

Sag Harbor Study Guide

Sag Harbor by Colson Whitehead

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Sag Harbor Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1-2.....	5
Chapters 3-4.....	7
Chapters 5-6.....	9
Chapters 7-8.....	11
Characters.....	13
Objects/Places.....	16
Themes.....	18
Style.....	20
Quotes.....	22
Topics for Discussion.....	23



Plot Summary

Sag Harbor by Colson Whitehead is a coming of age story set in 1985. In this novel, the narrator, Benji, is fifteen and spending the summer in his family's beach house on Sag Harbor. Benji is at an age at which he is still struggling to understand the person he is and the man he will one day be. This novel is a nostalgic story of one young man's search for an identity that is filled with colorful language and humor that will leave the reader laughing as they examine their own struggles with identity.

Benji and his brother are in the car before dawn, driving down to their summer house at Sag Harbor. Life in New York is so much different from life at Sag Harbor that the boys are looking forward to the freedom and excitement that comes with being on the beach with kids with whom they have grown up since infancy.

Benji and his brother, Reggie, spend the first afternoon walking around, checking out who is out and who is not coming this summer. They run into their friend, NP, and spend the afternoon running around with him. A short time later, after Benji's parents have gone back to the city for work, they hang out at their house and discuss how they plan to spend the summer. A boy on the fringes of their group, Randy, has gotten a car. This makes Randy the hero of the summer, driving the boys to places they could not reach on foot or on their bikes. This afternoon they spend the day at a more distant beach, searching for the fabled girls who sunbathe with their tops off.

Benji decides to get a job at the local ice cream parlor in order to help pay for food while their parents are gone. The parlor is owned by a Dominican man who owns several other parlors in the area. The boys spend a great deal of time debating whether or not the owner is black because of his penchant for hiring young black boys and his way of bossing them around, including a pat on Benji's head he gave once in congratulations of a job well done. Benji gets back at the owner by leaving the freezers open during a blackout only to learn the following year the owner is indeed black, making his attitude acceptable.

A BB gun fascination washes over Benji's friends. Several of the boys buy the guns, shooting at targets in their backyards and the woods around the beaches. One afternoon, bored, the boys decide to have a BB gun war. It is all planned out and rules are made, including the thought that they should not shoot at the face and the rifle belonging to Randy should not be pumped more than twice. However, Randy fails to heed these rules and shoots Benji beside the eye, causing the BB to be lodged in his face for the rest of his life.

Later in the summer, a big concert is planned at a local night club. The boys are all too young to go to the club, but they all scheme in their own ways to go. Benji buys a ticket and plans to dress like his white school mates back in New York in order to convince the bouncers that he is old enough to go inside. The schemes of his friends are busted when they try to get inside with a couple of cousins as their dates, but Benji later gets in with no trouble with his friend NP.



A young girl from Benji's past comes back to Sag Harbor years after her father and mother's problems cause them to sell their family home on the beach. The girl is dating Benji's friend, Nick, but constantly makes remarks that remind Benji of their shared childhood memories. One night Benji takes the girl to his family's old house, one that once belonged to his grandparents just as the one where they currently stay did. However, this house was given to an aunt of Benji's, forcing his family out. Benji continues to have good memories of this house, however; therefore it seems logical that his first kiss would take place there as well.

Finally, the end of summer arrives. Benji attends the Labor Day party and looks around, wondering about the generation behind him and the one in front. Benji wonders who he will be in the future, assured that Sag Harbor will remain a part of his life.



Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary

Sag Harbor is a novel of coming of age by celebrated author Colson Whitehead.

Chapter 1. Notions of Roller-Rink Infinity. Benji and his brother, Reggie, are driving out to Sag Harbor before dawn in the early days of summer, wondering who will be there when they arrive, who will come later, who will not make it this year. Life out in Sag Harbor is very different from life in the city. In the city, Benji and Reggie attend private school where the student population is predominately white, making them oddities among their classmates. When they were younger, Reggie and Benji were like twins, always together and sharing all their experiences. However, when Benji began high school, that began to change. Benji became a person all his own and somehow managed to become a social pariah among his classmates. It was not always that way. Benji had had good friends in junior high, always invited to bar mitzvahs and birthday parties. Benji remembers one particular bat mitzvah celebration at a roller rink when he skated a few songs with a girl, holding her hand around the rink before they both returned to the separate group of friends and never really saw one another again.

Benji keeps his eyes closed as they drive toward Sag Harbor. He thinks about the Hempstead House where they once stayed, but were forced to leave three years previously when his mother's sister inherited from their parents instead. Now they live in the smaller house that sits directly on the beach. When they arrive, the boys go up to their room and sleep a few more hours. Upon waking, Benji finds his old bike and prepares for the yearly tradition of riding around the neighborhoods to see who else has come out. They move through the familiar neighborhoods and come across NP, one of their many friends whose family has been coming to Sag Harbor for generations as well. NP suggests they go into town, but Benji is the only one with a bike so he ends up riding by himself while Reggie and NP take a shortcut over the beach.

Chapter 2. The Heyday of Dag. Benji and Reggie's house has become a hangout because they are the only ones who are completely unsupervised during the week since their parents go into the city to work. Reggie is working at the Burger King in East Hampton, therefore Benji is alone with his group of friends, who include NP, Bobby, and Marcus. They watch a white couple walking on their beach, feeling put out that this couple would leave their part of the harbor and invade theirs. Later Randy arrives in his jalopy of a car to take everyone to a beach too far away for them to walk. However, there is only room in the car for five, so Marcus has to ride his bike.

At the beach, the boys talk about the rumors that there are girls who lay out on these beaches with their tops off. Two of the boys go for a walk down the beach to see if they can catch sight of these girls, while the others play in the water. Benji wanders off on his own and loses his footing, panicking at the idea that he might drown. Clive comes to his rescue. Later, as they prepare to leave, Benji asks NP to get him an application to Jonni



Waffle, a new ice cream parlor in town. Benji has decided he needs a job to help pay for food when the credit they have at the local grocery runs out. However, as they try to leave, Randy's car will not start.

Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The first chapter of the novel introduces the main character, Benji. Benji is a young black boy who lives in New York with his parents, brother, and occasionally his college age sister. Benji's parents are professionals, therefore Benji and his brother attend private school. This causes them to go to school in a predominately white world. During the summer, they go to Sag Harbor where they live in a predominately black world with people they have known their entire lives. In fact, many of the families in Sag Harbor have been vacationing there in the summertime since their grandparents bought the land tracts that were the first housing developments in the area. It is here that Benji feels he can be himself and not worry about what people will think.

In Chapter 2, the reader begins to meet the other kids with whom Benji has grown up. Their group is predominately male, a problem now that the boys are older and growing interested in the opposite sex. Benji and his brother are alone during the week now, therefore their house has become a favorite hangout. The author gives a comical account of how these boys relate with one another and some of the origins of their speech, such as the word dag. Later, the author introduces what makes one boy more powerful than the others, such as the one with the car. It is a miniature society, built on the haves and have nots, that ironically parallels the financial and social status of their parents that make it possible for these kids to have a summer at Sag Harbor.



Chapters 3-4

Chapters 3-4 Summary

Chapter 3. If I Could Pay You Less, I Would. Benji has taken a job in an ice cream parlor whose gimmick is a new type of waffle cone and odd combinations of ice cream flavors. Benji works there with NP and another Sag Harbor friend, Nick, whose family suffered a divorce and now Nick and his mother are considered townies because they live there year round. The manager is a college kid who is hung over all the time. Nick and NP spend a great deal of time that summer discussing Martine, the owner. Martine is Dominican. Nick thinks he is black, but NP swears that he is too pale to be black. The debate becomes even more heated one afternoon when Martine pats Benji on the head for keeping up with a sudden rush's demand for waffle cones.

One afternoon, the power is off at Benji's beach house. Benji's mother forgot to pay the bill, therefore Benji is unable to wash his work clothes. That day just happens to be the day that Meg is working. Benji thinks that Meg has a thing for him because she often creates accidental touching incidents when working beside him. Benji is deeply self-conscious not only of his dirty clothes, but the braces on his teeth. When he laughs, he often covers his mouth making Meg think he is overly shy of his laughter.

That afternoon, just as they are in the middle of a rush, the power goes out. After an hour, they decide to close the shop for the night. They carefully cover the freezers with plastic bags to keep the cold in. After leaving the shop, Benji asks for the keys so he can go back and get a tape he forgot. Instead of getting something he forgot, Benji opens the freezer doors and leaves them open in revenge for the pat on his head that Martine gave him. No one ever gets in trouble for the open freezer doors, but Martine posts a list of blackout rules on a bulletin board next to a picture of him with his brother, a man who is clearly black.

Chapter 4. The Gangsters. Bored one afternoon, Benji goes over to Randy's to hang out with him and NP. When he arrives, Benji discovers that Randy has recently purchased a BB rifle. They sit outside and shoot at targets. Benji does well on his first try. A few days later, Benji learns that Bobby and NP bought BB pistols. It seems everyone has caught on to this new pastime. Benji sees it as a new way for them to fight one another. When they were younger, they fought with their fists, then with words. Now they are competing with BB guns. To support Benji's theory, NP and Randy get into an argument while in the park shooting up an abandoned car. Randy begins firing at NP's feet, forcing him to dance.

A short time later, Benji and his friends are sitting around trying to find something to do for the afternoon. After several failed suggestions, someone says they should have a BB gun war. They all agree, but Benji purposely picks a time when he knows his brother, Reggie, will not be able to participate. However, after they share their money to buy a pistol, Reggie changes his work schedule so he can participate. The day of the



gun fight, a Thursday, it is beginning to get dark by the time they have picked teams and laid out the rules. Benji tries to get Reggie to wear goggles, but he refuses. Benji goes off into the woods and hides in an area where he can see the road and ambush other team members, but avoid being seen. Unbeknownst to him, however, Randy is in the woods across the way with his rifle. Randy has agreed to only pump his rifle twice so that he will not injure anyone, but when the BB fired from Randy's gun hits Benji in the face beside his eye, it is clear that Randy has pumped the gun multiple times. Reggie wants Benji to go to the hospital, but Benji is afraid they will all get in trouble. Instead, Benji treats his damaged eye himself, attempting multiple times to remove the BB that is stuck in his wound so his parents will not know what happened, but fails. When his parents come for the weekend, they do not even notice the BB stuck in his face.

Chapters 3-4 Analysis

In Chapter 3, Benji gets a job at a local ice cream parlor and discovers some of the disadvantages to working. Benji also believes that he has experienced prejudice when his boss pats him on the head. For this reason, Benji tries to get revenge by leaving open the freezer doors during a blackout, but nothing serious ever comes of it. Later, Benji learns that his boss is just as black as he is, something that causes an easing of tensions.

Also in Chapter 3, Benji talks about a girl with whom he works. This is Benji's second discussion of girls and his inexperience with them. Benji thinks this girl has a crush on him and is willing to be intimate, but Benji has no idea of how to respond to this girl. In time, the summer passes and Benji never acts on his opportunity, showing the reader that despite all of Benji's big words and talk, he is still just a young boy on the cusp of adulthood.

In Chapter 4, the boys all become fascinated with BB guns, aware of the dangers but finding them exciting just the same. However, during a battle with the guns an older, less mature boy shoots Benji in the face and injures him. Soon the guns disappear and the boys move on to more mature things. However, the author hints here that some of these boys will turn to real guns when they are older and the results will be just as tragic.



Chapters 5-6

Chapters 5-6 Summary

Chapter 5. To Prevent Flare-ups. In 1985, The Cosby Show was a popular show on television. The Cosby Show was one of the first shows to revolve around a professional black family. In the show, the father was a doctor and the mother a lawyer, and they had five kids. Benji relates to this show because his father is a doctor, his mother a lawyer, just like the Cosbys. To Benji, The Cosby Show is his family, with several differences. One of these differences is the fact that his father is a mean alcoholic. Benji lies in bed one Saturday morning and listens to his father pore drink after drink for himself, mentally keeping track of how much he is drinking and hoping that nothing will set off his father's explosive temper. As Benji tries to stay out of the way, he thinks of the terrible haircuts his father has always given him, haircuts that he thought were wonderful until one day he saw some pictures of himself from the fifth grade and realizes how really bad they truly were. At the same time, Benji thinks of how wonderful his father's barbeque is. Neighbors stop by and ask about the barbeque, feigning interest in when it will be ready. At the same time, Benji's father becomes annoyed with his mother for buying cheap paper plates and they argue, with his mother finally going to the store to buy some more. In the end, Benji has some of his father's barbecue, chicken that is just as bad as the wonderful haircuts his father once gave him.

Chapter 6. Breathing Tips of Great American Beatboxers. Lisa Lisa and Cult Jam were coming to Sag Harbor along with U.T.F.O. The concert was to be at Bayside, a club that sells alcohol, therefore only those over nineteen could get in. Despite this, Benji and his friends began making plans to go to the concert. Benji simply bought a ticket and planned to dress like some of his preppie friends from school, hoping he would look old enough to get past the bouncer at the door. NP had a plan in which he gave one of the bouncer's free ice cream to encourage him to let NP and his girl through the door.

In the weeks before the concert, a new family came out to Sag Harbor that included two girls the same age as Benji and his friends. Bobby began dating one and NP the other. Benji has a crush on NP's girl, Erica. NP was supposed to get Bobby and the girls into the club the night of the concert with him. Then the day of the concert, Lisa Lisa and the members of U.T.F.O. came into Jonni Waffle for ice cream. NP managed to get one of them to promise to put him on the list for the concert. However, that night NP learned that the man had not fulfilled his promise and the bouncer who was supposed to let them in had gotten arrested and was not there. The replacement bouncer refused to let NP and Bobby in with the girls. Bobby took them home. However, NP and Benji were able to get in later when they tried again. It was a good concert, but the older Benji recalls it as a mediocre concert with a mediocre act that had been made sweeter by the sense of having gotten away with something.



Chapters 5-6 Analysis

In Chapter 5, Benji compares his family to the Huxtables on the Cosby Show. It is an equal comparison until Benji begins to clearly introduce his father. Benji's father is a deeply angry man who has a drinking problem. For this reason, Benji and his family spend a great deal of their time attempting to avoid their father's anger. Reggie has taken to working long shifts on the weekends and Benji himself walks around on egg shells trying to avoid triggers that will set his father off. Benji and Reggie have suffered greatly from their father's anger and his sense of pride that allows him to send his children to school with badly cut hair. The reader begins to understand Benji much better in this chapter as they learn the roots of his own anger and low self-esteem.

In Chapter 6, Benji does something all teenagers have attempted to do at one point or another. Benji tries to get into a concert being held at a venue inappropriate to his age. Benji is successful even as his friend's multiple schemes fail. It is a moment of triumph for Benji despite his adult self's realization that the concert and the performers were mediocre and quickly disappeared after their heyday in the eighties.



Chapters 7-8

Chapters 7-8 Summary

Chapter 7. Tonight We Improvise. Benji is alone in the house and listening to the local radio station, WLNG. The local station plays old Top 40 songs that no one in his immediate social circle would ever admit to listening to. However, Benji enjoys the station and will listen to it from time to time. As a song plays that make Benji suddenly feel overwhelmed with melancholy, he hears his parents pull up outside. Benji changes the radio station and leaves the house, still humming the song. Benji runs into Melanie. Melanie was once a member of Benji's group of friends at Sag Harbor, but her parents divorced and had to sell their Sag Harbor house. This summer, Melanie's mother has rented a house on the beach and she has returned. Benji does not remember her, but finds her nice enough. Melanie is dating Nick, Benji's co-worker at the ice cream shop.

This night, Benji runs into Melanie and she begins telling him about her memories of their time together as kids. Benji and Melanie walk and he slowly begins to remember. With his memory comes fond memories of the house he and his family once stayed in at Sag Harbor that now belongs to his aunt. Benji takes Melanie to the house and they break in. Melanie and Benji begin kissing in the bedroom Benji once shared with Reggie. As things become heated, Benji sees headlights of someone pulling into the driveway, a sight that was once comforting but now could mean trouble. Benji and Melanie slip out of the house and run away. The next day, Melanie is back with Nick and pretends nothing happened between she and Benji.

Chapter 8. The Black National Anthem. It is Labor Day and the neighborhood is having a block party to celebrate the end of summer. Benji watches the races in which all the kids take part and finds himself focusing on a child who seems a lot like him, as though this boy is taking his role in the adjusting drama of Sag Harbor. Benji looks at the adults and wonders which he will be replacing in the future, but cannot imagine what his life will be like as an adult.

A bonfire is built in one of the front yards. The kids are told to let it burn out, but some kid who does not seem to belong to anyone begins throwing things into it, including large pieces of lawn furniture, some of it new. Benji and Reggie sneak off and finish drinking a couple of six packs of beer they bought with their friends. Over the next few days they would all pack up and leave. Benji, as he lays in bed that night, looks to the future with optimism.

Chapters 7-8 Analysis

In Chapter 7, Benji has an experience with a girl that is tightly woven with his affection for his childhood that took place in the larger of the two homes once owned by his grandparents. Benji is beginning to look at his past with nostalgia even as he begins to



look to his future with hope and excitement. Benji has gotten to an age where he is aware of the great future he has ahead of him and is becoming suitably nostalgic and excited about it. This carries through to the final chapter of the book as the neighbors at Sag Harbor celebrate one more summer come and gone. Benji looks to his past and spots a child who is bashful and awkward like he was, but cannot quite see who he will be in the future. However, it is a time of optimism and the older man who is Benji as an adult tells him that his future will be a good and happy one despite his awkward start. This gives the reader some optimism when it comes to the future for Benji.



Characters

Benji

Benji is a few months short of his sixteenth birthday the summer of 1985. Like every other summer of his life, Benji and his family go to Sag Harbor for the summer. Benji and his brother are normally left with their older sister, but this year their sister is away at college, so the boys are left alone during the week without supervision. This creates a situation in which all their friends hang at their house because of the lack of supervision. Benji has suddenly become someone of importance among his childhood friends even though he is something of a social pariah at school back in the city.

Benji wears braces on his teeth and has a fascination with both horror movies and Dungeons and Dragons, two things that have marked him as a nerd among his classmates. For this reason, Benji is something of a social pariah among his classmates, leaving him feeling self-conscious. However, things are different at Sag Harbor where Benji has gone all his life and therefore has a natural position among his playmates. This summer Benji is beginning to move into adulthood, discovering girls and sneaking into nightclubs. At the end of the summer, Benji feels more confident in himself and begins to look optimistically toward the future.

Reggie

Reggie is Benji's younger brother. Reggie and Benji were once like twins since there is less than a year between them in ages. However, once Benji began high school, he separated himself from Reggie in order to find his own identity. Reggie has also begun to search for his own identity, a journey that has proven difficult due to tensions between he and his father. Reggie spends a great deal of the summer of 1985 working in order to avoid being around his father.

NP

NP is a young man whose family summers out at Sag Harbor near Benji's family. NP is a nickname that is related to the many tall tales that NP likes to tell. The author never reveals NP's real name. NP is the troublemaker of the group, the one who often comes up with crazy schemes to get into places they should not go. NP changes over the summer, however, becoming less boisterous and more thoughtful.

Bobby

Bobby is an angry young man who blames his mother for all the bad things that happen to them because she works for Wall Street. Bobby becomes the second boy to get a car during the summer of 1985, giving all his friends rides all over East Hampton. Bobby



also gets a girl because of the car and becomes the first, along with NP, to have a steady girlfriend that summer.

Nick

Nick's family once was one of the Sag Harbor summer group, but his parents divorced and his mother chose to live at Sag Harbor permanently. For this reason, Nick goes from being a summer guy to being a townie, technically not one of the group anymore. Nick begins wearing big pieces of gold jewelry and carrying around a large radio that is heavy and always blasting his mix tapes. Benji works with Nick at Jonni Waffle.

Martine

Martine is Benji's boss at Jonni Waffle. Martine is from the Dominican Republic. Martine bought Jonni Waffles after selling a chain of grocery stores he once owned. Martine owns three Jonni Waffles. The boys at Jonni Waffle debate whether or not Martine is black since his skin color makes it difficult to tell for sure. When Martine pats Benji on the head for a job well done, Benji becomes offended, convinced this is a racial act by a prejudiced white man. However, Benji later learns that Martine is black.

Meg

Meg is one of two cousins who works at Jonni Waffle. Meg often works close to Benji and rubs her body against his arms, making him think that she likes him. However, Benji never acts on his suspicions because he does not know how. Eventually Meg goes back to the city.

Erica

Erica is a young girl who comes to Sag Harbor to spend the summer with her cousin, Devon. Erica is a beautiful young girl on whom Benji has a crush, but she is dating NP. Erica believes that NP will be able to get her into the Lisa Lisa concert at a local night club, but NP fails to get her inside because she is too young. Erica leaves and breaks up with NP a short time later.

Melanie

Melanie is a beautiful young girl who once spent time at Sag Harbor with her family, but later stops coming out because her parents' divorce and are forced to sell the house. However, Melanie comes back the summer of 1985 to spend a few weeks. Melanie recalls Benji as a boy on whom she once had a crush. Despite dating Nick, Melanie keeps reminding Benji of their past. One night Benji and Melanie kiss, but then Melanie refuses to acknowledge that anything happened between them.

Randy

Randy is an older boy, already in high school, who continues to come out to Sag Harbor. Randy has a car the summer of 1985 giving him power over Benji and his group of friends. Randy uses this power to its full extent the early part of the summer, dictating who should get a ride and who should walk. However, when Bobby gets a car Randy loses his power. Randy is also the boy who shot Benji in the eye with his BB gun, causing a BB to be permanently stuck in Benji's face.



Objects/Places

Nick's Jewelry

Nick often wears big gold chains that have his name written out in gold.

Nick's Radio

Nick owns a large radio that he often carries around with him so that he can play his mix tapes.

Randy's Rifle

Randy owns a BB rifle that can fire further and harder depending on how many pumps it is given. Randy uses this gun in a BB war and injures Benji when he shoots him in the face.

Randy's Jalopy

Randy owns a small car that is old and damaged, a car with a hole in the floorboards. However, the car is the only one to which the boys at Sag Harbor have access for the first few weeks of the summer.

Bobby's Car

Bobby's parents give him a car, one that he criticized as being a result of his mother's servitude to the white man. However, Bobby uses the car and accepts gas money from his parents as well.

WLNG

WLNG is a radio station out of East Hampton that only plays Top 40 hits.

Lisa Lisa and Cult Jam

Lisa Lisa and Cult Jam was a popular music act in the 1980s.



The Cosby Show

The Cosby Show was a television show featuring Bill Cosby as the patriarch of a black, professional family. The show was unique in the fact that it had an all-black cast and that it portrayed a professional family rather than a poor, lower class family.

Hampstead House

The Hampstead House is a larger house that was built and owned by Benji's grandparents. Benji's family stayed there all through his early childhood, but in 1982 the house reverted to his aunt after the deaths of his grandparents. Benji's family was given another house directly on the beach, but smaller.

Jonni Waffle

Jonni Waffle is an ice cream parlor in Sag Harbor that sells a new type of ice cream cone made from waffles. Benji works there the summer of 1985 and several summers afterward.

East Hampton

East Hampton is the largest town near Sag Harbor. Reggie works at the Burger King there all through the summer of 1985.

Sag Harbor

Sag Harbor is a beach area in Long Beach where people often spend their summers.



Themes

Finding One's Identity

As much as this novel is a coming of age tale, it is also a search for one's identity tale. In this book, Benji is a young man who grows up in a privileged world that is predominately white. This causes Benji to be something of an oddity at school where most of his classmates are of a different race and therefore people with whom he feels he cannot identify. To add to this confusion, Benji's father is an angry man who blames the white man for everything bad in his life, often cursing these faceless people in front of his children. Benji's father often encourages his sons to lash out in violence against their white classmates when they feel as though they have been victims of prejudice, even when the offense was made out of misunderstanding or confusion.

At Sag Harbor, Benji is taken out of that white world and placed in a world filled with other kids with similar experiences to his own. At Sag Harbor Benji feels that he can be himself. However, many of Benji's problems come to Sag Harbor with him. Benji's father is just as angry at Sag Harbor and drinks just as much. Benji's friends at Sag Harbor are just as conscious of nerdiness and Benji still feels as though he should hide his interest in horror films and the game Dungeons and Dragons. Very little is different at Sag Harbor, but Benji believes it is because he is surrounded by his own people. As the summer progresses, Benji begins to see through some of these misperceptions and by the end of summer has begun to look at himself differently. For this reason, Finding One's Identity is a theme of the novel.

Racial Tensions

An important theme to this novel is the way in which the main characters identify themselves as black people. Benji describes from the early pages of the novel how Sag Harbor is a predominately black area that is starkly different from the white neighborhood and school he attends back in the city. Benji goes on to describe how his father refuses to listen to radio that is not filled with his own idea of black radio. Finally, when they arrive at Sag Harbor, Benji discusses his sense of coming home and being around people who are his own kind even though Benji does not like the house in which he now lives as compared to the house his family once used at Sag Harbor and how many of his friends struggle to make it to Sag Harbor for a variety of reasons.

The author describes a summer of fun and adventure in Benji's life, but continuously remarks on the question of race as the novel continues. Benji narrates the way people once became obsessed with tracking down and watching the few black faces on television and then the advent of shows like Good Times and Baby, I'm Home! that eventually led to the highly successful The Cosby Show. Later, Benji talks about the stereotypes that keep black men from walking down the street with a watermelon in their arms. In time, the reader comes to realize that this perceived prejudice is a part of



who these young men are and who they will become. These young men have been filled with such horrifying stories of injustice that they look for injustice where it may or may not exist. This becomes a part of these boys' identity, making racial tensions a major theme of the novel.

Family Dynamics

Family dynamics is an important theme of this novel because of the influence Benji's father has on his family. Benji's father is an alcoholic who is filled with anger at the white establishment that he blames for everything bad that has ever happened to him. Benji's father spends an entire summer calling his youngest son a derogatory name. All summer Reggie attempts to make his work schedule work out to such a way that he does not have to spend any time at home.

Benji spends one summer attempting to avoid his father's wrath. This includes eating barbecue that is inedible because it will hurt his father's feelings to make him think it is anything other than perfect. Benji's father's anger becomes the element around which everyone else revolves, even encouraging Benji's eldest sister to avoid coming home from college so that she does not have to be around her father.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first person point of view. The narrator is Benji, a young man who is coming to discover himself over the summer of 1985. The narration is written in such a way that the reader occasionally gets snippets of comment from Benji as an adult looking back on his life and explaining things to the reader that young Benji could not know or understand. In this way, the reader also gets an idea of what will happen to this group of young men as they grow older.

Whithead's writing in first person gives the reader the impression that he is writing a personal diary for his children or other family members. The point of view is highly intimate while at the same time the language is less than intimate, giving the story a mixed sense of intimacy and a sense of the distance and lack of intimacy a young teenage boy might feel for those around him. For this reason, the point of view of this novel works well with the plot.

Setting

The novel is set in Sag Harbor in 1985. During this time period, Sag Harbor had been a predominately black vacation spot in Long Island. Many of the families had been coming out to Sag Harbor since they were children, children of the original land owners in the area. There is a great deal of history in the Sag Harbor where Benji spends his summers, not only for him, but for all the other families he has grown up around.

The racial makeup of Sag Harbor during the time period in which this novel is set is important because it is a sense of history for the main character in addition to a source of both confusion and identity for the young man. The author tells the reader that the area has since changed, that it is a mixture of races now, but then it was like an extended family whose members were deeply intimate with one another. This sets up a safe atmosphere for Benji to search for his own identity and gives a background to the reader to explain some of Benji's interesting choices as the novel progresses. For this reason, the setting is important to the overall development of the plot.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is a strong, educated English that is filled with both slang from the time period in which the novel is set and flowery language that is more descriptive than informative. The writer of this novel spends paragraph after paragraph writing lovely descriptions of people, places, and items that are worthy of literature from centuries ago or to be considered a new form of literature of an emerging modern talent.



The language of this novel is strong and intelligent, telling a story that is both simple and complex. The author tries to tell a story of a young black boy who is learning what his place is in the world, but at the same time the author makes no attempt to hide the fact that the novel is written by an older man who has already found his place in the world. For this reason, the language often becomes more complex than necessary, with more words used for descriptive passages than on actual plot.

Structure

The novel is divided into eight chapters. Each chapter is fairly long and tends to be a complete story in its own right. Each chapter is written in a linear time line, but each contains its own themes and stories that tell of different aspects of Benji's summer and his attempts to find his own identity in 1985.

The novel's main plot follows the story of Benji, a young, privileged black boy living in Manhattan who summers at Sag Harbor. Benji is aware of his privilege, but he also feels somewhat alien in the city where most of his classmates and friends are white. For this reason, Benji turns to those at Sag Harbor to help him learn how to be a black man. Benji struggles with these dual identities, but soon learns that they can co-exist if he handles himself right. The plot comes to a satisfying end as the novel comes to its final pages.

Quotes

"As fake twins, we couldn't shake our love of the uniform. Each day we wore the same make of shirt, but different colors, different iron-on decals." Chapter 1, pg. 9

"We needed to know, is it just you and me or is there another to save us from each other?" Chapter 1, pg. 36

"It was also the heyday of dag. Dag was bitter acknowledgement of the brutish machinery of the world." Chapter 2, pg. 37

"What happened in the house stayed in the house, caroming off the walls and furniture and us, until it was absorbed or forgotten." Chapter 3, pg. 75

"Sometimes we messed up on Wednesdays, but it was never a Thursday-sized mess-up. No, Thursday we reserved for the thoroughly botched, mishaps that called for shame and first aid and apologies."
Chapter 4, pg. 114

"Randy took my face in his hands and lifted my chin for a better look. He did this queasy thing. He bent his face down and stuck his tongue in the wound." Chapter 4, pg. 144

"We were a Cosby family, good on paper. That was the lingo. Father a doctor, mother a lawyer. Three kids, prep-schooled, with clean fingernails and nice manners." Chapter 5, pg. 149

"No one cares about what goes on in other people's houses. The grubby dramas. It was just us. The soundstage was empty, the production lot scheduled for demolition. They'd turned off the electricity long ago. We delivered our lines in the darkness." Chapter 5, pg. 179

"What ticked me off was the implication that braces were what held me back from age-appropriate shenanigans, the fabled frenching, bra-fumbling, and blue balls. Obviously, it would have been hard for me to kiss fewer girls, basic mathematical properties of the number zero being what they are." Chapter 7, pg. 210

"It seemed impossible not to remember something like that. The first time a girl put her lips on yours. What kind of chump forgot being a five-year-old mack. I would've coasted on that for years if I'd known." Chapter 7, pg. 224

"Labor Day we cornered the worldwide market on people playing 'Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now.' It was the black national anthem. The disco version of 'We Shall Overcome,' courtesy of Mr. McFadden and Mr. Whitehead." Chapter 8, pg. 239

"Isn't it funny? The way the mind works?" Chapter 8, pg. 251



Topics for Discussion

Who is Benji? Why is he going to Sag Harbor? Why does the first chapter discuss Benji's eighth grade year of school? How does it compare to his most recently completed year of school? What happened at the party Benji describes in Chapter 1? How has that episode helped to shape Benji's life up to this point? How does it highlight his recent disappointments?

Who is Reggie? Why does Reggie work so much? How does he get along with his father? What are the causes of some of the tensions in their home? How does Reggie deal with it? How does Benji deal with it? How does their mother respond to their father's fits of anger? Why does she respond this way?

Who is Elena? Why does she rarely come home anymore? Why does she suggest to Benji that he get out of the house as soon as he can? Why does Benji act as though he does not understand Elena's advice? Who is the man Elena is with when Benji sees her the summer of 1985? How does Benji react to this man? What does this say about Elena's own search for her racial identity? How will this impact Benji's search for his own racial identity?

Why does Benji open the freezers during a blackout at the Jonni Waffle? What is he attempting to do? How does he feel about this afterward? Was Benji a target of racial prejudice in this episode? Explain. Was Benji overly sensitive to perceived slights against his racial identity? Were his friends? How did they respond to these acts?

What is The Cosby Show? Why does Benji compare himself to this show? What was the show about? How does Benji's family compare to the show? What are some of the differences between them? What does this say about Benji's sense of how the world perceives him and his family members?

Why does the author include a chapter about guns? What are some of the racial stereotypes with regards to guns? How does the author handle that in this chapter of the book? Who is injured in this chapter? What does that injury suggest to the reader? To the characters of the book? What does the author say about the results of the use of real guns in the future of the lives of these boys? What does that say about the use of guns and the acts of these boys at this point in their lives?

Why does Benji find himself thinking about the circle of life in the final chapter and looking for the boy he once was and the man he might one day be? What does the author say will be Benji's reaction to the man he will one day be? What might Benji have done differently if he had known more about the man he would one day be? Is it comforting to Benji to know where his life will go and what is in store for him? Is it a good thing to aspire to live your life like those around you, to conform to other's standards? Explain.