, in a flashback, recalled the police report that claimed use of deadly force was justified. She had her doubts. When officers found the sculpture in Ralph Angel's trunk, Charley promised it to Blue and said she would keep it for him until he grew up.

## Analysis

Hollywood sacrificed his pride to be the hero when he stepped up to talk some sense into Ralph Angel in Chapter 27, but he becomes the hero again in Chapter 29. Hearing how much money Charley needs for the farm, he offers to give her the \$50,000 he has in savings from his mowing jobs. The farm is a success, with his additional funding. Ironically, Hollywood earned the large sum of money with the very job that Ralph Angel told him would never get him anywhere.

The last chapter of the book takes place after the completion of grinding. Charley was successful in her farm venture, with the help of her business partners and Remy. She really enjoys the relaxing day out with the kids and Remy. As Remy plays with the kids, she reflects on her life and is happy with it at this point. She feels guilty about Ralph Angel's death and Blue's traumatic experience.

The narrator uses flashbacks in both chapters 29 and 30 as a tool to review something meaningful from the past. In Chapter 29, it is the disappointment her business partners



shared when Charley told them she could not get the needed money. In Chapter 30, it is the police report that shows officers thought he was going for his gun, meaning the deadly force was justified. Ironically, Ralph Angel has no intention of shooting the officer because he forgot he had John's gun until the police officer sees it.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Find a flashback in Chapter 29 or Chapter 30. Discuss its importance to that chapter.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Discuss the irony in Ralph Angel's theory about Hollywood's business never growing.

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why is Hollywood happy to give Charley the money from his savings account?

## **Vocabulary**

congregation, beamed, lush, orderly, closed, allowed



# Characters

## Charlotte Bordelon (Charley)

Charley is an African American woman who packs up her daughter and their belongings to leave Los Angeles to relocate in St. Josephine Parish in Louisiana after inheriting a sugarcane farm from her father. Despite knowing absolutely nothing about farming, Charley finds partners to teach her the ropes and she works very hard to be successful in the business. Selling is not an option. According to the trust her father established, if Charley tries to sell the farm, all profits will go to charity.

Charley lost her husband, Davis, in an armed robbery. She almost lost Micah due to a burn injury. Charley was so depressed after the death of her husband that she had Micah do her own cooking. Some cleaner leaked from a bottle and caught fire, burning the girl so severely she almost died. Charley still feels guilty about her daughter's burns on her arm and abdomen.

Having grown up in a more progressive community, Charley is painfully aware of the racism of the southern rural Louisiana town to which she moves. She finds the racism exists for some whites and for some blacks. Being a black female cane farm owner brings its own challenges for Charley in southern Louisiana. Despite the sexism and racism, her hard work and determination makes her victorious in the end. While Queen Sugar is the name of a beauty queen in the annual sugarcane festival parade, Charley can also be viewed as Queen Sugar because of her success in her sugarcane business.

## Ralph Angel

Ralph Angel is Charley's older brother, the son of Ernest and Emily born out of wedlock. Ernest wanted to marry her, but Miss Honey insisted he live out his dream of going to California.

As a little boy, Ralph Angel looked forward to the summers when his father came to visit. After Charley was born, however, those visits stopped. Jealousy grew between Ralph Angel and a half-sister he didn't even know. Finally, when Ralph Angel moves to California to live with his father an new family, things start off great. He grew jealous, though, of the attention they smothered baby Charley with and began acting up to get attention. Once, he forced her to drink water from a baby food jar and thought he was drowning her when bubbles started pouring out of her nose. Charley's mother insisted he be sent back to Louisiana right away. Since his mother had committed suicide while he was gone, he moved in with Miss Honey.

As an adult, his search for negative attention continued with is wife, Gwenna. Both were drug addicts, but her health was taking a turn for the worse. She decided to get clean, but he knew that meant dumping him. He convinced her to shoot up with him one last



time and it kills her. He left her dead in an abandoned house. The guilt still bothers him as he enters this story.

Ralph Angel has an entitlement attitude and cannot hold a job. He lies about his experience, telling everyone he is an engineer. He expects management positions wherever he applies, and says he does not do hard labor. Even though he wants to do better and provide a stable life for his son, he is argumentative and gets fired from every job he has.

He has rage issues which lead to him shooting his cousin in Miss Honey's house. Trying to stay calm when a trooper pulls him over, he focuses more on counting to stay calm than realizing that he has a gun next to him in the front seat. Not complying with the officer's request to step out of the car and making a sudden move, gets him shot and killed by the officer.

## Micah

Micah is Charley's daughter and is 11 years old at the beginning of the story. Micah misses the comforts and conveniences of Los Angeles and even asks to go back to live there with Charley's mother. Charley won't hear of it, however, and Micah soon comes to love living in the country. She loves photography and Miss Honey gave Micah her grandfather's old Polaroid instant camera.

One of the draws that appeals to Micah about the move to Louisiana is that her mother promised there are many children. She enjoys playing with her cousin, Blue, despite their five or six year age difference.

Micah's desire to go to the local festival to see Queen Sugar is what gives Charley and her love interest, Remy, a chance to make up from a first date that ended poorly. The Queen Sugar court of royalty is all white, leaving Micah to believe she can never be part of the court. However, thanks to Remy, she is invited to ride on the float next to Queen Sugar herself.

## Miss Honey

Miss Honey is Ernest's mother and grandmother to Charley and Ralph Angel. She offers to let both Charley and Ralph Angel move in with her as they build lives in St. Josephine.

She feels guilty for her role in Ralph Angel's life. She paid his mother's family money to keep his pregnant mother away from his father when he moved to California. Eventually, Ralph Angel went to live with Ernest but acted erratically and was sent back to St. Josephine. While he was gone, his mother committed suicide. Miss Honey carries the guilt of a broken father-son relationship, the death of Ralph Angel's mother, and his poor life choices that constantly land him in trouble and jobless.



Miss Honey is addicted to aspirin headache powders that she pours into Coca-Cola at least once a day. She is a motherly woman who loves children. Sometimes she argues with her son and daughter because she believes she knows best, especially when any conflict concerns Ralph Angel. They do not know her secret, though, about her role in manipulating his life.

## Blue

Blue is Ralph Angel's six year old boy. He likes Power Rangers and has an action figure named Zach that he plays with all the time. Blue gets mad at his father when he leaves and is gone several days without contacting him. He enjoys playing with his cousin, Micah, and the two often act like siblings. When Ralph Angel dies, Charley takes care of Blue.

## Violet

Violet is Miss Honey's daughter, Charley's aunt. Charley finds comfort in Violet, who is a good listener, practical, and a lot of fun. As a preacher's wife, the first lady of their church, she stays busy teaching Vacation Bible School for kids and planning church activities.

Violet and her mother argue about Ralph Angel. Violet says he is no good, but Miss Honey stands up for him. Violet is integral to this story because she encourages Charley to give Remy another chance after he makes some offensive remarks at the end of their first date.

## Uncle Brother

Uncle Brother is Miss Honey's son, Charley's uncle. He lives in Texas but comes to visit for the family reunion and when Violet calls to inform him that Ralph Angel stole Charley's sculpture.

## John

John is Charley's cousin, Uncle Brother's son. John is a prison guard who helps Miss Honey's family a great deal. As a hurricane is moving in, John shows up unannounced with wood and tools to secure Miss Honey's house before the storm makes landfall. He is also who they call to help track down Ralph Angel after he steals Charley's sculpture.

Ralph Angel is jealous of John, who has a secure job and is respected by all the other members of the family. He always tries to pick a fight with John. On the night the two do fight, Ralph Angel was only able to get away because he took John's gun and shot him with it. He recovers from his wounds.





## Remy Newell

Remy Newell is a young white farmer that lease more than 2,000 acres for his sugarcane farm. He develops a relationship with Charley that almost ends after their first date. He says she isn't like the other blacks in St. Josephine and it offends her. At Violet's encouragement, Charley gives Remy another chance and the two get along well.

Remy is a friend of Denton's and helps Charley at the auction before he even meets her. When Denton sees that Landry and Baron are out to sabotage Charley's bids, he gets Remy to bid on items on Charley's behalf. After that, Remy supports Charley by helping make equipment repairs on her farm and even buys her a new variety of cane to plant.

Remy supports Charley personally by spending time with her and the kids (Micah and Blue). He also gets Micah a spot on the Queen Sugar court so she can ride in the parade and represent diversity in the town. This means a lot to Charley and helps make up for his offensive remark made on their first date.

## Prosper Denton

Prosper Denton is the reason Charley's farm is successful. His first name, Prosper, symbolizes that despite plenty of struggles, the farm will prosper. Ironically, Charley refers to him throughout the book by his last name as if she does not believe the farm can prosper. Denton comes out of retirement to help Charley on her farm because he knows she cannot do it alone. After Landry makes some degrading remarks to Denton at the auction, he wants Charley to be more successful than ever. Her success will be a slap in the face to Landry and Baron. Denton, an elderly black man, has managed cane crops for area white farmers for years, including Landry's father.

Denton encourages Charley to stop writing notes about cane and to start living it. He even makes her eat dirt so she can taste the elements in the soil to determine good soil from bad. He is a great mentor and comes up with many creative financing ways to run the farm since he knows Charley's budget is limited.

## Alison Delcambre

Alison Delcambre is an elderly white farmer who is losing his operation to Landry and Baron. Charley and Denton bring him in as a partner and pay him a percentage for his work and use of his equipment. Since his wife passed away the previous year, Alison is raising two grandsons, ages 3 and 4, on his own. Their parents are into drugs and not stable. Alison is known for his rough nature and unfiltered language.



## Landry and Baron

Landry and Baron work for Saint Mary's Sugar Cooperative, a nearby mill. Landry stops by Charley's farm shortly after she arrives and plants negative thoughts in her head. Baron does the same when he runs into her at the auction. They both tell her she's in over her head and cannot do the job. They want to buy her land; they don't care if she gets the profit or if it goes to charity.

As it turns out, a lot of farmers don't like Landry and Baron's operating tactics. They make farmers lose money and force them to sell, at which point the sugar cooperative buys the land for a lower price. This is what is happening to Alison and why he is so devoted to making Charley's farm successful. The more successful the woman farmer who knows nothing about sugarcane is, the more stupid Landry and Baron look.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Cane Cutter Sculpture

The Cane Cutter sculpture reflects a good deal of symbolism throughout the story. When Charley recalls the story of her father first bringing the Cane Cutter home, she remembers the conversation she had with her father about it. Together, they admired the man's strength, determination, and work ethic. They also saw a degree of defiance in the man's expression, which symbolizes the defiance Ernest experienced that actually encouraged him to buy the old LeJeune farm when it was for sale. Ernest did not want the farm because he longed to work long hours in the fields. He bought it out of defiance because LeJeune knocked him in the head with a shovel when he was a teenager working on the farm. He got a drink before the white workers and was abused for it. By owning the land, Ernest takes ownership of the racism of the community. He wants people to see that black people can also own cane farms and be successful.

Introduction of the sculpture into Charley's home also symbolized the differences between Ernest and his wife, Lorna. Lorna liked fine things, like crystal. She did not like the sculpture, but Ernest loved it so much that he threatened to break all her crystal if she moved it. Lorna never lived in the south and did not experience the Jim Crow era culture that is still prevalent in some small southern communities today.

For Charley, as heir to the land, the sculpture is a symbol of strength and determination. She sees the defiance as a reminder that she must defy the odds of being a black female cane farmer in a southern rural community. She relates it directly to her father and sometimes she talks to it, like it is her father. For Ralph Angel, the defiance he sees is against his father and Charley. For him, the sculpture symbolizes a father he never got to have and strength, determination, and work ethic that were never passed down to him.

## The Sugarcane Farm

For Charley, the sugarcane farm symbolizes uncertainty. Until she learned of her inheritance and the trust in which it was established, she has no idea her father even owned the place. She thought she was inheriting several rental properties in the Los Angeles area. After her husband's death, however, Charley struggles to make ends meet on her nonprofit art teaching salary so she is behind on bills. Moving to St. Josephine to give sugarcane farming a try is the only chance she has and building a future for herself and her daughter. With a manager in place, success would not have been as difficult. Having the manager walk out without saying so months earlier created a big problem.



For Ralph Angel, the sugarcane farm symbolizes favoritism. He was disinherited and it all went to Charley. This is especially disheartening since Ralph Angel was already jealous of Charley's relationship with their father.

## The Bridge

The bridge symbolizes being a survivor. In Chapter 18, Ralph Angel seems drawn to it. When he thinks about the man who fell in and swam to safety, he associates the symbolism to survival. In Chapter 20, the reader understands that Ralph Angel himself is a survivor of the bridge in a different kind of way. After his mother jumped to her death, he was left without a parent to raise him. He was a lone survivor.

## Hurricane

Rain symbolizes problems, but a hurricane symbolizes severe problems. In a hurricane, the rain is heavy, indicating the weight of the problem. In this story, the hurricane is a direct problem for Charley's fields, most of which are underwater. As the water subsides, however, she sees that her farm is stronger than she realized and more resilient. The cane starts shifting back to normal on its own after the rain stops. Where it does not, Charley sees that she has reliable friends who can help her recover from any of life's storms. They show her that when the flooding does not naturally alleviate itself, they can work together to improve conditions.

## Labor

Denton made an interesting observation with which Alison agreed. Black men would choose to work for a white boss over a black one, even if the pay was the same but benefits were better. He said even if their farm offered a longer lunch break and more frequent breaks, the local black labor would opt to work for a white man that offered a shorter lunch and fewer breaks. This symbolizes a plantation mindset. This symbolism shows that segregation is still a deep problem in the community and that the African American community still tends to fall back into the plantation type mentality just because it is the way things have always been done in that town.

## Fire

Fire can be both destructive and purifying. This book contains an example of each. Charley is riddled with guilt after a fire burned Micah when Charley was bedridden from depression. Just too depressed to get out of bed, Charley told her daughter to make her own dinner. A trickle of cleaner leaked out by the stove and caused the fire. This devastating fire almost destroyed their lives. Micah was severely burned and almost died. Now, she must live with scars, a constant reminder for Charley of the destruction fire can cause.



Fire symbolized purity and new beginning when Charley burned Davis' old robe. After her husband died, she wore his robe all the time. Finally, with the encouragement of her father and his Cane Cutter sculpture, she took the robe outside and burned it. This freed her of using the robe as a crutch and forced her to start rebuilding life for her and her daughter.

## **Peanut**

A peanut represents something small. Ralph Angel is the only one who calls Hollywood by a different nickname, Peanut. The reader finds out late in the story the sexual reference for the nickname, but there is additional symbolism for the word. Since Ralph Angel insists on calling Hollywood "Peanut" even after his friend asks him not to, the term reflects that Ralph Angel is a small person socially and not a good friend. He uses the term to belittle someone who he says is his best friend, which indicates a bully relationship between Ralph Angel and Hollywood. His insistence on calling Hollywood a name he does not like, indicates what a small person Ralph Angel is and how he uses words to intimidate people.

## **Sugarcane Stalks**

When Remy and Charley share their first intimate encounter, it is described largely in symbolism related to planting and sugarcane. When the narrator refers to the "eager stalks pushing through the dark earth" the stalks represent the sexual encounter of Remy's erection and intercourse.

## **Queen Sugar**

Queen Sugar and her court symbolize the community's ideals of beauty. Micah is upset to see that there are no black girls on the court, indicating that black girls are not pretty. Ironically, Queen Sugar herself is the step daughter of an African American musician. She does not look black because both her parents were white, but she is being raised in a biracial family.

## **Micah's Garden**

For Micah, her garden symbolizes independence. She digs, plants and tends the garden all by herself. The hurricane kills it all except one pumpkin. When she thinks her mom is not going to take her to the Sugarcane Festival, she angrily chops up and destroys the pumpkin. This symbolizes her frustration with her dependence on her mother and her lack of independence evident with the destruction of her garden.



# Settings

## The Old LeJeune Farm

The Old LeJeune Farm falls into Charley's hands after the death of her father. As a teenager, he worked on the farm one summer and experienced abuse and racism at the hands of Mr. LeJeune. The experience lead him to buy the farm to show that he had come full circle, from working the field at age 17 to buying the whole operation as a successful, wealthy black man.

The farm is unkempt when Charley arrives and learns that her crop manager quit months earlier without even telling her. This situation puts her very behind schedule and at risk of losing money fro the very beginning.

## Miss Honey's House

Miss Honey's house is the family's home base. She welcomes her grandchildren to move in with her. Many important events happen at Miss Honey's house, including the family reunion in Charley's honor and Ralph Angel's shooting of their cousin, John.

The house is located in the Quarters, a segregated section of town known for its poverty and poor living conditions. Despite the physical attributes of the home, Miss Honey knows all her surrounding neighbors and they all look out for each other.

## The Blue Bowl

The Blue Bowl is a restaurant where the local farmers meet for breakfast or lunch almost every day. The Blue Bowl is significant because it is where Charley hires Denton to be her farm manager. At the time, they are the only two African Americans in the restaurant and she is the only female, other than employees.

## Tee Coteau

Tee Coteau is a seedy section of town that is full of bars. Ralph Angel and Hollywood used to go there together when they were younger, but Hollywood won't go now because the area is too dangerous. Ralph Angel, however, continues to frequent the area for booze and heroin.

## Remy's House

Remy's house is full of sentimental value. As Charley pulls up in front of it, she notices that the windows offer a warm, welcoming glow. Inside, she sees it is full of antiques

and reminders of past owners. It is significant to the story because it is the location of their first sexual encounter.



# Themes and Motifs

## Loss

Charley inherits the sugarcane farm after losing her father. She loses the opportunity to sell the land because he put it in a trust with specific stipulations. She lost her husband to a robbery and almost lost her daughter to serious burns.

Ralph Angel has lost his father, mother, wife, sister, and his old best friend Hollywood. He loses job after job. Micah loses her garden patch (except the pumpkin) in the hurricane.

In addition to the losses each has already faced, there are pending losses as well. If Charley cannot make the sugarcane farm operation profitable, she loses the last of her income and any income to try producing a crop again in the future. If the farm is not successful she loses her father's fight against racism and her own fight against racism and sexism. The farm is time consuming and her daughter does not simply stop growing up because her mother is busy with work. Charley is losing precious time with Micah, and Micah feels that loss too. Because of obligations on the farm, Charley does a bad job of keeping promises to Micah, just as introducing her to lots of kids so she will have plenty of people to play with in St. Josephine.

Ralph Angel has the ultimate loss -- his life. This leaves his son, Blue, alone after losing both parents.

## Sibling Rivalry

The sibling rivalry that Charley and Ralph Angel harbor against one another is very different. Charley's disgust with Ralph Angel comes from things her mother and father told her as she was growing up without him in her life and what she hears later from Violet and Uncle Brother. Ralph Angel is so far removed from Charley's life that she forgets all about him, even at the reading of her father's will. It isn't until she reaches Miss Honey's house and someone mentions his name that the sinking feeling hits her.

The rivalry is different for Ralph Angel, however. As the first child, he remembers having his father all to himself every summer before Charley came along. He stopped making the summer trips to see Ralph Angel after Charley was born. When he moved in with his father and step mother, he witnessed all the attention they gave to the baby and was jealous. He wants everyone to think he is just as good as she is and just as deserving without any consequences for not action as such. He believes he is entitled to part of the inheritance regardless of his father's wishes. When Ralph Angel takes the Cane Cutter sculpture, he does it to hurt Charley, to ruin her so she will be like him. He knows how important the money from the cane cutter will be to her farm. Even though he admits later that he couldn't sell it, his plan to hold onto it for a couple of days was long enough to still ruin her chances of saving the farm.





## Injustice

Many of the characters experience injustice throughout the book. Charley sees injustice in race relations in the small town and experiences both racism and sexism herself. Denton has experienced injustice at the hands of cane plantation owners and cane mill operators like Baron and Landry. But the injustice in the cane business is not just for African Americans. Alison is a white man who has had a crop operation for seven years. Since the cane mill companies keep changing their operating rules, they are pushing him slowly out of business by keeping his debt high and his income low.

No one suffers injustice more than Ralph Angel does, at least according to Ralph Angel. He needs to be responsible for his own behavior, but keeps placing himself in situations that result in what appears to be unjust consequences.

## Racism

Racism is prevalent in St. Josephine -- racism from both white and black residents. Landry makes a racist comment to Charley about being a black surfer chick and he talks with Denton like he is a piece of property since the man once worked cane for his father. Ralph Angel and Miss Honey both refer to white people as crackers, a derogatory term.

Micah feels the sting of racism when the girls in the beauty queen court are all white, indicating that black girls are not pretty or that white is the accepted standard of the community. Charley tries to encourage her to let her know she is still pretty, but the frustration makes Micah throw away her Queen Sugar photograph. While it is true there were no African American girls on the queen's court, they did not realize that the queen was raised by her white mother with a black man.

## Sexism

Charley experiences sexism in St. Josephine. Several farmers, including Landry and Baron from the co-op, discourage her because of her gender. They don't think she can work hard or fast enough to keep up and they encourage her to sell. Even Denton realized her gender would be a setback, although he did not explain why.

# Styles

## Point of View

The point of view is third person limited, but it switches among chapters between Charley and Ralph Angel. There is no clear pattern associated with the switching.

## Language and Meaning

The imagery of this book relies largely on similes with a mix of metaphors added. The book uses strong language in dialogue, including some profanity. From time to time, French phrases are scattered in, usually when Micah is talking, cursing her mother under her breath. She stops doing this when Hollywood translates her message. French phrases, along with Biblical phrases are printed in *Italics*. There is some reference to drug culture as well, such as when Ralph Angel is chasing the dragon, which means he is inhaling heroin.

## Structure

This book is made up of 30 chapters and divided into sections representing critical months of the sugarcane farming season: June, July, August, September, November, and again April. As the early chapters give expository information, they are longer. The chapters at the end of the book are much shorter as they attempt to get to the climax and wrap up the story.



## Quotes

If Frasier ain't been doing his job, getting ready for grinding is gonna be like licking honey off a blackberry vine.

-- Denton (chapter 3 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Denton explains to Charley during their first meeting how difficult it will be to revive her land if the manager had not been working it for several months. The simile implies that the chore of working the fields will be as difficult and as uncomfortable as licking the prickly vine.

My father put, the land in trust, I don't know why, but if I run it, I get the profits after the bank is paid. If I walk away, the land goes to charity.

-- Charley (chapter 3 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** With this explanation, Charlie tells Denton (and the reader) exactly why she does not just sell the land she inherited, which would make more sense seeing as how Charley knows nothing about farming or sugarcane. This quote sums up the inciting force for the story's plot.

I like being on this trip with you, Pop.

-- Blue (chapter 5 paragraph 10)

**Importance:** Ralph Angel wants to build a relationship with his son that he never had with his own father. This comment from Blue shows he is on the right path.

Isn't there something else you can watch? Something educational?

-- Charley (chapter 6 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Charley is bothered by the Shirley Temple movies Miss Honey and Micah watch together. They portray black people as lovable buffoons.

This is the living room. Your laborer can go in the den.

-- Lorna (chapter 6 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Lorna expresses her displeasure for the Cane Cutter statue. She is opposed to the image it portrays in her otherwise very professional house

If you want this, Miss Bordelon, you got to trust my judgment all the way. Some folks find that hard to do. There'll be things that won't make sense to you. There'll be times you think I should do the opposite.

-- Prosper Denton. (chapter 7. paragraph 8.)

**Importance:** Denton surprises Charley in the Blue Bowl restaurant and agrees to work with her if she will put her whole trust in him.



That's one of the things you'll find down here, little sister; things never change.  
-- Ralph Angel (chapter 8 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Ralph Angel's comment reminds Charley that they are in a very segregated region of the south. Some things don't change, which implies that the same old prejudices still exist. The statement also foreshadows his own situation. He is still causing trouble, just like he always did.

It's an awful thing when a mother can't protect her child.  
-- Miss Honey (chapter 9 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Miss Honey tells Charley for the first time about Ernest being knocked on the head with a shovel by Mr. LeJeune when he worked for him one summer. Miss Honey's family needed money bad and Ernest wanted to help, so he did not tell her about the incident until a month before he left for California. Miss Honey was still upset that her son endured that kind of racism so the family could have more money.

Well, gentlemen, if I'd known you were coming, I'd have baked a cake.  
-- Charley (chapter 13 paragraph 7)

**Importance:** Charley greeted Landry and his boss Baron with this quote to let Landry know she had not forgotten his sexist remarks from their first meeting.

Da had a garden when I was coming up, but I always hated yard work. Too hard.  
-- Ralph Angel (chapter 16 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Ralph Angel says that tending a garden is hard work, yet he continues to ask for work on Charley's farm. He consistently says he does not like manual labor and he expects to be given easy jobs, indicating his entitlement nature.

You're not like other black people; at least not the black people around here. It's almost like you're not black at all.  
-- Remy (chapter 21 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Remy's insensitive remarks on their first date offend Charley and she is shocked at his ignorance. He thinks it is a compliment to tell her it's like she's not black at all. Violet convinces her to give him another chance to see if he is able to learn a lesson from the experience.

It's my grass-cutting money. It's just sitting down at the bank, collecting dust. You can have it. You've been a good friend to me since the day you got here. I don't have any use for it. I got everything I need. You don't even have to pay me back.  
-- Hollywood (chapter 29 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Hollywood saves the day and the farm with his offer to give Charley the \$50,000 he has saved from mowing lawns over the years. His generous offer allows Charley to successfully complete her crop.