

A Solitary Blue Study Guide

A Solitary Blue by Cynthia Voigt

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Overview

Like most of Voigt's books, *A Solitary Blue* focuses on the theme of love and trust. It tells the story of Jeff Greene from the ages of seven to sixteen. The novel begins on the day he comes home from school to find that his mother has left him and his father, and it ends years later when Jeff, who has inherited his wealthy great-grandmother's estate, rejects his dishonest mother's overtures. Along the way, Jeff learns to overcome his insecurity, which results from the abandonment by his mother, the apparent indifference of his father, and the neglect of a series of live-in housekeepers/sitters. His ability to come to terms with his difficult childhood demonstrates the potential of the individual to learn from and triumph over painful experiences. Although it is hurtful, Jeff's psychological journey is fascinating, and the lessons he learns about the real nature of love and strength are valuable and convincing.

About the Author

Cynthia Voigt was born on February 25, 1942, in Boston, Massachusetts. She attended the Dana Hall School in Wellesley, Massachusetts, where she graduated with distinction.

She earned her bachelor's degree from Smith College in 1963. After she married, Voigt received her teaching certificate from St. Michael's College (now called the College of Santa Fe) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, then moved to Annapolis, Maryland, where she began teaching at the Key School.

Voigt's books for young adults began appearing in the early 1980s and were soon winning praise and awards.

Homecoming was nominated for an American Book Award; Tell Me If the Lovers Are Losers was named an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults; and The Callender Papers won the Edgar Allan Poe Award for best juvenile mystery. In addition, Dicey's Song received the Newbery Medal, and A Solitary Blue was named a Newbery Honor Book.



Plot Summary

The novel follows the emotional and physical development of protagonist Jeff Greene between his seventh and eighteenth years. His mother Melody leaves him and his father, whom he calls the Professor, when Jeff is in second grade. Melody leaves only a note, which tells Jeff she must leave him in order to save the world. Left in a small Baltimore flat with a father so emotionally crippled by Melody's behavior and departure that he can barely carry on a conversation, Jeff tries to emulate his father's attitude by pretending nothing matters to him either. He also tries to figure out how to be exactly what his father wants him to be, so that the Professor won't leave him too. When Jeff gets very sick three winters later, the Professor must call Melody to find out about Jeff's doctor. Melody invites Jeff to spend the summer with her and her family in Charleston, South Carolina. Jeff is so overwhelmed by Melody's warmth and beauty, as well as the splendor of Melody's family home, and the interest that his great-grandmother Gambo shows in him as she teaches him his family history, that he chooses Melody over the Professor in his heart.

The following year, Jeff spends most of his time daydreaming about Melody and playing the guitar because it reminds him of her. Jeff and the Professor begin to warm to each other, as Jeff realizes that the Professor has kindness and humor behind his expressionless mask. Jeff writes Melody several letters, to which she never replies, but the Professor gives Jeff the perfect Christmas gift, a beautiful old Martin guitar. When Jeff returns to visit Melody the following summer, everything has changed. Melody briefly introduces Jeff to her rude boyfriend Max, and then leaves Jeff alone in the house for virtually the entire summer as she travels the country with Max.

Gambo and Melody's elderly aunts have completely lost interest in Jeff, and he is forced to wander around Charleston alone. He buys a boat and takes it out to explore a deserted island in the bay. On one of Melody's brief returns to the house, she tells Jeff that she doesn't love him. Jeff is devastated, and feels that he has been broken into thousands of pieces. He spends a last night on the island before he returns to Baltimore, and feels cleansed and renewed, making a decision to isolate and protect himself so that he will never be hurt again the way that Melody hurt him. However, as Jeff draws inside himself, his life falls apart, and he begins skipping school and failing his classes. Ultimately, the Professor breaks through Jeff's protective wall, and by sharing their experiences of loving and being hurt by Melody, they both begin to heal and open up again.

The Professor has published a successful history book so the two decide to leave their small apartment in Baltimore, and move to an isolated cabin near the bay. Here the Professor and Jeff are finally content; Jeff enjoys taking his boat out on the water and catching crabs, and they both enjoy the solitude. Jeff begins school at Crisfield and discovers that he can actually earn good grades and make friends simply by being himself. He realizes he had been a ghost in his old life, and now he wants to learn about and know himself. At this time Jeff meets the Tillerman family, who intrigue him and make him feel awake and alive. Melody reappears just as Jeff is feeling most



comfortable in his new life and tries to convince Jeff to move back to South Carolina with her.

In order to make her leave, Jeff stands up to her and tells her he doesn't love her, but he feels terrible afterwards. He begins to retreat inside again, as the guilt he feels makes him avoid the warmth offered by other people. Gambo dies, and Jeff learns he has inherited the bulk of her estate through her will because he is the only male descendant. By using some of Gambo's money to do good, and also by allowing himself to feel sorry for Melody, Jeff begins to feel himself getting better again. Melody appears a last time, and Jeff agrees to trade the valuable diamond ring that he inherited for the jade ring of sentimental value that Melody inherited. Jeff forgives her for what she did to him, and forgives himself for what he did to her. Jeff can see that Melody has no sense of the real value of people and things and he feels sorry for her. Jeff also realizes that emotional solitude is impossible - even the solitary blue herons live in colonies together.



Part 1, Chapter 1

Part 1, Chapter 1 Summary

This story begins on an early March day, as second-grader Jeff arrives home from school to find a note from his mother, Melody. The note says that she loves him, but must leave him and the Professor in order to help all the people who need her - orphans and animals and hungry children. Melody tells him that this is such a big job, that she will not be able to come back and see him. Jeff understands her desire to help people, but doesn't understand why she must leave him, and he cries. He makes himself stop because he knows that his father, the Professor, won't like it. The Professor likes order and routine, and working undisturbed in his study. Jeff remembers how his mother would pick him up from day care and take him to do fun activities, and teach him about the problems in the world. Melody painted a picture of a polluted and deeply troubled world that makes Jeff wake up worried during the night. Melody used to tell Jeff that the Professor wasn't much of a father, and Jeff weeps as he realizes the Professor is all he has now.

Jeff stops crying before the Professor arrives home. There is also a note to the Professor, and he reads it and throws it away without making any facial expression. The Professor retreats to his study, but forgets his briefcase in the kitchen and doesn't come back for it. Jeff sits in the kitchen neatly and carefully doing all his homework, and then fixes hot dogs for dinner. When he feels like crying, he cleans the sink instead. He is afraid he will also lose his father if he shows too much emotion. They don't talk during dinner, but afterwards the Professor tells Jeff that Melody won't come back, and they will need to find a college student to move in and take care of Jeff and the house. The Professor tells Jeff that it won't make much difference at all, which relaxes Jeff because it is what the Professor says about everything. Jeff recalls how a fellow student at his school, whose father is also a professor, says that the Professor's history department is in shambles because the Professor doesn't publish and has no leadership skills. When Melody would say this to the Professor, he always said it didn't make a difference. Melody's absence doesn't affect Jeff's life at school, where he continues to do work in an unexceptional manner and avoids being noticed.

The spring Melody leaves, the Professor hires a student named Jackson to move in and do the housework and watch Jeff. Jeff hopes he will hire a girl the next time, but the Professor thinks girls will be unreliable. The Professor takes Jeff to Ocean City for a week that summer. Whenever the Professor walks off down the beach, Jeff is frightened he will never come back. The next year Jeff is in third grade, and Professor hires a housekeeper named Tony, who teaches Jeff to cook. In Jeff's fourth grade year, Andrew keeps the house and the next year, a student named Ian, who asks Jeff uncomfortable questions about his parents' relationship. The summer before Jeff's sixth grade year, in Ocean City, the Professor tells Jeff he is old enough to go without help in the house. That autumn, the Professor begins to bring a friend over to the house for dinner, a Catholic Brother named Thomas. Jeff watches him quietly to figure out how Brother



Thomas would like him to behave and tries to act accordingly. He tries to keep his face as expressionless as possible. Jeff is impressed by the easy and joking way that Brother Thomas and the Professor interact, but knows he couldn't talk that way. He is surprised to hear from Brother Thomas that his father is well-respected at the university.

Jeff becomes talented at reading the Professor's reactions and expressions and figuring out what he might want. Brother Thomas continues to come for dinner, and because Brother Thomas likes to eat, Jeff tries to cook nice recipes for him. In the winter, Jeff catches the flu, and by the time the Professor realizes something is wrong, Jeff is extremely ill with a very high temperature. Brother Thomas comes over and encourages the Professor to call Melody to figure out who Jeff's doctor is. Dr. Baker comes to the house, diagnoses Jeff with bronchial pneumonia, and gives him medicine. Brother Thomas and the Professor nurse Jeff and read to him for the next several days. Brother Thomas tells Jeff that his illness has been a shock to his father, but the shock is good for him. Brother Thomas also tells Jeff that he should ask the Professor to tell him about his mother because it would also be good for him, but Jeff thinks to himself that he knows better. After Jeff gets better, the Professor apologizes to him for letting him get so sick, and for failing to get him regular check-ups. Jeff tells him that it doesn't make any difference. Things return to normal, except Brother Thomas comes to dinner more frequently. In May, the Professor tells Jeff that Melody has invited him to spend the summer with her in South Carolina. Jeff accepts the invitation.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Analysis

This first chapter, which spans four years, begins with Melody's departure and Jeff's response to it. In Jeff's initial grief and fear, the reader sees the "normal" response of a young child to a personal tragedy, which almost immediately morphs into the carefully controlled response that he believes his father wants to see. Jeff's fears that his father will leave him are heartbreaking, but completely understandable. He makes extreme efforts to please not only his father, but everyone else he comes into contact with. With each of the housekeeping college students, Jeff assumes the different characteristics he believes will please the boys. At school he is cautious and quiet, and does only exactly what he thinks is expected of him. He observes Brother Thomas in their first meeting in an attempt to discern what will please him. In this chapter, the reader gets a first sense of how Jeff can submerge his own identity and desires in an attempt to meet the expectations of other people.

The author carefully builds up a misconception of the Professor in the chapter as well. Through Melody's comments to Jeff, that the Professor is not much of a father, and can't be relied on, and also through the Professor's own actions, a picture of the Professor as a cold and withdrawn man is created. The reader will later learn that this picture is not entirely accurate, but in this chapter, the author actively encourages the reader to believe it. The only exception to this image of the emotionless Professor, is his genuine fear and guilt when Jeff gets sick. This is one of the few clues that there is more to the Professor than Jeff and the reader initially believe.



Part 1, Chapter 2

Part 1, Chapter 2 Summary

Jeff arrives in the airport in Charleston, and must wait some time before Melody arrives. When she finally gets there, Jeff is overwhelmed with her beauty, warmth and cheerfulness and her sweet southern voice. She hugs him and touches him and cries to think of his unhappiness, and his heart is so happy it hurts him. Jeff is particularly struck by how beautiful she is. They get in a car and Melody tells Jeff that she needs to make a stop. They arrive at a house where two women are sitting at a kitchen table stuffing envelopes, and Melody introduces Jeff to them as "the man in my life." The women are very surprised because Melody never told them she had a son. Melody asks Jeff to help with the envelopes, and when he agrees by saying "it doesn't make any difference to me," she laughs and tells him that it will. The three women discuss men and the unfairness of society, and Melody says she would never work for a man or be supported by a man. Melody and Jeff arrive at her house in the dark, and Jeff, exhausted, falls asleep immediately after a kiss from Melody.

In the morning, after unpacking, Jeff finally works up the courage to leave the room to find a bathroom. He then returns to his bedroom and sits on the bed waiting until Melody comes up to get him. She is cross because everyone else has already eaten, and she tells him that he is just like his father. Melody introduces Jeff to his great-grandmother, Gambo, and his aged distant cousins, Aunty Booty and Aunt Dodo. At breakfast, Gambo allows Jeff to kiss her, and tells Melody that he is handsome, and has the family look to him. Melody and Jeff explore Charleston together, and he is impressed by how ancient and mysterious the city seems. Melody shows Jeff how green and polluted the river is, and tells him that factories have killed the crabs and herons who used to live in the marshes. When Jeff tells Melody that he only gets Bs and Cs at school, she tells him he has her brains instead of his father's, but that the Professor's brains never did him much good anyways. Melody asks Jeff if life is very terrible for him, but then tells him not to answer because she doesn't want to feel any guiltier. They go to a nice restaurant for lunch, and Jeff asks Melody questions about her age, her parents, and why she left him, and learns that Melody is 32, was raised by Gambo in Charleston, and left because she was unhappy. Jeff is filled with love for his mother. She forgot her purse, so Jeff pays the bill with the \$20 the Professor gave him.

When they return to the house, they sit outside and Melody plays Jeff her guitar and sings. He loves her voice. Melody goes to a party that night and Jeff sits up with Gambo and the aunts and Gambo tells him stories of their family and her heirloom rings, and explains to him that she wants to pour herself and her experiences into Jeff so that he can carry them into his life. Jeff feels very contented. After the first few days, Jeff sees Melody infrequently, but whenever he does, she makes him feel wonderful and loved. He tries to learn about discrimination and pollution to please her. He begins to take long bus journeys all over town during the days, and learns the songs that Melody likes so that he can sing with her. When it comes time for him to leave, Melody changes his



return plane ticket for a bus ticket and pockets the extra money. She cries and kisses Jeff at the bus station, and weeps because she has no money to give him for food during the sixteen hour journey. On the journey home, Jeff feels like he is returning to a completely different self in Baltimore. He sees a blue heron out the window, and is impressed by its solitude. He sings Melody's songs to himself, and thinks if he ever had to choose between his parents, he would choose Melody.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Analysis

Melody calls the South, the "land of lost causes," in this chapter, which foreshadows the future of Jeff's relationship with and love for Melody. Although Jeff is completely charmed by Melody and her warmth and beauty, the reader can see Melody's selfishness and manipulations from the very beginning of the chapter, when she shows up late to pick up Jeff at the airport, to the very end, where she takes the money made by switching Jeff's ticket, but puts him on a bus for sixteen hours without food or money. Melody may be fun and charming, but even as the reader watches Jeff's happiness grow, the reader fears what Melody could do to him in her carelessness and selfishness. Jeff, who usually protects himself with an "it doesn't make any difference to me" attitude that he learns from the Professor, seems to make himself particularly vulnerable to Melody, the person who may be able to hurt him the most. Melody's future betrayal of Jeff is foreshadowed in her cruelty about the Professor, her white lies and her eagerness to take money and affection from Jeff.

Jeff's sense of self also changes while he is in Charleston. Not only do Melody's warmth and passion awaken similar feelings in Jeff, but Gambo's stories and attention make him feel part of something bigger, and give him a sense of identity as a "Boudrault of Charleston." The bus ride home to Baltimore thus symbolizes a journey between identities as well as a journey between places. Jeff knows he will return to a different self when he is with the Professor. The symbol of the solitary blue heron is also introduced for the first time in this chapter. As a symbol of solitude and isolation, it reappears throughout the book. Here, just as Jeff feels he occupies a small "corner of the world" in Baltimore, he observes that the heron "occupies its own insignificant corner of the landscape." (p. 79). In his identity confusion, Jeff almost seems to both envy and pity the heron for its isolation.



Part 1, Chapter 3

Part 1, Chapter 3 Summary

When Jeff arrives in Baltimore, Brother Thomas is waiting for him because the Professor is in class. When Jeff tells Brother Thomas that he didn't have any dinner or breakfast, Brother Thomas takes him to a diner and orders him a big meal. When Jeff gets home, he feels disappointment that the summer is over and the house is so small and dark. After showering, he looks into the mirror, and realizes that he has his mother's gray eyes and the shape of her face, and he feels much better. Jeff and the Professor greet each other in the evening by studying each other silently, then making small talk. They sit down to dinner with Brother Thomas and drink a bottle of wine that Jeff brought back for Brother Thomas from Charleston. Brother Thomas tells Jeff that the Professor worked hard all summer, and Jeff notices with surprise how Brother Thomas and the Professor joke around with each other. He realizes he can hear the joking and enjoy the conversation because of Melody. Over dinner, Jeff tells Brother Thomas and the Professor about his summer and about Melody, and the Professor joins in to tell Jeff what he knows about Gambo. When Brother Thomas asks Jeff if he will go back next summer, Jeff wants to say yes, but instead says he doesn't know.

Jeff immediately writes a thank you note to Gambo and a long letter to Melody, which he tries to make as interesting as possible. When he hasn't received a reply after several weeks, he asks the Professor if letters ever get lost. He writes again, but still receives no reply. He starts reading everything he can find about the South, and his grades get worse and worse. He has no friends, and spends his time daydreaming and remembering Melody. The Professor gives Jeff an allowance every week, and he saves up until he can buy an old guitar, which he plays all the time. He writes Melody again to tell her, but receives nothing in return. Jeff decides loving someone means loving them even if they don't do what you want, and he sees himself as Melody's knight - faithful no matter what. The Professor asks Jeff about guitars, and Jeff tells him that his favorite guitars are beautiful old Martins. The Professor invites Jeff to go to a guitar concert with him and Brother Thomas. Jeff agrees in order to be polite, even though he is only interested in the guitar as a link to Melody. For this reason, he rejects the Professor's offer to buy him guitar lessons. At the concert, Jeff is blown away by the beautiful music, but tries to resist the pull of the notes, because he realizes the music is far superior to Melody's playing.

Part 1, Chapter 3 Analysis

Although Jeff believes at the end of Chapter 2 that he is returning from Charleston to resume his self-sufficient and reticent identity with the Professor, it is obvious in the chapter that the dynamic between the Professor and Jeff has actually changed in some perceptible way. In talking about Melody over dinner and discussing guitars and going to concerts, the Professor and Jeff (with the help of Brother Thomas) actually begin to



forge a relationship. Jeff may not notice it as he pines for Melody, who ignores his letters, but the reader will notice that the Professor is being supportive of Jeff in a way that Melody is not. Jeff's observations about love and his conception of himself as a knight, faithful to Melody no matter what, are further evidence of his blind devotion to her. He shuts himself off to everything about the guitar that doesn't relate to Melody.



Part 1, Chapter 4

Part 1, Chapter 4 Summary

Jeff sends Melody a beautiful scarf for Christmas, because it is a perfect gift for her and he wants to be "perfect in his love." Jeff and the Professor never celebrate Christmas in a traditional way, but do always exchange one present. Jeff makes breakfast and gives his father a gift of a belt, and then the Professor awkwardly wishes Jeff a merry Christmas, and gives him a large box with an old Martin guitar inside. Jeff holds the guitar and starts to cry. He thanks his father and then runs out of room, thinking that, because the Professor hates tears and emotions, crying would be a terrible way to show him how much he likes the gift. Jeff is overwhelmed with feelings and plays Melody's songs on the guitar all morning. When Jeff stops for a sandwich, the Professor comes to the kitchen and tells Jeff that if he'd rather have a new guitar, he will get it for him. Because the old guitar is so perfect, this suggestion makes Jeff laugh happily. The Professor's eyes flicker and he leaves the room, and Jeff suddenly realizes he has hurt his feelings. Jeff thinks he may be wrong, as he isn't even sure if the Professor has any feelings, but he goes to the Professor's office to clear up the misunderstanding and the Professor thanks him.

Over Christmas dinner, they talk about Melody and Professor tells Jeff how much he had loved her, and how happy and helpless she had made him. He also tells Jeff that he has a lot of his mother in him. Jeff and the Professor talk about the fact that Jeff never calls his father by any name and they agree on "Professor". Brother Thomas comes for dinner the day after Christmas, and Jeff plays the guitar for him. Brother Thomas tells them he is going to study at Oxford for a year, and asks them to keep his stereo in their kitchen. While they are discussing the possibility of a visit to England, Jeff learns that Melody ran up debts that the Professor is still paying off, and that the Professor must now pay for Jeff's school. Jeff feels bad for this waste, because he is not doing well at school, and still has no friends. Jeff is ignored and rejected at school, but tells himself that it doesn't make any difference, because with his guitar and his memory of Melody, "nothing could touch him" (p. 108).

Jeff continues to write Melody a letter every month even though he receives no reply. He listens to Brother Thomas's classical records and buys some folk records with his allowance. At the end of May, the Professor shows Jeff a letter from Gambo, which says that they'd be glad to have Jeff over for the summer again. Jeff thinks the handwriting looks older than Gambo. The Professor had finally written to ask her if Jeff could come after waiting for her to get in touch. Jeff asks the Professor why he and Melody separated, and the Professor quotes Tolstoy's observation that every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way, and says that Melody had been disappointed by him - first by his inability to buy her an expensive engagement ring or house, and then more and more as time went on. Jeff can tell his father doesn't want to talk about it, so he doesn't ask any more questions.



Part 1, Chapter 4 Analysis

Even as Jeff and the Professor begin to open up to one another at home, Jeff's carefully calculated indifference and his "it doesn't make any difference" attitude that he first learned from the Professor grows into an even stronger fortress against the rest of the world. As things get worse and worse for Jeff at school, he draws into himself with his guitar and his thoughts of Melody, and thinks of himself as untouchable. Jeff and the Professor's touching miscommunication about the guitar, and their subsequent Christmas dinner conversation evidences a growing bond between the two, and also, in the Professor's reference to Tolstoy's quotation about unhappy families, introduces the idea that families can come in all sorts of different guises. In the final pages of the chapter, the author also employs foreshadowing to suggest that Jeff's second trip to Charleston will not be as happy as the first - Gambo's aged writing, the fact that the Professor had to ask if Jeff could come, Melody's failure to write Jeff, and how Melody's disappointment in the Professor grew over time.



Part 1, Chapter 5

Part 1, Chapter 5 Summary

This chapter begins with Jeff again waiting for Melody at the Charleston airport, this time for two hours. He is so happy to see her that he doesn't mind waiting, or the fact that he is unable to bring his Martin with him on the plane. When she finally arrives, they embrace, and Jeff is again overwhelmed by her beauty. Melody's boyfriend Max is waiting in the car, and is immediately rude and unwelcoming to Jeff. Melody has taken up photography, and Max refuses to let her bring Jeff to a party he is working at that evening. The three go to a restaurant, and while Melody is in the bathroom, Max tells Jeff that Melody had to marry the Professor because she was pregnant with Jeff, and abortions were illegal then. When Melody returns to the table, Max tells her not to be "any more stupid than you can help." Melody tells Jeff that Gambo has had a stroke and is weak. She asks Jeff to pay for supper with the \$20 the Professor gave him. They drop Jeff off several blocks from the house. Miss Opal is waiting for him, and takes him to see Gambo, who looks much older than the year before. Gambo is short with him, and tells him to go away because he is making her tired. Jeff feels bitterly disappointed because he had believed that Gambo liked him, and that her house was his true home, but comforts himself with the fact that only Melody matters.

Over breakfast the next day Gambo reminds Jeff that he had invited himself to stay, and he feels uncomfortable. Melody comes down to breakfast and tells him she must work in the darkroom that morning, but invites him to lunch later that day. Jeff asks Melody if he can borrow her guitar, and she tells him she sold it, although she can't remember why she did. She suggests he take a walk, and he does because he feels connected to her when he is doing what she wants. Over lunch, Melody tells Jeff she must go out of town for a week with Max to take pictures at a folk festival, and she will leave tonight. Melody tells Jeff she wouldn't leave him if she thought she had to worry about him, but he is probably used to being alone after living with the Professor. Melody says she married the Professor because he was so handsome and lonely and she wanted to make him happy, and she left him because she was so unhappy and tired of pinching pennies. Jeff feels very sorry for her. Melody shows Jeff the photo she took of him at the airport, right when he first saw her coming, and he can't believe how happy and excited he looks.

While Melody is gone, Jeff struggles to keep busy - Gambo and the aunts have lost interest in him, and Miss Opal refuses his offers of help. Melody keeps calling to extend her trip, and Jeff stops expecting her to be home soon. He tries to stay out of the house during the days, and takes long bus rides all over the city. One afternoon when he gets home, Melody is waiting for him, angry that he wasn't there when she got home. When he says he is sorry, she tells him that he is just like his father. She tells Jeff that she and Max are going away for another month or five weeks. Jeff makes himself accept it, because he knows she won't like him if he complains. He forces himself to be expressionless. When Melody tells him she missed him, she looks like she means it,



even though he knows she must be lying. That night he cries in bed and feels like he has been broken into pieces, and he can't believe how easy he was to break.

After Melody leaves, Jeff wanders around the house sad and unnoticed, and tells himself he is glad that everyone can leave him behind, because that means he owes nobody anything and can do what he wants. Jeff takes the bus out of town to the area with the marshy island he saw the previous summer, and finds a man who is selling a rowboat, and buys it. After some practice, he decides to approach the island, although it looks wild and dangerous and makes him feel afraid. He likes to feel afraid in the boat because it is an external fear, and it distracts him from the fear he feels inside himself. After a week circling the island and eating his sandwiches, Jeff finally lands on the island. When he first steps on the island, crabs scramble back into their holes. He watches the great blue herons, and notices they are always alone. He spends days exploring the island, and sees an alligator one day, which fills him with fear and excitement.

That same evening, Jeff receives a note from the Professor telling him that he sold a book, and before Jeff can go out to buy a stamp to send a reply, he learns that Melody is home. Jeff hates himself for his inability to resist her, but is happy to see her even though she hurt him. Melody tells Jeff she is going away again, and he realizes she is lying about missing him, and she only cares about herself. He tells her he isn't sad to return to Baltimore, and shouts at her for lying to him, and speaking badly about the Professor. She accuses him of siding with the Professor because he is a man, and tells him if he had been a girl she would have taken him with her when she left. She tells him she only married the Professor because she was pregnant. Jeff can tell that Melody is trying to hurt him and break him, and he tells her to go away. Jeff can feel all the broken pieces of himself rattling around inside. At dinner that night, Melody puts on an act for Gambo and pretends nothing has happened, and then leaves for a party. Jeff feels hate for her, but also hates himself for being so easy to break.

Part 1, Chapter 5 Analysis

When Melody introduces Jeff to Max, she calls Max, "the man in my life," which is exactly what she called Jeff when she first introduced him to her friends the previous summer. This parallel is clearly intentional, and suggests that Melody's warm but fickle attention has completely shifted away from her son to her boyfriend. This becomes ever more obvious as she neglects Jeff throughout his second summer in Charleston. Jeff, who is so carefully guarded and protective of himself at school, allows himself to be completely open to Melody, and this means she hurts him over and over again. In their final argument, Jeff finally stands up for himself and the Professor, but Melody is simply better at cruelty. The author employs imagery of brokenness to explain the pain Jeff experiences when Melody neglects him and hurts him. This idea of brokenness, and the fragility that Jeff hates himself for, reappear throughout the following chapters. The blue heron also reappears during this chapter, as Jeff begins to explore the marshy island with his little rowboat. Jeff's observation that the heron is always alone foreshadows the implosion of his relationship with Melody and his subsequent self-isolation.

Part 1, Chapter 6

Part 1, Chapter 6 Summary

The day before he leaves Charleston, Jeff returns to his island, where he runs along the dunes, watches the waves, and swims. As night falls, he realizes he should cross back, but can't bring himself to do it. So he sleeps on the beach, and wakes up feeling healed, and at home, and as if he had just woken from a deep, long sleep. Although he must hurry to catch his flight to Baltimore, Jeff lingers on the island, and sees the heron fly across the island, croaking with displeasure at being disturbed. It seems to Jeff that the heron is saying, "just leave me alone."

Part 1, Chapter 6 Analysis

Before leaving Charleston for the last time, Jeff goes back to the island where he is "the only human inhabitant." The wholeness and catharsis that Jeff feels after he sleeps on the beach is a sharp contrast to his feelings of brokenness in the previous chapter. However, the reader fears that Jeff has found a false solution to happiness - in his reverence for the heron, who wants to be left alone and doesn't watch Jeff as he leaves, Jeff seems to have found a questionable route to happiness. The reader will note in subsequent chapters the ways that Jeff's plans to isolate himself and maintain the solitude of island end up failing him.



Part 2, Chapter 7

Part 2, Chapter 7 Summary

The Professor is waiting for Jeff when he arrives at the Baltimore airport, but Jeff has emotionally gone inside himself, to a small room where he locked the memories of his day and night spent on the island beach. When the Professor asks after Melody, Jeff feels rage surging against his locked room, but inside it he feels safe. He feels that if he didn't have the room, he would fall apart into broken pieces. Protecting the room becomes Jeff's only project - he stops playing the guitar, talking to the Professor and participating at school. He begins riding the rollercoaster at the amusement park whenever he can, and the excitement of the feeling is the only thing that compares to the excitement of being on the island. He skips classes to ride the rollercoaster, and begins flunking his courses and hiding the evidence from the Professor. One day, the Professor and Brother Thomas show up at the amusement park because the principal of Jeff's school had called the Professor and told him Jeff was skipping his exams and failing his classes. When Jeff sees the two men, he is immediately terrified - he fears they will hurt him, and he knows how easy he is to hurt. Instead, the Professor tells Jeff that he feels afraid, and Brother Thomas tells Jeff that he will finally have to tell the Professor what he is feeling.

When Jeff and the Professor sit down at the kitchen table to talk, Jeff initially can't talk about what he is feeling. However, the Professor intuits that Melody had hurt Jeff, and the two men begin to share their experiences - Jeff tells the Professor about the boat and the island and the Professor tells Jeff how it felt when Melody left him, and how her lies had wounded him repeatedly, and how scared he had felt. Jeff tells the Professor that Melody told him that if he had been a girl she would have taken him with her. The Professor laughs, and tells Jeff that Melody was a liar, and he wouldn't have allowed it anyway. Jeff feels himself beginning to relax as he realizes how much he matters to the Professor, and realizes he can rely on that. Jeff tells the Professor about the blue heron, and how he sank the boat on his last day in Charleston because he didn't want anybody else to have it. Jeff and Professor talk about the Professor's book, which will be published by a regular publisher, and will mean extra money for the family. The Professor tells Jeff he won't be able to pass the year at school, but promises Jeff that they will make it all right.

That winter, Jeff stays home from school with the Professor and plays his guitar. The Professor and Jeff go to a meeting with the principal of the University School and the Professor and the principal agree it is best to withdraw Jeff from the school. The principal suggests Jeff is a student of below-average abilities. They also go to see Dr. Baker, who suggests counseling for Jeff, but the Professor wants to give it some more time, and believes he can understand the effect of Melody on Jeff better than anybody. When they get home, the Professor tells Jeff that he can't change, and Jeff tells him that it is okay, and it is one of the things he likes in his father. Instead they decide to change their circumstances by moving. So they spend weekends driving around looking at



properties, going further and further out of Baltimore until they find a little cabin facing a creek of marshes in the westernmost part of the state. The cabin is small, damp and dilapidated, but Jeff sees a blue heron on the water outside, and takes it as a sign. The Professor likes it too, and notes that in its isolation, it is like an island. They decide to buy it. They do a lot of work on the cabin to make it livable and also build a dock for a boat. Jeff comes to think of the property as a "safe place," and as he and the Professor adjust to the cabin, and spend days out in his new boat, he realizes he was right. He continues to watch the herons, and shares his fascination with the Professor. Jeff starts to realize that the Professor is funny, and they enjoy each other's company.

Jeff and the Professor enjoy their life together in the new house - The Professor works in the evenings and Jeff plays his guitar. The Professor buys Jeff a bike to ride to school, and Jeff takes the boat out on the bay whenever he can, and learns how to catch crabs with chicken necks. The Professor is too clumsy to do it, but enjoys being on the boat with Jeff. Brother Thomas comes out to stay for a week, and Jeff continues to enjoy their conversation and enjoys learning new things about his father. He can also see the Professor's contentment.

Part 2, Chapter 7 Analysis

This chapter begins by introducing the image of a locked room inside of Jeff, where he has hidden all of his feelings to protect himself. Jeff feels protected inside of this room, but in reality his external world falls apart when he takes refuge there, and it is ultimately only when the Professor breaks through and makes him communicate, that things begin to get better for Jeff. When the Professor tells Jeff that he felt afraid when he lost Melody, it is also a huge moment for the Professor, who has avoided his emotions in much the same way that Jeff has. It is by recognizing that they are both survivors of loving Melody, and need not feel alone with that pain, that both men are able to begin healing, and also experiencing the happiness that is evident in the last pages of this chapter. Jeff begins to play his guitar again, and thinks of his new home as a "safe place," instead of needing to draw inward to feel safe.



Part 2, Chapter 8

Part 2, Chapter 8 Summary

Jeff knows that the Professor doesn't expect him to get perfect grades or become popular at school, but merely wants Jeff to be okay, and Jeff finds he *is* okay at the new school. He doesn't attract much attention and the classes are easy for him. Jeff also finds that he doesn't feel uneasy on the nights the Professor stays in Baltimore with Brother Thomas. He enjoys watching the herons and playing his guitar, and actually feels comfortable in the silence and solitude. He observes the kids at Chrisfield and dresses and acts to blend in. He finds two other students, Phil Milson and Andy Barrows, interesting, but doesn't approach them. When Jeff gets his report card. He is shocked to find all "As" but the Professor is not. He tells Jeff that he has a high IQ, and Jeff realizes that Melody and the principal at the University School had made him believe that he wasn't intelligent. Jeff feels like he has been a ghost in his own life for many years.

At the end of October, the Professor shows Jeff his published book, and Jeff can tell that he is proud behind his expressionless face. Jeff is proud of him too. Jeff is asked to write an essay about a real character for his English class, and writes about John C. Calhoun of South Carolina. Mr. Chapelle, the English teacher makes fun of Jeff before the rest of the class because the essay was supposed to be about someone the students knew.

Although Jeff is scared for a moment that he will break again, he instead keeps his cool, and impresses the rest of the class, including Phil Milson. That night, as he is crabbing in the bay, Jeff realizes he has practiced not being anybody for most of his life. He realizes he would like to know more about himself, but is scared, because he was hurt so badly last time he opened up to Melody. He decides to try, inspired by the Professor, who has recovered from being hurt by Melody and gone on to write a book and make friends with Brother Thomas. Brother Thomas sends Jeff articles about his father from national magazines and papers, and Jeff is very impressed with the Professor, but also realizes that he doesn't really know him. The Professor tells Jeff that the book has been successful, and that they can afford to move to a fancy house in central Baltimore if he wants, but after a very awkward conversation, they realize that they both want to stay.

As spring comes, Jeff begins preparing the boat and begins to see the herons again, and they make him laugh with joy. He begins joining Phil for lunch, and invites him out on his boat once school lets out. Jeff feels satisfied with the way he spent the year. Brother Thomas visits Jeff and the Professor for two weeks that summer, and goes crabbing with Jeff and they have a wonderful time. One day in town, Jeff comes across a grouchy-looking older lady who scowls and mutters at him when he fails to offer help with her shopping bags. The odd encounter makes Jeff feel funny. Brother Thomas learns her name is Abigail Tillerman, and she is a widow who lives alone nearby. She makes Jeff think of Melody for the first time in a long while, and that night the Professor



tells Jeff that Melody has written to request a divorce and custody of Jeff. Jeff panics, but the Professor calms him, and together they work out a strategy to fight Melody in court. Jeff can see that the Professor is scared too, and he plays his guitar to cheer them up. However, Jeff continues to feel unsettled. One day, Phil Milson comes over, and after Jeff gets over the awkwardness of entertaining, they take the boat out together for the afternoon.

In ninth grade, Jeff and Phil become friends with Andy Burrows too, and Jeff realizes everyone is pairing off and going on dates. A girl named Carol has a crush on Jeff, but Jeff isn't interested in dating - he feels he has just learned how to have friends. For Christmas, the Professor gives Jeff his book, and Jeff learns it is dedicated to him, and he is touched. The Professor is still worried about Melody, but Jeff realizes increasingly that he has chosen the Professor with all of himself. By the time tenth grade begins, the Professor has begun another book and Jeff is taking Drivers Ed. His attention is also caught by a lively and intelligent-looking eighth-grader named Wilhemina Smiths. Jeff feels good except for the permanent nervousness about Melody. She continues to write to the Professor, and also sends Jeff a note, saying she misses him. Jeff realizes how she played his feelings just as she played her guitar- and that she played the guitar badly.

Part 2, Chapter 8 Analysis

This school year is the first happy one in Jeff's life, and it is because Jeff relaxes and acts like himself that he begins to make friends and excel in his classes. Jeff's realization that he has been a ghost in his own life for many years is extremely interesting, and accurately reflects the way he moved through his previous school, trying not to draw any attention to himself or put himself in any danger. Jeff's sense that he would like to know more about himself, in spite of the hurt Melody did him the last time he opened himself up and made him emotionally vulnerable, shows an incredible new strength in Jeff. By drawing inspiration from the Professor's recovery, Jeff embarks on a journey of self-discovery, and in so doing draws to himself a new world of friends.



Part 2, Chapter 9

Part 2, Chapter 9 Summary

Jeff is on high honor roll again his sophomore year, and spends the last free period of each day sitting outside the school, playing his guitar and working on songs. One day, while he is playing, a girl comes over to listen, seemingly drawn against her will by the music. There is something in her manner that makes Jeff think of solitude and space, and his island in South Carolina. She leaves abruptly, but comes to him again in a week, and this time sings along with his guitar. Jeff learns that her name is Dicey, and she is the granddaughter of Abigail Tillerman. Jeff finds her determination appealing, and also likes the way he can hold her helpless with music. Jeff learns that she has also cut the English teacher Chapelle down to size, and is friends with Wilhemina Smiths.

Jeff starts to hang out at the grocery store where Dicey works, and meets her brother Sammy. One day Jeff goes over to the Tillermans' farmhouse, and when Dicey sees him, she acts angry, and under her glare, Jeff feels himself breaking down inside in just the way that Melody had made him feel. He feels that he has been fooling himself and forgetting what he is actually like. He is hugely relieved when Dicey gets over her surprise and welcomes him, and is glad that he stayed past her anger. He plays the guitar for her as she finishes working on her boat, and thinks about the different feelings caused by Melody and Dicey, and feels that he has broken through something.

Part 2, Chapter 9 Analysis

The introduction of Dicey Tillerman in this chapter adds another level to Jeff's development into an emotionally well-adjusted person. Dicey is interesting because she is so like Jeff in many ways - she loves music and boats and is able to stand up to the English teacher, just as Jeff did before her. However, Dicey is also a very powerful personality, and under her anger, Jeff feels himself vulnerable to the same pain and fear that Melody caused him. However, this time, Jeff finds he is able to control and overcome the fear that sets in when he feels himself breaking inside. Because he can conquer this fear, he is able to pursue a relationship with Dicey that otherwise might have been prevented by the damage done by Melody. Jeff continues to learn more about himself as he observes these changes occurring in himself.



Part 2, Chapter 10

Part 2, Chapter 10 Summary

Jeff suddenly finds his life crowded with people he likes and things he wants to do, and feels that life is rich. He spends a lot of time at the Tillerman's farmhouse, and meets Dicey's sister Maybeth, whose quiet, gentle ways and beautiful singing voice charm him. Wilhemina tells Jeff that Dicey and her siblings traveled alone all the way from Connecticut after their mother was put into a mental hospital. Jeff is impressed with their courage and also likes the person he is around them, and likes trying to figure out what each is feeling and how best to interact with them. He realizes he is good at it. When Dicey's mother dies, and she turns inside herself, he knows to leave her alone, because she is as private and solitary in her grief as the Professor. Phil and Andy like to tease him about his friendship with Dicey, but Jeff likes how alive and awake she makes him feel.

That summer, Jeff sets up a crabbing business with the Tillermans, and Jeff enjoys the long hours on the boat with the siblings. One day while he is talking to Dicey's brother, James about their mothers, James tells Jeff that Dicey knows how to lie, and did it frequently on their trip from Connecticut to Maryland. Jeff is so upset that he feels the day go dark and cold around him, and feels the fragile part of him cracking. When Dicey finally asks Jeff to go sailing on her boat he almost says no, but doesn't, and when they are on the boat, Dicey tells him what it had been like on their trip to Crisfield. Jeff feels himself relax as he begins to understand what they had been up against, and tells Dicey about the island and how he felt in South Carolina.

Brother Thomas comes to visit that summer, and Jeff senses a change in him, and uses his talent for knowing how people feel to intuit that Brother Thomas feels bleak and hopeless. He wants to help Brother Thomas, who has helped him so much, and invites him to join him and James Tillerman for a day of crabbing. They work so hard on the boat that Brother Thomas finally feels sleepy, and enjoys feeling fatigued. After dinner, Brother Thomas asks the Professor about Melody, and the Professor tells him the hearing was uncontested and that a decree should issue next week. They also discuss the Tillermans. After Brother Thomas goes to bed, the Professor tells Jeff that Brother Thomas has been going through a spiritual crisis, and that this had been the first good day for him in a long time. The Professor tells Jeff that he'd like to meet the Tillermans sometime, and asks if Jeff is courting Dicey. Jeff blushes and says no, and asks the Professor if he believes in a one-woman man. The Professor tells Jeff that it seems to be in his character.

The next time Dicey asks Jeff to go sailing with her, Jeff asks her to come by his house to meet the Professor. On the way up the creek, they see a blue heron, and both confess that the bird reminds them of each other. When they pull up to Jeff's house, Melody is waiting on the dock, and Dicey promptly leaves. Melody tells Jeff how proud she is of him, and how much she has missed him, and that she wants him to come and



live with her and Gambo. Jeff sees how sad she feels that he has chosen the Professor, and also sees how terrible she makes the Professor feel. Jeff also sees that she criticizes the Professor unfairly and still lies liberally, especially about Max. It hurts Jeff to feel sorry for her, and he can see that the Professor still loves her and that she is taking advantage of his weakness. Jeff breaks her spell by lashing out at her and telling her he doesn't love her and doesn't want to be with her. When she leaves, he feels terrible and can tell the Professor does too, although they both pretend to be fine.

Part 2, Chapter 10 Analysis

In this chapter Jeff uses his newfound ability to understand people and their feelings and needs in order to both hurt and help people. He intuits what Brother Thomas and the Tillermans need, and helps them find it, but he also sees through Melody's falsehoods, and knows how to shut her down and hurt her. It is interesting that this skill for understanding people is one that Jeff cultivated early in life in order to become invisible, and now he uses it to become close to people. Even as the reader notes how Jeff has grown into a caring, happy, well-adjusted person, the reader also sees the legacy of Melody's treatment of him, not only in the way he reacts to his mother, but also in his response to James' revelation that Dicey lies. It is a testament to Jeff's growth that he is able to see Dicey's lies in the context of her life experience, and understand and forgive her the flaw. He can see that all women are not like Melody. Although it is not completely clear at this point what sort of relationship will exist between Dicey and Jeff in the future, the fact that they both associate each other with the heron, the book's primary symbol of solitude, suggests that it may be possible for two people with solitary natures to have a meaningful connection.



Part 2, Chapter 11

Part 2, Chapter 11 Summary

Jeff still doesn't feel fine after the encounter with Melody, but he continues to pretend he is. The school year begins, and Phil tells Jeff that he met Jeff's mother when she came into town, and imagines how great it must be to have a beautiful mother like Melody. Jeff realizes he was scared and acted cruelly to Melody, and although he doesn't regret it, he can't forget what he did. He feels like he did the same thing to Melody that she did to him - she thought he loved her, and he told her he didn't. He doesn't tell anyone how he feels because he doesn't think he deserves comfort or sympathy. He even avoids the Tillermans, until one day in September he sees Sammy riding his bike in the icy rain and picks him up in his car. Jeff takes Sammy back to the Professor's house to dry his clothes. Sammy talks about his mother, and how, if Maybeth ended up like her, it wouldn't be a terrible thing because she was more than just one bad thing. Sammy and the Professor meet each other for the first time and Sammy is impressed with the Professor's steadiness. Jeff misses the Tillermans. Melody doesn't try to get in touch with Jeff.

All winter, Phil and Andy talk and worry about college and the future, but Jeff avoids the subjects. The Professor asks him about his plans and Jeff is evasive, and the Professor tells him he worries that he is losing touch with Jeff again, like the fall before they moved. Jeff assures him it isn't true and tells the Professor he might be interested in studying the responsible management of ecology and marine biology. Jeff tells the Professor that he is going to be okay, and he thinks that accepting what he had done to Melody is the hardest part of that.

One afternoon Jeff comes home and the Professor is nervously cleaning the house for the visit of Gambo's lawyer, Beuaregard Jacobs. The Professor is worried that the lawyer is checking up on his fitness, but instead he tells them that Gambo has died and left Jeff an inheritance. Jacobs tells Jeff that Gambo had decided that the male descendant should inherit her estate. She left Jeff everything except for the jade ring and portrait she left for Melody. Jacobs tells Jeff that Gambo had mortgaged the house and borrowed against her investments, so the estate will actually yield little money, but Gambo also left him her diamond engagement ring, worth approximately twenty thousand dollars. Jacobs is surprised by the Professor, who Melody had led him to believe would be bitter and difficult. Gambo made provision for the two elderly aunts in her will, but not for Miss Opal. Jeff decides to give the stocks to Miss Opal, and after much wrangling with the lawyer, they figure out how to make it work.

After the lawyer leaves, Jeff and the Professor discuss how upset Melody will be with Gambo's will, and Jeff points out that Gambo must have loved Melody to leave her the one ring she really valued. They realize that Melody probably led Gambo to believe that she would treasure the jade ring too. The Professor tells Jeff that he believes that loving someone is just the beginning - what matters is what one does about it. Jeff looks at



himself through the Professor's analytical view, and realizes that his cruelty to Melody had been forced by her cruelty, and even though he sees he had to do what he did, he also likes himself for not liking himself when he did it. Jeff then feels much better. He thinks he might use Gambo's diamond ring to help the Tillermans. The Professor tells Jeff that he has a lot of his mother in him, and that it is a compliment. Jeff replies that he has a lot of his father in him too, and that it's also a compliment.

The next Saturday, Jeff goes to the grocery store where Dicey works, and offers her a ride home. Jeff asks her to come by the house to meet the Professor, explaining that he believes that in order to really know someone, you must know their family. Dicey tells him that her Gram likes him, and thinks he has staying power and a gentle spirit, and is a "rare bird." Jeff is pleased and wants to ask Dicey what she thinks of him, but doesn't. He feels like he has just received a letter from the world that says, I've been watching you, Jeff Greene, and I like you. He feels the list of signatures would include his own.

Part 2, Chapter 11 Analysis

This chapter sees Jeff draw inside himself again, this time led by guilt and self-loathing. He withdraws from the Professor and, even more painfully, from the Tillermans. However, he also brings himself back this time - by forgiving himself and by helping Miss Opal. In this way, he finally begins to free himself from Melody's old powers over him. This is also evidenced by the real and genuine sympathy he feels for Melody. In this chapter, the enormity of Melody's power over the Professor also becomes evident. The Professor's observations about love, and the importance of what one does with love, also shows his slow, but steady, healing process. Jeff's imagined letter to himself at the end of the chapter suggests that Jeff is beginning to know himself instead of hiding from himself, and that he actually likes and respects the person he is becoming. This self-awareness and self-respect stands in sharp contrast to Jeff's sense earlier in the book that he is a mystery to himself, or has spent too much time trying to be nobody. The reader can see that Jeff is somebody, and somebody good.



Part 2, Chapter 12

Part 2, Chapter 12 Summary

Ten days before school lets out, Jeff reaches his house and sees Max's car out front. Melody is sitting on the lawn, and though Jeff is tempted to ride away, he decides to stay because Melody is his responsibility. Melody asks if they can put everything behind them and he tells her he already has. Melody starts to flatter him, and Jeff feels complicated feelings of anger and guilt rise up inside him. She tells him she doesn't want anything from him, but merely wants to say goodbye before leaving for South America with Max to teach villagers. Jeff is pleased that he has no feelings about that. Melody tells Jeff that she couldn't be happy knowing about the situation in Columbia and doing nothing, and Jeff thinks that happiness and unhappiness isn't the question after all. He thinks of the Tillermans who worry not about happiness, but about living right for each other, together.

Melody tells Jeff that she knows he picked his father because the Professor is the rich and famous one, but tells Jeff that she knows he used to love her. She asks him for money, and for Gambo's ring. She offers to trade him for the jade ring, and Jeff realizes he would really treasure the jade ring as a connection to the past and to his identity as a Boudrault of Charleston. He suggests to Melody that she should keep the diamond ring instead of selling it, and she laughs at him. Jeff thinks that the money value of things is all that matters to Melody, but then remembers Max, and thinks that maybe the pieces of Melody doesn't fit together any more neatly than the Professor's or Jeff's or even the blue herons', who are solitary, but also nest in colonies together. He feels sorry for Melody, who "never knew what the real treasures were."

Part 2, Chapter 12 Analysis

In this last chapter, Jeff finally makes complete peace with Melody and the hurt that she did him in his childhood. Jeff's decision to swap the diamond ring for the jade ring suggests that he understands true value in a way that Melody cannot. Jeff pities her this lack of understanding, because she will miss out on treasures in life. This certainly means the love of her husband and son as much as the heirloom jade ring. However, Jeff also realizes that Melody is more complex than he gave her credit for, and that the same is true of most people, including himself. He realizes that everyone is made up of little pieces that don't fit perfectly together. The final image of the herons- nesting in colonies together- is a particularly powerful one, because it suggests that even the heron, the book's primary symbol of solitude, needs to be with others. Jeff does too.



Characters

Jefferson Greene

Jeff is the novel's protagonist. The novel begins when Jeff is seven-and-a-half years old, and in the second grade, and ends when he is eighteen, and about to graduate from high school. Jeff's mother, Melody, leaves him at the novel's beginning, and he spends much of the novel trying to come to grips with his complicated feelings about her. Jeff has the height of his father, but has Melody's beautiful gray eyes. After Melody hurts him very badly by telling him she doesn't love him, Jeff draws inside himself and seeks absolute solitude. It is only when Jeff's father reaches out to him, and Jeff leans on another person, that Jeff begins to heal. Jeff loves playing the guitar and riding his boat in the bay, catching crabs. After Jeff comes out of his self-imposed solitude, he forges a relationship with his father and Brother Thomas, begins to make good grades at school, and also begins to make friends. Jeff learns he has a knack for understanding other peoples' feelings and needs, and is good at complicated interactions, like those between members of the Tillerman family. In time he comes to see that he has both his father and his mother in him, and that is not necessarily a bad thing.

The Professor

The Professor is Jeff's father. According to Jeff he looks like a professor, tall and slim with straight white hair and eyebrows, and big, square glasses. The Professor is the head of the history department at Baltimore University. When the Professor is first introduced, the reader believes him to be an emotionally crippled and closed-off man who is incapable of comforting or relating to his son, Jeff. However, in the course of the novel, it becomes evident that the Professor is actually a warm and loving person, who has been badly hurt by Melody, and is now afraid to feel anything or express any feelings. As he recovers from the damage done by Melody, the Professor forges a close relationship with his son and a fellow professor, Brother Thomas, and writes a best-selling book. Melody

Melody is Jeff's mother and the Professor's wife. She is only twenty when she has Jeff, and she leaves him and the Professor when Jeff is seven and she is twenty-seven, and returns to Charleston. She is beautiful and petite, with long dark hair, and the same deep gray eyes as Jeff. She is extremely charming (the Professor and Jeff both fall under her spell for certain amounts of time) but she is also selfish, manipulative and dishonest. Melody has difficulty committing to anything. Although she believes in many worthy "causes," like women's rights and environmentalism, she quickly loses interest in the people and things she initially feels so much passion for, including the Professor, her son, and her guitar.



Brother Thomas

Brother Thomas is the Professor's friend and a Catholic brother who teaches Theology at the university. He begins coming to dinner at the Greene house when Jeff is in sixth grade. Although Brother Thomas has no children, he has a natural way with Jeff that the Professor does not immediately have. It is Brother Thomas who first realizes the care Jeff needs when he falls ill with bronchial pneumonia, and it is Brother Thomas who facilitates the first real conversations between Jeff and the Professor. Brother Thomas is the first person Jeff ever hears speak well of the Professor and his academic career.

In time, Brother Thomas becomes an important part of the Greene family. Brother Thomas is teaching in England during the period where Jeff suffers his breakdown, and Jeff later helps Brother Thomas when he suffers a spiritual crisis.

Jackson, Tony, Andrew, Ian

College students the Professor pays to move in and mind Jeff and clean the house when Jeff is in second, third, fourth and fifth grade.

Dr. Baker

Dr. Baker is Jeff's pediatrician. He comes to the Professor's house to take care of Jeff when he has bronchial pneumonia, and counsels Jeff after he suffers his breakdown.

Gambo

Gambo is Melody's mother's mother and Jeff's great-grandmother. Her married name is Eulalie Boudrault Melville. Gambo raised Melody from childhood. On Jeff's first visit to Charleston, she is extremely interested in him, and wants to tell him all their family's old stories. She suffers a stroke between Jeff's first and second visits and is less interested and kind to Jeff on his second visit. However, she still leaves Jeff the bulk of her estate when she dies because he is the sole male descendant in the family.

Aunt Booty and Aunt Dodo

Jeff's senior cousins who live with Gambo in Charleston. Jeff often compares the aunts to birds, because they twitter away to each other, and shower Jeff with fluttering, silly attention. When Gambo dies, she provides for the aunts in her will, and they are sent to a nursing home.



Miss Opal

Miss Opal is Gambo's African-American housekeeper, and later her nurse. She likes Jeff because he is well-mannered and has a good appetite. She has a grandson Willum who lives with her in a public housing apartment. Willum is always getting into trouble and ultimately is arrested for drug possession. After this, Miss Opal moves into Gambo's house to take care of her. Gambo does not provide for Miss Opal in her will, but Jeff makes sure she is taken care of.

Max

Max is Melody's boyfriend in South Carolina. Melody is crazy about him, but he is extremely rude and abusive to both Jeff and Melody the first and only time that Jeff meets him. Max is a hippie photographer, and has long hair. Gambo doesn't approve of him so he and Melody carry on behind her back.

Phil Milson

Phil is a student in Jeff's English class who becomes his friend. He is funny and smart and is the first of the kids at school to realize Jeff's value. They become friends in eighth grade, and he is Jeff's first guest at the house besides Brother Thomas. They continue to be friends throughout high school.

Andy Burrows

Andy is a student in Jeff's science class who Jeff finds interesting because of his obvious intellect. He becomes friends with Jeff and Phil in ninth grade.

Mr. Chapelle

Mr. Chapelle is the English teacher at Crisfield High School. Jeff earns the respect of his classmates when he stands up to Chapelle over an essay Jeff has written. Dicey has the same experience the next year.

Wilhemina Smiths

Wilhemina is an attractive, lively black girl, two years Jeff's junior. She is well known and liked in the school, and is considered a "fireball" by many. She catches Jeff's attention when he is in the tenth grade. Wilhemina is also friends with Dicey.



Abigail Tillerman

Mrs. Tillerman is Jeff's gray-haired, steely-eyed neighbor. She is a widow, who is considered a little crazed with solitude by the townsfolk. Jeff first meets her outside the supermarket, where she scares him by glaring and muttering under her breath. However, in time he realizes that her gruff exterior hides a strong and interesting personality. Abigail is Dicey and her siblings' grandmother, and they call her "Gram."

Dicey Tillerman

Dicey is Abigail Tillerman's granddaughter. Dicey and her siblings go to live with Abigail when their mother is put into a mental hospital. She and Jeff become friends after they find they share a love of music and boats. Dicey is a tall girl with fiery hazel eyes, and a purposeful, jutting chin. She often speaks and acts abruptly, and wears boys clothes. Jeff comes to love her independence and spirit and even forgives the fact that she lied on her cross country trek to Abigail's, because he realizes that her lies are different than Melody's.

Sammy Tillerman

Sammy is Dicey's youngest brother, and he shares her defiant spirit. He is the sibling most prone to getting into fights and trouble. Sammy often helps Jeff with the crabbing business.

Maybeth Tillerman

Maybeth is Dicey's younger sister. She is a beautiful girl with a beautiful singing voice. She is very shy, and slow in her reactions, and is also drawn in by Jeff's music.

James Tillerman

James is Dicey's other brother. He is about eleven when Jeff meets him, and is extremely intelligent with an intense interest in science, especially entomology.

Beauregard Jacobs

Jacobs is Gambo's lawyer, and an old-fashioned Southern gentleman. He visits Jeff and the Professor after Gambo dies to explain Gambo's will, and helps Jeff figure out how to handle his inheritance.



Objects/Places

The University School

This is Jeff's school from first grade. He leaves when he is in eight grade, after failing the year. The school is free for the children of university professors, although some children's parents pay for them to attend. Jeff never really makes friends at the University School,

Charleston, South Carolina

Charleston is Melody's hometown and it seems a place of wonder, mystery and ancientness to Jeff on his first visit.

Gambo's House

Gambo's large, airy and rambling Charleston home stands in sharp contrast to Jeff and the Professor's dark, small Baltimore apartment.

The Martin

The beautiful old guitar that the Professor gives Jeff for Christmas when Jeff is twelve. It is the best gift that Jeff has ever received, and in spite of an initial miscommunication between the Professor and the Jeff about the Martin, it creates a real bond between the father and son.

Gambo's Diamond Engagement Ring

This is the enormous diamond ring that Melody covets her whole life, but Gambo leaves to Jeff in her will. It is worth twenty thousand dollars. Ultimately Melody comes to Jeff and offers to swap the ring for the less valuable jade ring that Gambo prized and left to Melody.

Gambo's Jade Heirloom Ring

This ring is a large jade stone set with diamonds all around. It has been in Gambo's family for many generations. She tells Jeff that it is her only possession that matters to her, and she leaves it to Melody in her will. Jeff ultimately comes to own and value it.



The Island in Charleston

Jeff discovers the island on his boat during the long summer in Charleston when Melody disappears. He loves exploring his beaches and ponds, and discovers the blue herons, porpoises, crabs and even an alligator. The night before he returns to Baltimore, he spends a night on the island, and has an epiphany. When he returns to Baltimore, the island becomes a place he goes to in his mind when life around him seems too difficult or sad.

The Blue Heron

Jeff has a relationship with blue herons throughout the book - he first sees them when he first leaves Charleston, then again on the island, and finally in the marshes near his cabin. They are a primary symbol of isolation and solitude in the novel.

The Rollercoaster

The Octopus is the rollercoaster that Jeff skips school to ride during his dark days at the University School. On the rollercoaster, he feels an excitement that helps him escape the torment caused by Melody's rejection. Jeff is on the rollercoaster when the Professor and Brother Thomas learn that he has been skipping school, and it is where they first confront him.

Crisfield

The closest town to the Greenes' cabin along the marshes. It is a small town, eight miles away from their home. It is also the name of Jeff's high school.

Earth's Honored Guests

The name of the Professor's first published book. The book is dedicated to his son, Jeff, and proves to be a surprise success and source of revenue for the Greene family.



Setting

The setting of *A Solitary Blue* is integral to the story and its themes. The story begins in Baltimore, then moves between Charleston, South Carolina, and Baltimore, and finally ends in Crisfield, Maryland.

Baltimore and Charleston come to represent two extremes of Jeff Greene's confused and insecure life. In Charleston with his mother, where it is warm and sunny, Jeff feels loved. In Baltimore with his father, where the weather is colder, he feels self-sufficient and reticent. The house in Charleston is spacious and bright; in Baltimore, the house has small rooms and narrow halls. In Charleston, he is Jeffie (his mother's name for him) or Jefferson (his great-grandmother's name for him); in Baltimore he is Jeff Greene. On his first visit to Charleston, when he sees his mother for the first time in almost five years, Jeff feels "like a man must who has been kept in a dungeon for years and years, and he steps out into the sunlight for the first time." Just as he physically is shuttled back and forth between Baltimore and Charleston, Jeff is emotionally torn between his father and his mother; because Jeff has no identity of his own, he becomes what he thinks his mother wants him to be when he is in Charleston and what he thinks his father wants him to be when he is in Baltimore.

His mother seems the warmer, more loving character. She has told Jeff that his father is a poor parent, a cold, unloving, boring man; little in his shy, introspective father's behavior indicates otherwise to Jeff. But when, in the warm and happy atmosphere of Charleston, Melody betrays Jeff's love and trust yet again, he must find a retreat from the beautiful setting that is now tainted for him with the stains of sorrow and disillusionment. He finds an uninhabited island to which he can sail each day and be safe from hurtful human contact. The island represents Jeff's withdrawal from life, but what it symbolizes is not altogether bad. In solitude Jeff begins to recover from the shock of learning what his mother is really like; on the island, he can begin to muster his internal resources to fortify himself for a return to what he thinks is the unloving atmosphere of Baltimore. But in Baltimore he discovers that his father really does love him. The Professor does not say much about love, but he is reliable and trustworthy; he is always there.

Recognizing Jeff's unhappiness and his bad memories associated with the Baltimore house, the Professor discusses with Jeff the possibility of moving. They sell their house and move to a smaller one in Crisfield, on Maryland's Eastern Shore. The Professor, who is a man of few words but astute observation, knows that this house and the surrounding area remind Jeff of "his" island. This is the place where Jeff will be happy. Crisfield is home to Jeff. Charleston and Baltimore were places where he lived or stayed; they were never home.



Social Sensitivity

Melody's early abandonment of her child and her later betrayal of his trust create perhaps the most sensitive issue in *A Solitary Blue*. This negative picture of a mother reveals a harsh emotional truth: that some people, even parents, are never able to love maturely. The selfishness and narcissism of Melody's love is disturbing. But it is crucial to Jeff's development that he see Melody for what she is. The relationship between Jeff and his mother never improves, but he finally reaches a stage where he expresses anger toward her.

Jeff travels far to trust himself enough to afford the luxury of deciding his own fate.

Voigt presents this situation with great sensitivity. Jeff rejects his mother because she repeatedly betrays his trust, and he does so only after a good deal of introspection. Neither Melody's final betrayal nor Jeff's rejection is malicious.

After the final betrayal, Jeff finds an isolated island, and there, "he felt at ease with himself and as if he had come home to a place where he could be himself, without hiding anything, without pretending even to himself." But Voigt makes it clear that while such an escape may be part of the healing process for Jeff, it is not a solution to his problems.

Jeff is still alone; he has found part of himself, but he has not integrated that part into a whole person who can function in society. When he returns to Baltimore, he keeps the image of the island with him at all times but finds that he is not capable of concentrating on anything else. The guitar that has been such an important part of his life lies unnoticed in his room, and his schoolwork suffers to the point that he gets suspended.

It is when Jeff finally manages to leave his "island" to share his feelings with the Professor that he realizes his father loves him. Once Jeff lets any feeling inside of his emotional fortress, he is able to feel everything. He still has bad memories, but he now can live a fuller life and treasure some good memories as well.

Literary Qualities

Voigt has been described in the New York Book Review as "a wonderful writer with powerfully moving things to say."

The wide variety of images and symbols she uses can turn a realistic, everyday happening into something new and wonderful. Voigt knows that young people believe the possible to be real and writes according to her readers' expectations. Without being unrealistic, she presents the possibility of happiness, healing, and love.

The most obvious symbol in *A Solitary Blue* is the blue heron. Jeff appreciates the heron's beauty and its love of solitude. The blue heron does not want to be bothered and is frightened by sudden movement. The heron parallels Jeff, who, after being devastated by his mother's abandonment, becomes wary, untrusting, and withdrawn. The only time that people do not frighten the heron into flying away is when Jeff and Dicey are together in the sailboat.

Voigt uses simple but evocative diction, and her descriptions of the blue heron and Jeff's tranquil island are almost poetic. Her dialogue is strikingly appropriate to the characters. The Professor speaks almost in monosyllables until he and Jeff come to understand and trust one another; then he shows himself to be very articulate but never chatty. Melody, on the other hand, fairly gushes with words: light and funny dialogue when she is happy, appealing emotional language when she wants something, and bitter, harsh remarks when she is angry. This skillful use of language helps make the characters, even minor ones such as Miss Opal, fully rounded. This lends depth to the book, for even people with very small roles in Jeff's story are perceived as people, not cardboard cutouts.



Themes

Solitude and Isolation

Solitude is one of the most pervasive themes of the novel, even showing up in the title. Jeff's response to the way his mother hurts him is to draw inside himself to hide, and protect his fragile heart. After his night spent alone on the island in South Carolina, Jeff feels like he has locked up all his memories of that day and night in a "room inside himself" and learned how to step inside that room and lock the door behind him.

The blue heron becomes a symbol of isolation throughout the novel. Jeff first sees the heron on his first trip home to Baltimore from a visit to Gambo and Melody, and he feels that the heron occupies "its own insignificant corner of the landscape in a timeless, long-legged solitude." (p. 79). This isolation becomes an ideal to which Jeff aspires after he is hurt by Melody. Jeff continues to see herons on the creek outside his cabin in western Maryland. He enjoys how the herons want to be left alone, and seem content in their solitude. As Jeff heals, he finds he enjoys people with solitary natures - the Professor, Dicey, and Abigail Tilleran. The Professor is prone to shutting himself off just as Jeff is, and together they help each other open up inside. Although the Greenes' choice of the cabin outside of Crisfield suggests an enforced isolation, the effect on the father and son is actually just the opposite. Jeff and Dicey are reminded of each other when they see herons. It is through this coincidence, as well as Jeff's realization at the novel's end that herons nest in colonies together, that Voigt suggests it is possible to be a solitary spirit and still have meaningful connections and relationships with the people around you.

Identity

Jeff spends the first half of the novel with his true identity submerged as he tries to be variously what he thinks his father, mother, teachers and others want him to be. He is quiet, regular and unemotional for his father, passionate and informed about social issues for his mother, interested in history and family names for Gambo, and polite and well-mannered for Miss Opal. These roles are highlighted by the names people use in the novel. Melody calls Jeff, "Jeffie," and his aunts and Gambo call him "Jefferson." The Professor just calls him Jeff. However, none of these characters is really Jeff Greene. Later, Jeff feels that he has been a ghost in his own life, has striven too hard to be "nobody," and really does not know himself at all. He resolves towards the novel's end to make an effort to know himself, even though it scares him, he suspects that he will like himself when he does.

The novel plays with other ways that identity is formed. There is the sense, in Gambo's stories, that part of one's identity is one's family history. Gambo tells Jeff that she wants to "pour" herself and her experiences into Jeff so that he can "take it on into your life." Jeff temporarily feels he has an identity as a "Boudrault of Charleston." He rejects this



identity after Melody and Gambo hurt him, but by the end of the novel, he realizes that "whatever it might mean to be a Boudrault of Charleston" is valuable to him. This is the reason he keeps Gambo's jade ring. Towards the end of the novel, Jeff tells also Dicey that he wants her to meet the Professor, because he feels that you can't really know someone unless you know his family. Jeff has recognized that the Professor is part of his identity, just as the Tillermans are a part of Dicey, and he embraces that fact.

Love

Voigt explores various concepts of love in *A Solitary Blue*, and in the contrast between Jeff's relationship with his mother and his relationship with his father, makes a powerful statement about true love and false, selfish love. When Jeff goes to stay with Melody in South Carolina, he blossoms around her warmth, and mistakes her passionate ways and her proclamations of love for the real thing. At first he is unable to express it in return; the first time he tries, he can only tell Melody that she has beautiful hands. She recognizes it though, and tells him she loves him too. However, the reader gradually realizes that Melody's love is selfish and insincere. Even as this becomes clearer, Jeff's love for her only intensifies. When he returns to Baltimore, and Melody fails to reply to any of his letters, he imagines himself as a knight, always faithful in his love, no matter what Melody might do. He finds her a perfect Christmas gift, because he wants to be "perfect in his love" (p. 96). On his second visit to South Carolina, when Melody's self-centeredness is becoming apparent even to Jeff, he tries to be content in doing what Melody wants him to do because "when he was doing what she wanted, they were connected - in a way - they were touching; even if they weren't really" (p. 127). Melody seems to feed off of Jeff's love - she is delighted to realize he still loves her in spite of her neglectful treatment, and this knowledge ultimately allows her to hurt Jeff even more deeply. The connection that Jeff treasures with Melody is not really love, and Jeff falls apart when she shows him that through her cruelty.

However, even as it becomes clear that Melody does not love Jeff as she should, it also becomes apparent that the Professor does love him. Although the Professor first appears cold and unfeeling, it slowly become evident how much he once loved Melody, and also how much he loves Jeff. On the same Christmas day that the Professor gives Jeff the perfect gift of the guitar, he also tells Jeff how when he had first loved Melody, it had felt like he had "swallowed sunlight," and made him feel more helpless and happy that he had ever felt before (p. 103). The author suggests throughout the novel that in order to love someone, one must make himself or herself vulnerable to both hurt and happiness. Jeff later realizes that in spite of all the hurt that Melody caused the Professor, the Professor still loves her. Although Jeff sees this as a weakness, it is also part of the reason the Professor is still able to love Jeff though his heart was broken by Melody. The Professor tells Jeff that he now believes that love is just the beginning, and "what matters is what we do about it," and "what love does with us" (p. 303). This may be one of the most important points in the novel. Jeff loves Melody, but when that love proves unrequited, Jeff reaches out to love others around him, the Professor, and Brother Thomas and the Tillermans, instead of dwelling in the bitterness of his broken heart.



Themes/Characters

Jeff Greene is the protagonist in *A Solitary Blue*; the reader sees everything that happens through his eyes. The novel begins when seven-year-old Jeff comes home from school and finds a note from his mother that says she has gone away and will not be coming back.

In the letter she intimates that Jeff should try to do things for himself and not bother his father. This insures that Jeff will be afraid to grieve publicly and ask for help.

Jeff is a frightened, sensitive, and insecure boy; he feels as if his father might leave at any moment if he becomes a hindrance. Later, as Jeff matures, he takes chances: he tells his mother he does not like her lying, and becomes more open with his father. His sensitivity will always leave him vulnerable to pain, but his love of nature and music will help him through such suffering. By the end of the book, his hard-won emotional maturity shows that he is a strong and brave young man willing to take the risk of loving and trusting again.

The Professor, Jeff's father, has been terribly hurt by his marriage to Melody; although he is extremely intelligent, he has a difficult time communicating with others. He is withdrawn and gives the appearance of not caring. Jeff bases his image of the Professor in part upon what Melody has told him and in part upon the Professor's own withdrawal from life.

The Professor also grows as a person when he and Jeff are able to communicate with each other. Like Jeff, the Professor has been living behind a wall for protection.

Melody, Jeff's mother, may be the most simple character in the book: she is a type, like Mrs. Jellaby in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*. She is full of concern for strangers, but oddly indifferent to the suffering of her own husband and son. She has gone off to try to save the world. She gives the appearance of being a loving person; unlike the Professor she is very demonstrative.

When Jeff goes to visit her, she hugs and kisses him frequently. Starved for affection, Jeff assumes this is love. Even though she lies and manipulates people, Melody is not all bad. She wants custody of Jeff only after she finds out that Gambo, her grandmother, has made him the heir of her will. But Melody does not want the money for herself; she wants to put it into her crusades. When Jeff gives Melody Gambo's diamond engagement ring, she plans to sell it so that she can go on a charitable mission to Colombia, South America. In her own way Melody tries to make the world a better place. But the trail of pain and shattered illusions she leaves behind in her personal life is an ironic contradiction of her good intentions.

Among the minor characters are Brother Thomas, Gambo, and Miss Opal. Brother Thomas is a friend of the Professor's who also teaches at the university. He acts as a



bridge between the Professor and Jeff by forcing them to talk and interact with one another.

Gambo is Melody's grandmother and Jeff's great-grandmother. She is wealthy and very pleased to meet Jeff because he is the last of the Boudrault family line of men. Gambo fills Jeff with the history of his family. Even though Gambo and Jeff are not very close, she makes him the heir of her estate, an act inspired by pride rather than love. Her cold character helps the reader to understand Melody's personality. Miss Opal, Gambo's maid, gives up her house and moves in to take care of Gambo when she has a stroke. Jeff is amazed to learn that she is older than Gambo. After Gambo's death, Jeff asks the lawyer to give the house to Miss Opal so that she will have a place to live for the rest of her life.

The Tillerman family in Crisfield helps Jeff heal his emotional wounds and start to trust people again. The family includes Gram, the eccentric old woman who has taken her four grandchildren in; Dicey, the bright, tough, honest oldest girl; James, the oldest boy, a mixture of intelligence and raw curiosity; Maybeth, who is fragile and warm; and Sammy, a born fighter. Although the Tillermans are present only in the last third of the book, they are deftly drawn, and their role is important. Jeff sees in them what a family can be: a collection of individuals bound together by a tough and honest love.

The search for true love and trust is the most memorable theme in *A Solitary Blue*. It is most clearly shown in Jeff's experiences and development. Twice betrayed by his mother, Jeff becomes obsessed with protecting his heart. His father's less demonstrative but more reliable love finally reassures him, and he becomes a caring young man who is at last secure. Jeff has come full circle because he has learned to love and trust himself.



Style

Point of View

The novel is told in the third person, but the point of view is Jeff's. The reader has access to Jeff's emotions and opinions, which is critical for a character unable to express these feelings for the first half of the novel. The reader sees characters and their actions through Jeff's eyes, which sometimes causes misleading result, as with the Professor and Melody in the early chapters. As Jeff matures and evolves, the reader watches his perception of his surroundings change, as well as his self-perception. For this reason, the point of view is very effective.

Setting

The novel is set mainly in Maryland, although Jeff's two meaningful visits to Melody and Gambo are set in South Carolina. The dichotomy between the North and the South is relevant, especially in the first half of the book. For Jeff, South Carolina is a land of beauty, light, openness, and ancientness, while Baltimore is dark and grimy and restrictive. Jeff begins to open up inside when he and the Professor move to the cabin by the creek in western Maryland. The wide, open spaces and physical beauty of the surroundings parallel Jeff's growth as a character. Although Jeff does not ever physically return to South Carolina, the setting of the creek enables him to regain some of the wonder and trust that he felt in the South.

Language and Meaning

Voigt uses simple and easy-to-understand language and dialogue for much of her novel, but also employs powerful images and symbolism which make the work much richer. The symbol of the blue heron, from which the novel gets its name, appears frequently throughout the novel to underline Jeff's sense of solitude and isolation, and the symbol serves as a marker to the reader of how Jeff is dealing with these feelings. To emphasize Jeff's vulnerability, Voigt uses images of breaking and cracking whenever Jeff feels attacked, and this allows the reader to connect the incidents and understand them as part of a big picture. Voigt has an interest in the physical appearance of places and things and uses powerful descriptive prose liberally throughout the novel.

Structure

The novel is divided into twelve chapters and two parts of equal length. Part One deals with all of Jeff's experiences leading up, and including, Melody's betrayal and Jeff's sense that he has been broken inside. Part Two begins when Jeff returns from his second trip to South Carolina, tucked away inside himself in his safe tower room without windows. The structure serves to underlie the change that occurs in Jeff when Melody



hurts him and also creates a powerful contrast between the person Jeff is before he visits Melody, the person he is when he believes that she loves him, the person he is when he is so badly wounded by her, and the person he becomes when he heals. Voigt also uses chapters of greatly varying length to good effect. Many of the chapters employ a long, flowing narrative style, but are then followed by choppy, emotionally charged short chapters.

Quotes

"Jeff always watched for the first glimpse of the Professor, because he always knew he might not return. 'He doesn't know much about being a father,' Melody had told him, 'so you can't expect very much from him, Jeffie.'" Chapter 1, p. 20.

"She went on and on, until Jeff had a sense of family spreading out around them endlessly, and only an hour later, when she was lost in reminiscences, did he understand that the names she mentioned, the people she spoke of, were most of them long ago dead. The family spread not out and around, but back, back into time. At last, she looked at him and said, 'I feel - as if I can pour myself in to you, everything I've learned, everything I know, and you will take it on into your life.'" Chapter 2, p. 72.

"It was not simply going from a warm to a colder climate, or from his mother to his father. It was also going from one self to another. In Charleston he was Jeffie, Jefferson, Melody's son, the last in a long line of Boudrault men. In Baltimore, he was Jeff Greene, self-sufficient and reticent, no trouble at all, occupying his corner of the world." Chapter 2, p. 78.

"One of the small ponds came into view. A solitary blue heron stood at its edge, half hidden in the pale marsh grass....The heron occupied its own insignificant corner of the landscape in a timeless, long-legged solitude." Chapter 2, p. 79.

"So Jeff did that because he wanted to do what Melody wanted him to do. When he was doing what she wanted, they were connected - in a way - they were touching, even if they weren't really." Chapter 5, 127.

"He felt - rolling over onto his back and wrapping his arms across the pain in his chest and stomach, pain that wasn't even real - as if he had been broken into thousands of little pieces. Broken and then dropped into some dark place where he was always going to stay....He never expected how easy he was to break. He couldn't think of anything he wanted to do. Ever." Chapter 5, 136-7.

"He was always a little afraid in the boat. That was, in fact, why he liked it. That fear came from outside....Because the fear that came from the outside distracted him from the fear that was living inside him. The fear inside him threatened at any moment to take him over and sweep him away, and the only way he could manage it at all was by avoiding it. In the boat, alone on the water." Chapter 5, p. 141-2.

"But Jeff had made himself a place, inside himself, a kind of tower room, round, without any windows. In that room, he had locked his memory of the beach on the island, all the memories from the day hours and from the night hours. He had discovered how to step inside that room and slide the curved door closed and bolt it across....If the room were not there, he would fall apart, disintegrate like music broken into individual melody lines, the lines turning into notes, the notes exploding into unconnected sounds, the sounds dissipating into space itself." Chapter 7, p. 158-9.



"Most of the time, he thought, he practiced not being anybody. If you weren't anybody, then nobody could - what? Hurt you or leave you behind? Make you unhappy? But then they couldn't make you happy either, could they? If you played it safe, then you kept safe. Jeff figured he was pretty good at keeping safe - he didn't even look into mirrors because he didn't want to see Melody's eyes. But one result of that was Jeff didn't know anything about himself. And he thought...that he might want to know more." Chapter 8, p. 201.

"Her feelings washed over him, like waves, and he didn't know how he'd let this happen. He had been in this scene before, with Melody, with the anger and dislike attacking him and breaking him down. He could feel himself cracking, inside. He didn't know why he kept forgetting what he was really like." Chapter 9, p. 236.

"What he liked about the Tillermans he decided...was the person he became around them. He liked the complicated interactions, trying to keep aware of what each person was feeling. He liked being able to move comfortably among them." Chapter 10, p. 242-3.

"It wasn't that he regretted it, it was just that he couldn't forget. The knowledge was always with him, wherever he happened to be.... Jeff felt that there was an invisible wall around him that separated him from everyone else. Because he had done to Melody just what she had done to him: she had thought he loved her and he had told her he didn't. It was the truth, but it didn't make it any better or make him any better." Chapter 10, p. 282.

"It strikes me that love is just the beginning. If you think about it, Jeff. I think we can't help loving, but what matters is what we do about it. What we do with love. Do for it. What love does with us." Chapter 10, p. 303.

Topics for Discussion

1. Are Jeff's personality characteristics more like his father's or his mother's?

Who do you think he wants to be more like at the beginning of the book? And at the end?

2. Why does Jeff call his father "the Professor"?

3. Why does Jeff continue to write Melody letters, even though she does not answer any of them? If Melody had written back, what do you think she might have written about—her own life or Jeff's?

4. Why does Gambo decide to make Jeff the heir to her estate?

5. What are the differences between the summer when Jeff is twelve and the summer when he is thirteen?



Essay Topics

Discuss your initial impressions of Melody and the Professor and how these impressions change over the course of the novel. Why might the author have allowed us to misunderstand these characters in the beginning?

What do you think of the way Jeff dealt with his mother in the final chapter of the book? Was trading the rings a good decision? How does that decision relate to Jeff's growth as a person?

How is Jeff's friendship with Phil and Andy different from his friendship with the Tillermans? What does this say about the importance and meaning of friendship in the novel?

Discuss the similarities and differences between the creek near Jeff's cabin in Maryland and the island in South Carolina. What do the two places mean to Jeff?

Melody and Dicey both tell lies in the novel. How are their lies different? Can lying ever be justified?

The Professor tells Jeff that he believes that love is a beginning, and what matters is what you do with it and what it does to you. Who does Jeff love by the novel's end, and what does he do about it? What effect does this have on him?

Voigt uses images of brokenness to explain Jeff's emotional state throughout the novel. Discuss these images, and consider what it means to be a "whole person." Is Jeff a whole person by the end of the novel?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Why do the Professor and Jeff decide to move to the small house on the Chesapeake Bay? How does this quiet setting affect Jeff?
2. Brother Thomas and the Professor are good friends even though they appear to be very different. What is the basis for their friendship? How are they alike?
3. What is the relationship between the book's title and its themes?
4. Analyze the attraction that the Tillerman family holds for Jeff.
5. Read another of Voigt's books that includes Jeff as a character. How does the way other characters see Jeff change your understanding of his personality?

Further Study

Donahue, Rosanne. "New Realism in Children's Fiction." In *Masterworks of Children's Literature*, edited by William T. Moynihan and Mary E. Shaner. Vol.

8. New York: Chelsea House, 1985. A critical survey of new realistic books and their impact on the field of children's literature. *A Solitary Blue* is discussed in the context of novels that depict children surviving on their own.

Irving, Elsie K. "Cynthia Voigt." *Horn Book* (August 1983): 410-412. Voigt's mother gives an insider's view of the author.

Jameson, Gloria. "The Triumph of the Spirit in Cynthia Voigt's *Homecoming*, *Dacey's Song*, and *A Solitary Blue*." In *Triumphs of the Spirit in Children's Literature*, edited by Francelia Butler and Richard Rotert. Hamden, CT: Shoe String Press, 1986. Focuses on how Dacey's and Jeff's spirits triumph as they struggle to survive and develop.

Lukens, Rebecca J., ed. *A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature*. 3d. ed.

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Discusses the theme of love in *A Solitary Blue* and the way Jeff's internal conflict contributes to the book's plot.

Reed, Arthea J. S. "Transition from Childhood into Adulthood." In *Reaching Adolescents: The Young Adult Book and the School*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985. This chapter discusses Jeff's two trips to visit his mother as symbolic of his emergence into adulthood.

Voigt, Cynthia. "Newbery Medal Acceptance." *Horn Book* (August 1983): 401-409. Voigt discusses her philosophy about quality literature for young people.

Voigt, Jessica. "Cynthia Voigt." *Horn Book* (August 1983): 413. A reflection on Voigt written by her daughter.

Related Titles

A Solitary Blue is the third of six books that deal with the Tillerman family.

Each book depicts many of the same characters but through different eyes.

Jeff Greene figures in four of the six books. He first appears as a minor character in Dicey's Song, as an insecure, frightened, but likable teen-ager who is drawn to the Tillermans. A Solitary Blue is Jeff's story. Jeff surfaces next in Come a Stranger, where he is seen through Mina Smith's eyes. Mina describes Jeff as one of those rare people who have the capacity to love deeply, and she says that he has never fallen in love with anyone but Dicey Tillerman. In Sons from Afar, Mrs. Tillerman reflects briefly on Jeff's personality, and readers learn that he has gone away to college. The other two books in the Tillerman series are Homecoming, the first book about Dicey and her brothers and sister, and The Runner, the story of Bullet Tillerman, Dicey's uncle.



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