

# **Somebody Else's Kids Study Guide**

## **Somebody Else's Kids by Torey Hayden**

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## Plot Summary

Torey L. Hayden, author of the book, says that she is working as a resource teacher following the federal mandate that special needs children be mainstreamed. She no longer has a class of students who remain with her for the entire day, but spends a few hours each day with small groups of two to five students requiring special help in specific areas. Then she is asked to take Boothe Birney Jackson, a destructive, apparently autistic kindergarten student. She does so, and almost immediately begins to call him "Boo," the nickname given to him by his younger student.

She has Boo all afternoon, but keeps helping the resource students, including a first grader named Lori Sjukheim, the product of abuse. Her biological father had apparently beaten her. Lori and her twin were taken as wards of the state and Mr. and Mrs. Sjukheim began the adoption process. Mrs. Sjukheim then died of cancer and Mr. Sjukheim had to fight to retain the girls as a single man who would be the sole caregiver to two young girls. A head injury had resulted in a bone fragment in her brain, which pierced the part of the brain that controls, very specifically, her ability to recognize letters, numbers and symbols of any kind—though she is a caring child and is as frustrated by her own ability to learn as are those who try to teach her.

Torey feels stretched to the limit by Boo and Lori, constantly seeking ways to engage one while she works intensively with the other. Then she's told she has a new addition to the classroom, a young boy named Thomaso. He is angry and enters the room cursing and making threats. Torey soon learns that Thomaso's mother had died young and that Thomaso had later witnessed his stepmother kill Thomaso's father and brother. He speaks constantly of his father, saying that his father is coming to take him away from the foster care and Torey's class though he can't quite make himself believe that it's true.

With months of the school year left, Torey is now trying to engage three very different children when she's given a fourth student - a twelve-year-old honor student who is pregnant but deeply troubled over her own home life and who believes the child to be her ticket to happiness. As the school year comes to an end, Torey can look back over some small successes and some many failures, but notes that the few successes were worth all the effort she put into the group.



# Chapters One through Three

## Chapters One through Three Summary and Analysis

Torey L. Hayden, author of the book, says that she is working as a resource teacher following the federal mandate that special needs children be mainstreamed. She no longer has a class of students who remain with her for the entire day, but spends a few hours each day with small groups of two to five students requiring special help in specific areas. She notes that the new position is not nearly as fulfilling as had been having her own class. Birk Jones, head of special education for the district, tells Torey that there is a seven-year-old kindergarten student who cannot be managed in a regular half-day kindergarten class and asks Torey to work with him. He'll be in her class all afternoon, every day, without time in the regular classroom. His name is Boothe Birney Franklin and Torey immediately begins using his nickname, "Boo," because his younger sister cannot say his name.

Torey, having heard that the boy is probably autistic and that he is "destroying" his kindergarten class, removes all the breakables and toys with small pieces from his reach and clears a large area so that he'll have plenty of room to run around. Within minutes of his arrival, Boo is screaming and Torey notes that his sounds like a rabbit being strangled to death. Two fourth graders in her class at the time are amazed at the display and one begins to cry, begging Torey to stop the child's screams. Boo tears himself from Torey's grasp, runs around the room once and out the door. In chapter two, Torey returns the child to her room where Lori, a twin who had lasting brain damage from abuses sustained as a child, is waiting. Lori tries to talk with Boo but Torey moves their attention to Lori's spelling words and Lori points it out when Boo begins to explore the classroom. After awhile, Boo imitates the birds in a birdcage, then begins running around the room. Torey calls him a Houdinni because he is able to slip out of all his clothes while barely varying the rhythm of his run. After Lori leaves, Torey has time along with Boo, but he spends it on the floor under a rug. He doesn't object when Torey dresses him as they prepare to leave for the day.

In chapter three, Lori arrives at Torey's class upset and Torey learns that Lori's teacher, a veteran educator named Edna Thorsen, is requiring the Lori finish her workbook homework in class before being allowed to go out for recess. Lori is unable to get the right answers because she cannot read or write on any level, but Edna puts that down to Lori's attitude and tells Torey that she's sickened when she considers all the time spent in one-on-one work with "slowies." Edna believes Lori's lack is on purpose. Lori's concentration wanes to the point that she can't focus even while in Torey's class. Edna redevelops migraine headaches. Then one day, Lori throws her book. Edna sends the child to the office and says that she won't have Lori back in her classroom. Torey retrieves Lori from the office. Back in Torey's class, Lori loses control, destroying her book in a fit of rage. She then tries to run from the room but Torey has installed a lock to prevent Boo's escapes and Lori crashes into the door and falls, where she cries violently.



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Torey points out several facts about Lori, including that she is a caring child and that those who work with her sometimes forgets that she has special needs and that teachers sometimes get angry at Lori for things she can't possibly change. Torey notes that she's worried about Lori because this caring for others is so intense. Torey had told Lori about Boo and when the two first encounter each other in the classroom, Lori attempts to make friends, asking him several questions that he doesn't answer. Then Lori asks Lori if Boo is angry. Later, Lori tells Torey that Boo is "a little weird," but points out that it's OK to be "a little weird." Then Boo begins his run while stripping his clothes and Torey has nightmares that he might run away down the hall again. He doesn't but eventually crawls under a rug where he remains until time to go home. It's after Boo has settled down that Lori tells Torey that fixing Boo would be a huge task, and that her father would be angry if he knew that she'd looked at Boo's "thing." Torey corrects her, calling the "thing" a penis, and says she doesn't believe Lori really minded. She admits that "it was interesting."



# Chapters Four through Six

## Chapters Four through Six Summary and Analysis

Every day, Boo's mother arrives but never agrees to come in. Boo then stands still near the door until Torey helps him remove his "outer garments." One day he doesn't help him at all and he stands still that entire time. After two hours she can no longer stand it and helps him. Afterwards, as is always the case, Boo begins to move around the room and is particularly enamored by the pet snake named Benny. Other than that, he touches and smells everything, including walls and Torey. She says at the end of some days she wiped the saliva off her arms and neck where Boo had "tasted" her, but that physically holding him is the only time she can interact with him. Boo is also interested in Lori and Torey calls it a positive situation because it offers Boo the contact with another child, but impossible because of the challenge of reaching both when the only way to reach Boo is through physical contact.

Torey then tells of Lori's situation. Lori's adoptive mother died shortly before the adoption was complete and her adoptive father, Mr. Sjukheim, fought to complete the process, being older than typical single adoptive parents. After the process was complete, Lori's condition was discovered. Her father is a caring man, an engineer who has taken a lesser job so that he has time to be with the girls. It's also noted that his biological daughter died in a tragic accident at age four, years before the adoption of Lori. Mr. Sjukheim is pleased to have Lori in Torey's room for the half day.

In chapter five, Torey discusses her relationship with a man she's dating named Joc who is her complete opposite. Though the relationship is often rocky, Torey says she loves Joc but she knows that the relationship won't last forever. One night Torey receives a letter from a friend who also teaches in a resource setting who gives Torey the idea to make ice cream with Lori and Boo. An argument with Joc that ends with her agreeing to go out for dinner precludes the opportunity to try out the ice cream before class time, but she takes the necessary items with her, with a plan for them each to make their own container of ice cream using empty juice cans inside larger cans as an activity Boo and Lori can share. Lori tries to move a bowl though Torey tells her to wait, drops it and breaks it. She immediately goes into a trance, repeating that she's sorry and Torey, frightened, realizes that Lori isn't even talking to her but seems to be remembering something. Finally, Torey picks her up and sits in the rocking chair. By now Boo has stripped completely naked and comes to stand beside the chair, eventually climbing up so that he's sitting across Lori's legs, forehead against her forehead, and then pulls Torey's arm around him. Torey notes it's the first time he's willingly touched her and that she never discovers the source of Lori's fear.

In chapter six, Lori plans to spend the afternoon of Halloween with her own class where there's to be a party. Dressed as a witch, Lori rushes into Torey's room where Torey is working with Boo on potty training. Lori, crying, says a boy in her class called her retarded and she looks to Torey for reassurance that it isn't true. Torey notes that she



has questions of her own about the children she teaches, and that there aren't answers for her questions any more than there is an acceptable answer for Lori's, but she tells Lori that there's nothing wrong with her and urges her to believe that.

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Torey admits that Joc is right about her inability to leave her work at the end of the day. What's interesting is that when Joc refers to her students as "fucked up kids," she doesn't argue the point. This could say something about the depth of her feeling for Joc though she knows they won't make it as a couple.

On teacher conference days, Torey finally has a chance to talk with Boo's mother. She's black and his father is white, and they have no contact with their own parents. Mrs. Franklin reveals the fear that Boo will be institutionalized, a fear apparently fed by her husband. The family has searched for answers, moving to a number of places with no luck. The finances are strained as is the marriage, but they remain together. Torey had hoped to learn more about Boo's life outside class but finds herself trying to reason with his mother about her fear that Boo will eventually be put in an insane asylum.



# Chapters Seven through Nine

## Chapters Seven through Nine Summary and Analysis

Torey receives short notice that she's to receive another child, a young angry boy named Thomaso. He immediately begins cursing and destroying things but Torey remains near the door, seeming not to react to his outburst but actually figuring that being forced to chase him down the hall would be more detrimental to her chances of working with the boy. During recess, with the children under the care of an aide, Torey reads Thomaso's file which indicates that his mother had died, his father remarried, and that he'd been a witness to his stepmother shooting and killing both Thomaso's father and his older brother. He continues to berate Boo, calling him a "nigger," and Lori, saying she's a retarded baby. By the end of day, there is the beginning of a tenuous truce though Thomaso continues to say that he hates being in the class and that when his father finds out he's in foster care as well as in this class, he'll surely come take him away. Torey doesn't correct him but there's a moment of interaction between Thomaso and Lori, who is angry at Thomaso's actions but who tells him that she'd been in foster care and that she somehow just knew when her biological parents didn't want her any longer.

In chapter eight, Torey continues to battle Thomaso who can seemingly fart at will and, when unable to pick boogers from his own nose found "a gold mine" in Boo's. Thomaso tells Torey that she has bad breath, prompting her to brush and use Listerine at lunch time until she figures out that it's merely a way for him to get to her. Whenever he acts out, he asks if he's made Torey mad. She notes that the fear is his overriding emotion and the anger is how he covers it. He soon begins to make a connection with Lori that Torey is unable to explain, but she notes that he watches Lori and shows her a deference seen nowhere else.

In chapter nine, Boo falls from the monkey bars and suffers a deep gash on his tongue. At the hospital, Torey explains to the physician that Boo is probably autistic. The man orders restraints so that he can sew up Boo's tongue, and begins work with no anesthetic. Torey erupts and the doctor says that "this kind" of child can't feel and comprehend pain anyway and that there's no need to "waste" the anesthetic on him. Torey notes that she's angry at the doctor and also at Mrs. Franklin who is afraid of everything and doesn't speak up.

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Though Torey knows of Thomaso's past, she doesn't correct him when he tells of his proud heritage or that his father will be coming for him, and it seems likely that this is something that Thomaso desperately needs. At the end of chapter seven, Thomaso tells Lori that he believes she might be "a little Spanish," which seems to indicate the beginning of his thawing emotions toward her. She tells him she doesn't think so because she is from Buffalo. In December, Lori brings up the subject of Santa Claus.





Torey says that she hates this conversation because it's complicated and different with each child. She also expects Thomaso to deride Lori's belief in Santa, but he actually comes to Torey's aid. He tells Lori that he has never seen Jesus, Mary or Heaven, but that he believes in them and knows that they are real, taking that analogy to include Santa. He says that Santa doesn't come to every house at Christmas time, but that he instills the desire in others to buy presents for those they love. The answer seems to satisfy Lori and this is an important step in Thomaso's emerging development. Torey is at a loss of how to explain this attachment Thomaso feels for Lori but Torey says that she has come to love the little boy.

After Boo's injury, Lori cries hysterically. When Torey returns from the hospital, Lori seems to feel the need to explain her reaction, but also seems to be frustrated at her inadequacy. She finally says that she hates it when others are injured because she has no way to tell how badly they are hurt and what to do to help. She says that if she is the one injured, at least she knows the answers to those questions. While Lori doesn't elaborate, it seems likely that Thomaso has talked with her about it while Torey was at the hospital.



# Chapters Ten through Twelve

## Chapters Ten through Twelve Summary and Analysis

There's a breakthrough with Thomaso that isn't fully explained. Torey and the three children are planting bulbs when Thomaso says he wants to do a pot of his own to take home to his father after the plants grow and bloom. Torey says that they have only two pots and that they're to remain in the classroom. Thomaso suddenly goes into a rage. Thomaso's anger erupts and Torey has to physically restrain him. The pots have been broken in the outburst and Lori is sent to get some milk cartons from the kindergarten rooms. As they return to the project, now planting in milk cartons, Torey says, "Your father really makes you angry, doesn't he?" Thomaso erupts again, this time running from the room. After a long search, Torey finds him in the auditorium. She has to lie on the floor to be on his level and she does so. As they begin to talk, he says that he plans to kill himself to be with his father, who he finally admits is dead. Then he says that everybody hates him. Torey points out that Lori doesn't hate him and Thomaso responds that he doesn't hate her either, that no one can really hate Lori. Torey tells him that she wishes she could convince him that she loves him, but that she doesn't expect him to believe her. He comes out of his hiding place, hugs her and asks that she not tell Lori that he'd cried.

In chapter 11 it's December, Torey puts up a Christmas tree with the children and, with Joc pressing the issue, puts up one at home and the two host a dinner party for about forty friends. Then Joc asks her to marry him and when she doesn't answer right away, Joc leaves. When he returns, he says that he'd always known they wouldn't make it but that he had to know he'd tried.

In chapter twelve, Claudia arrives. Birk says that she'll have books and lessons with her so that there's no need for lesson plans. The goal, she says, is for her to be in a class at the high school vocational department for half a day to learn about caring for a baby, and to complete her academic requirements for sixth grade in the afternoons.

On a particular day in January, Torey and Lori are taking down Christmas decorations, Claudia is working and Thomaso is playing with toy cars when Boo begins spinning. Torey, worried that he'll hurt himself or step on Thomaso's toys, tells him to stop and finally has to physically make him sit down. He talks, but all of his words are only parroted pieces of conversations, including pieces of television shows. As he's mumbling, Lori stops what she's doing and listens. Boo, obviously parroting back a conversation, says, "Leave that alone," repeatedly. Lori continues quizzing him, asking what it is he's to leave alone though Boo never responds to any question. This time, however, he tells her that he's supposed to leave the "plug places" alone because they "bite."

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Torey says that the moment she comments on Thomaso's father she knows it was a mistake. She says that the comment belongs in a psychiatrist's office or in a book about how to "not screw up your children." She apologizes to Thomaso but notes that it does push them to a breakthrough. An interesting point here is that the next chapter skips ahead so that she doesn't explain how Thomaso got home that day because school dismissed while they were in the auditorium. The full extent of this breakthrough is evident over time, but Torey never fully explains what happened and it's left to the reader to determine exactly what happened.

Torey notes that she has tried a number of techniques to entice Boo to talk other than the repetition of phrases, conversations and bits from television shows. She says that she has recently spent much more time focused on life skills such as toilet training and dressing. The encounter with Boo over the "plug places" was brief and Torey admits that some people might not technically call it a verbally communicated response, but it gives Torey hope. She says it's the first time he's responded in this way to anything since he's been in her class.



# Chapters Thirteen through Fifteen

## Chapters Thirteen through Fifteen Summary and Analysis

Claudia is very shy, never participating in group activities until the day Thomaso, Boo and Lori put their entire bodies into what was to have been a quiet art time. As they're washing up later, Thomaso asks if she's been relegated to this class only because she's pregnant. That afternoon, Claudia opens up some to Torey, saying that she'd had sex only once, with a fifteen-year-old boy named Randy who'd promised she couldn't become pregnant until she'd developed breasts. She ends by asking Torey what she was supposed to do about a baby when she still herself nothing more than a baby.

In chapter 14, Lori plays a game with cards made by Torey. The object of the game is to match up cards, each with letters on them though the letters are different sizes and in different colors. Torey often throws the game so that Lori can win. It's during this time that she sees some changes in Lori but can't put her finger on them exactly. Torey feels the need to win once, rather than to let Lori win every game, and one day she does. Lori erupts, yelling that this class has been the one place in her life where she is a winner and that Torey has taken that.

Meanwhile, Claudia remains withdrawn and Torey plans an interview with her parents. They are competitive, harsh and uncommunicative. They hate the situation and says that Claudia was virtually raped. They ask if the other children in the class are dangerous and Torey notes that she "deserved a medal" for her calm reactions to the people. She suggest counseling which angers them more and she drops the idea of working with them, knowing that they'd not only remove Claudia from her room but might decide to sue Torey as well.

In chapter fifteen, Torey pushes Claudia into talking about her plans for the baby and she says that she will keep it and that it will love her and only her. She then says that she doesn't understand why Torey cares, that the students are all just "somebody else's kids," and that nobody else cares what Claudia thinks or wants in this situation. Claudia cries for awhile and Torey again finds herself feeling reticent and inadequate because Claudia is older than the children she normally deals with.

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Torey admits that communication with Claudia is difficult for several reasons, but the driving one is that Claudia is older than most of the students Torey teaches. What's interesting about this is that Torey says the reason she works well with little kids is that she remains a child herself. She says that her body grew and she learned from books and from life, but that she continues to understand the mind of a six-year-old because she continues to feel like a child herself.



# Chapters Sixteen through Eighteen

## Chapters Sixteen through Eighteen Summary and Analysis

In February, long before Valentine's Day, Lori brings Valentine's hearts for everyone and insists that they all open them. For Boo, she's made a booklet with pictures. Boo opens it, points out a picture of a dog and says, very clearly, "doggie." Everyone is astounded and crowd around Boo as Thomaso takes the lead, gently forcing Boo to turn pages and correcting him when he doesn't correctly identify the object. Torey says that she's prepared for the inevitable moment when Boo reverts to the vacant looks and unresponsive talk, but Lori had been delighted that her gift had prompted the change and is sad when it doesn't last.

In chapter seventeen, Lori buys a gift for Thomaso's birthday. Torey is worried about the impact of a party but bakes a cake and decorates the room with the help of Lori and Claudia. Thomaso is elated, says that he's never had a birthday party. He is especially excited over Lori's gift but grows angry when he discovers that it's a teddy bear. He uses the scissors Torey provided to help him get through the taped package to "disembowel" the bear, then turns on Torey, using the scissors as a weapon. There are long, tense moments before Thomaso gives up the scissors and collapses, crying. He later asks Torey to sew up the bear and both he and Lori remain after school.

In chapter eighteen, Torey talks again with Claudia's mother but she is unreceptive to the idea of counseling, saying that Claudia is going through a phase and that she'll grow out of it. Torey has previously admitted her fears for Claudia's future, knowing that girls who have babies at a young age often don't finish school and that they often give birth to special needs children. Claudia herself can imagine nothing but a fairy tale ending to her problem and says that her life will be perfect once the baby arrives. Torey tries to find a support group but finds discovers that most people knowledgeable on the subject want to offer services such as literature on teen pregnancy or birth control, which prompts Torey to respond that it's too late for birth control. The high school runs a program, but only accepts girls of age sixteen or over, citing the sometimes graphic discussions as the reason. Finally, Torey calls on a counselor who is a passing acquaintance who says that nobody wants to talk about it because to do so would admit that the problem exists. She tells Torey that trying to begin such a group would cause an outcry.

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In the moment when Boo talks and then reverts, Lori realizes something important about Torey's work with children like Boo. She says that Torey continues to work with Boo but that he'll never be a "regular" kid. She doesn't verbalize the idea, but it seems reasonable that she also realizes that this truth also applies to her.



Lori purchased the teddy bear for Thomaso because he had once told her that he had a bear as a child that was thrown away. Lori found it difficult to comprehend having nothing to cuddle with at night. While the reason for Thomaso' eruption upon opening the gift is never fully explained, but while he is holding Torey at bay with the scissors, he asks why she continues telling him what to do and why she wants him to feel. After the episode is over, he asks Torey to fix the bear. When she says it will take awhile, he asks to remain with her, saying that he doesn't feel like going home now. Torey admits that she doesn't know what prompted Thomaso's anger, but surmises that the gift either evoked painful memories or that the fact that Lori gave him such a thoughtful gift based on something he'd said is more than he can stand.



# Chapters Nineteen through Twenty-One

## Chapters Nineteen through Twenty-One Summary and Analysis

Torey hears a child screaming just before something crashes into her door. She cautiously opens it to find Lori, crying uncontrollably. With the door open, Lori dashes inside and hides under a shelf used to store art supplies. Edna Thorson, Lori's teacher for the morning hours, says Lori should be pulled from her hiding place. Torey objects and Edna says Torey is being too lenient with the child. The principal backs Torey's call and Edna leaves. Lori remains hidden for the rest of the day. At one point, Thomaso slips away and sits talking her. Torey originally stops him but later allows it. Everyone in the class is tense and Torey yells at Boo and later at Thomaso. After school dismisses, Torey agrees that Lori's father must be called. She sits on the floor by the cabinet singing softly for a long time and Lori eventually emerges, puts her head in Torey's lap and says that she wet her pants. Torey tells her it's alright and the child remains in that position.

In chapter twenty, Torey arrives home much later than normal, having driven around for a long time, contemplating the events of the day. Joc is waiting and obviously angry. He tells her that they were to have gone to dinner with friends. Torey tries to calm him but he continues to rant. Finally she returns the anger, saying she's had a really bad day and briefly describing Lori's meltdown. Joc says that she should "get off your God trip" and realize that she is not overly important in her position as teacher to the four children. When Joc leaves, Torey realizes that this fight was different from others they'd had in that it was the final argument.

In chapter twenty-one, Lori doesn't come to school the following day and everyone is upset. Boo walks around the room agitatedly, saying "What letter is this?" and Torey realizes that she has said that to Lori so often that Boo associates that sentence with Lori. He continually looks out the door, apparently for Lori. Finally, he takes the Valentine book Lori had made for him and sits down with it. He then takes Torey's hand and pulls her over to stand beside him. He opens the book, points to the dog and says, "Doggie. What letter is this?" Then he does the same for other pages. Torey realizes he's trying to convey something to her and wishes she could produce whatever it is that he wants. He next goes to Claudia and seems on the verge of pulling her over to his desk as well, but then stops as if actually seeing the girl for the first time. He smells of her arm - a particular trait he has when exploring new things. Boo then runs around the room wildly and strips, something he hasn't done in some time. Torey continues to watch, transfixed, but doesn't do anything, and then the moment is gone and Boo's attention is captured by his hands and the light.

Libby arrives one day to pick up Lori's homework. Torey knows that the girls are listed as identical twins, but says she sees none of the effervescence so obvious in Lori's nature. Libby says that Lori has decided she never wants to return to school. In a



meeting with Mr. Sjukheim, Edna Thorson tells him that Lori is a hopeless case. Torey notes that she wants to object to what Dan and Edna say, but that she can't find the courage to do so. She notes that in the end, they've done what professionals do best by "playing God." It's decided that Lori must return to school as soon as possible but Mr. Sjukheim says he isn't certain he can put her through the trauma he knows will come. The next day, Lori doesn't return.

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Torey eventually finds out that Lori had thrown up with no warning in Edna Thorson's class. Edna seems to believe that Lori did it on purpose. She notes that Lori is "a big girl," and that she gave no warning, splashing the vomit on other students. Edna's attitude is that the only way to achieve anything with the children is through discipline. Torey had noted early in the story that she respected Edna simply because of her many years of teaching though she sometimes doesn't agree with her methods. The principal notes that Edna is only a short time from retirement, which seems to indicate that there would otherwise have been some sort of corrective action taken for her harsh methods.

Torey knows that she saw the warning signs of Lori's collapse coming, and that she did nothing to address the problem. Citing behavior such as the outburst when Torey won a game, Torey now feels guilty.





## Summary and Analysis

Lori's sister Libby continues to come to Torey's room to pick up Lori's homework each day though Torey tells her there isn't any. One day Libby comes in and sits down. Torey hints that she has work to do and Libby says that's OK, but continues to sit. Torey admits that Libby somehow intimidates her, but then Libby asks if Lori is retarded. Torey immediately realizes the fear in Libby's voice over her sister and goes to sit with her. Then Libby says she knows what happened to Lori. She says that Edna Thorson gave Lori an advanced reader and told her to read in front of the class, ridiculing her when she is unable to comply. Edna then gives her easier and easier books, continuing to ridicule Lori until the child throws up.

In chapter twenty-three, Torey goes to visit Lori at home, telling her that they were wrong to have treated her in such a way and that reading is a good skill to have, but not the only nor the most vital. Something in her speech apparently touches Lori and she agrees to return to school the following day. In chapter twenty-four, Torey and a fellow teacher, Billie, drive over to pick up Lori who has to be carried out, kicking and screaming. In chapter twenty-four, Lori is back in school and Torey takes a desperate step by throwing away Lori's reading and writing materials. She says that Lori will read, but that now isn't the right time for it to happen. She then dreads the thought of Dan and Edna finding out, but sticks to the plan, which includes having Lori focus on other subjects using any kind of material she can find and assigning Thomaso to read and write for her when it becomes necessary - a job he takes very seriously.

In chapter twenty-five, Thomaso brings a statue to school and claims his father made it, eventually admitting to Torey that his father and brother are dead and that he witnessed the shooting.

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Libby then says that she hates Thorson and that someone should run over her with a car. When the conversation turns to Lori's injury and the results of that, Libby admits that she remembers abuse at the hands of her father and says that she plans to kill him when she grows up. Torey realizes that she's witnessing the product of a violent and abusive home which has produced so much hate in a seven-year-old child.

Torey wonders how to deal with Thomaso's tales of exploits of his father, and the situation comes to a head with the appearance of the statue. Talking to Torey about it later, Thomaso admits that his father is dead and describes the scene, including the screams of his brother, Caesar, who had been on the couch with Thomaso. Thomaso says that Caesar's blood ran into his ear and that he first feared it was his own blood. After the conversation, Thomaso says that his father is now in Spain, probably

preparing a home for them both. Torey doesn't object, apparently understanding that the fantasy is a way for Thomaso to cope with this incredible loss.



# Chapters Twenty-six through Twenty-nine

## Chapters Twenty-six through Twenty-nine Summary and Analysis

Because Lori is officially still enrolled in Edna's class, she has the right to choose Lori's curriculum and now learns that Torey isn't teaching Lori the reading. She complains to Dan who calls Birk as head of the special education. In chapter twenty-seven, Birk arrives and hears the story from Edna then Torey, then asks Dan if there is a written protocol for the situation. He then asks for some time alone with Torey who fears being reprimanded but Birk, hearing her say that Lori will probably never be able to read, says he believes Torey's methods are reasonable. He does tell her that she should have come to him with the problem and urges her to trust in others to care for the children the same as she.

In chapter 28, Torey realizes that the year is drawing to a close and wishes for more time with the children. She helps Lori work on what she terms "pre-reading" activities, but also begins helping her cope with the disability. For example, she uses a Braille clock and Lori learns to tell time within a quarter hour, though to be more exact is too complicated. Claudette is absent for several days. Upon her return, she admits to Tory that she tried to kill herself, had spent several days in the hospital and is now seeing a psychologist.

In chapter thirty, Torey is visited by a high-level official in the district, Ariadne Boom. Torey expects the worst but gets praise from Boom who says that Birk, who had arranged the visit, had said Torey has an amazing class.

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Torey is in a tough spot as she tries to explain her reason for not including reading as part of Lori's daily lessons. She seems to truly believe that Lori will eventually learn to adapt and that she'll someday be able to read, but that she simply isn't mature enough at this point to do so. But she's trapped because when she explains to Dan that Lori isn't capable of learning to read, Dan says that children without potential should be moved officially to the class for special education. Torey hates conflict and faced with Edna's and Dan's anger, she tells her co-worker Billie that she wishes she had simply promised Edna that she'd put the reading back into Lori's daily lessons.

Torey notes that Boom has an air of confidence that she lacks. She comes to put that down to the fact that Boom really does believe in her abilities, based largely on her own educational degrees. When she asks Torey what model she uses for teaching, Torey hesitates, then finally admits that she doesn't know. To herself, she realizes that she's using the "Torey Haden" model - not because she's so smart but because it's all she

understands. What's interesting about the encounter is that Boom's presence upsets the children, especially Boo. After the children are gone, Boom says that she was impressed by Torey's actions with Boo, and urged her to get out of the resource classroom where her abilities and skills are wasted on children who will never amount to anything. Torey doesn't respond to this, but is obviously angry and compliments herself on retaining her composure.



# Chapters Thirty through Thirty-Four, Epilogue

## Chapters Thirty through Thirty-Four, Epilogue Summary and Analysis

In May, there's a children's program and Lori is upset that she's excluded. She lashes out, saying if she were a "regular" first-grader, she'd be preparing for the performance. Torey realizes that Lori is safer in her class, but that it's not Lori's first choice. That prompts a tide of emotions with Torey citing her own inability to reach many of the children and her wish that she could make things better for them. In chapter thirty-one, Boo has a tremendous set back which depressed Torey but also affects the other children. Claudia, who had taken him to the bathroom at the time of the episode, feels responsible. Then Torey learns that Lori is going to be retained in first grade. In desperation, Torey chooses a "Dick and Jane" primer and teaches Lori that the short word of the story is "oh" and the longer word "look." With this information, Lori "reads" the book. Torey admits that it's not really reading, but that she's given Lori the gift of success. Lori reads and re-reads the book to everyone multiple times.

In chapter thirty-three, Thomaso announces happily that he's going to live with his Uncle Iago in Texas on the day the class is celebrating Torey's birthday. He clears out his possessions at the end of the day and leaves. Within day, Claudia gives birth to a four-pound baby girl and her mother calls Torey with the news, saying that mother and baby are fine except that the child is jaundiced. Torey notes that she never again sees Claudia. In chapter thirty-four, Claudia calls Torey and says that she's decided to give the child up for adoption, and that she's already signed the papers, as has her mother.

In chapter thirty-four, school ends. On the last day, Lori goes to be with the first graders who are having a party and Torey takes Boo for a walk, stopping to buy them ice cream on the way. Then Lori comes back to the class, angry and upset over having failed first grade. Initially she's unresponsive to Torey's attempts to reach her but eventually decides that she would like to invite Libby along for an impromptu celebration. Lori notes that she is the only student of the four who will be returning in the coming year, but Torey promises that she will also be back, and they leave the room together.

In the epilogue, Torey says that she returns to teach another year and has Lori in her class. Boo has gone to a parochial school for autistic children and sometimes speaks coherently. Claudia graduates valedictorian of her class and Torey has searched the face of every child for one who might be Jenny. One day Torey reads a newspaper clipping of a young boy - Thomaso - who had saved several people from a burning building.

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When Thomaso announces that he's moving, he's wildly excited. Later in the day, Torey realizes he's missing and when she asks about him, Lori says he's in the closet, crying because he misses them already. There, Torey talks with him for awhile. Thomaso tells her to leave him alone and she prepares to get up from her seat on the floor. He stops her, admitting that he didn't really want her to leave. This represents an important breakthrough for the boy. Later, Torey walks Thomaso to the bus stop and he tells her that his father is coming from Spain and that he will live happily with his father, probably never again attending any school. Torey doesn't correct him, seeming to realize that Thomaso knows the truth of the situation and simply needs the comfort that story lends. He proves her correct when he turns, crying, into Torey's arms. He says then that he's not really going with his father, and that he is frightened of the changing situation.

Torey has noted that children with the challenges who wind up in her room are often the prettiest and adorable children. She also notes that if and when they begin to advance, that typically changes. As Mrs. Franklin picks up Boo on the final day, Torey watches him walk down the hall and notes that his appearance is shining. She thinks to herself that she "has not sullied him." This statement is not explained but it seems that Torey is referring to the fact that she hasn't made notable progress with Boo.



# Characters

## Lori Sjukheim

A seven-year-old girl who spends part of each day with Torey, usually working on reading or writing skills. Lori is a twin and she and her sister have been adopted. Outwardly, there's little wrong, but abuse suffered as a child in the home of her biological family resulted in a concussion. Fragments of bone had created lesions and no one knew whether Lori would eventually recover. Torey notes that Lori seems to normal that people tend to forget she has special needs and to grow angry over things she can't help.

An important point about Lori is that she cares deeply for those she cares for. Torey says that Lori quizzes her about everything in her life, just because she cares. Lori is very conscious of her failures and is frustrated by her inability to learn. She fears that what a little boy says about her is true - that she's retarded. When an incident occurs in which Edna Thorson, Lori's morning teacher, embarrasses her in front of the entire class, Lori has a breakdown and refuses to return to school. Eventually taking matters into her own hands, Torey physically carries the child back to class, kicking and screaming. There, she makes Lori a promise that there will be no more reading, writing and spelling lessons and then begins searching for every method available to help Lori learn other things. A Braille clock so that Lori doesn't have to know numbers in order tell time is only one of the small feats accomplished after this point.

When Lori is held back for a second year in the first grade, she's mortified. Lori doesn't learn to read though Torey does help her learn to recognize words in an old Dick and Jane book and notes that the real purpose was to give Lori an accomplishment on that front.

## Boothe Birney Franklin

The seven-year-old boy who is Torey's first student. He is the child of a black mother and a white father. Torey notes that Boothe's mother calls him "Boothe Birney" and that his younger sister can only say "Boo." Torey picks up the nickname and immediately begins calling him Boo as well. Boo is easily over stimulated, isn't toilet trained and never interacts with others. Torey begins working on those fronts though she is frustrated that she can't find a way to reach him so that she can teach him at least the fundamentals.

When Lori brings him a picture book she made by cutting pictures from magazines, there's a brief few minutes in which Boo interacts with the others, correctly naming several of the pictures. Boo becomes attached to Lori though Torey doesn't recognize the depth of the emotion until Lori is absent for several days. On the first day of Lori's absence, Boo searches frantically for her and Torey sees the vacant stare melt away.



She watches as Boo's search becomes frantic and as he mimics Lori's words and words said to Lori. The moment passes before Torey can take any action and later Boo has a serious breakdown, scratching himself and injuring Torey before she manages to calm him.

## **Thomaso**

Thomaso is a scrawny ten-year-old kid with lanky black hair. He arrives in Torey's classroom after spankings, a term in juvenile hall and all other punishments had failed to stop his acting out. He sometimes goes into violent rages and curses constantly. He repeatedly says that his father is coming to get him and creates imaginary lives his father is currently living that prevents his coming. His mother died when he was very young and he was witness to his stepmother shooting and killing both his father and older brother. Torey loves him immediately, recognizing that the anger is a cover for fear.

He makes an immediate connection with Lori and at one point soothes her concerns regarding whether Santa Claus is real. Thomaso is eventually taken by an uncle, Iago, who lives in Texas. Thomaso fears leaving Torey's class and the friends he has finally made there. He believes that the transfer to yet another home is because his behavior has now become acceptable and that he should never have allowed Torey to pull him to that point.

## **Claudia**

A pregnant twelve-year-old girl who is an honor student at a Catholic school until her pregnancy is discovered. She is shy and introverted but comes to loosen up somewhat after a particularly messy and fun painting session. Her parents are difficult and harsh and Torey notes that it's amazing that Claudia is such a pleasant child. Over the course of the year, Torey comes to realize that Claudia believes that her life will be perfect with the birth of this child. She pledges to care for it and says that it will love only her. Torey tries to talk to her about the reality of caring for a baby, but Claudia seems unwilling to consider adoption as an alternative.

At one point, Claudia becomes so overwrought that she tries to commit suicide. The positive point that comes from that is that her parents finally agree that she should have counseling. She gives birth to a four-pound, premature girl and calls Torey a few days later to say that she and her mother have already signed the papers giving the child up for adoption.

## **Torey Hayden**

Author of the book and a resource teacher, Torey had taught in a self-contained classroom for several years before becoming a resource teacher with only a few children at a time, each requiring specific one-on-one time to keep up with their classes. While Torey is the teacher with an educational degree, she admits that she has no





formal "model" for teaching other than her own instinct. Torey hates the failures that inevitably occur and begins the book with a dedication to those children she could not reach.

## **Birk Jones**

Director of special education for the district where Tory works as a resource teacher. Birk is called in to settle the dispute when Torey had taken reading and writing from Lori's curriculum. Torey fears Lori will be removed from her classroom at that point but Birk, upon hearing from Torey that she feels Lori will probably never read, agrees with her methods and gives his support to her decision.

## **Libby Sjukheim**

Lori's twin sister. Libby escaped the devastating result of the abuse shared with Lori and, as a healthy first grader, worries about Lori and fears that the names she's called - including retarded - are true. Libby comes to Torey for reassurance on that point. When Libby tells Torey that she plans to find and kill their biological father when she's grown up, Torey recognizes that hate as the result of the childhood abuse.

## **Mr. Sjukheim**

Lori's adoptive father. It's noted that he's an engineer who is above the normal age approved for adoption but who fights to complete the process to adopt Lori and her twin sister when adoption officials threaten to withdraw approval after the death of Mrs. Sjukheim.

## **Jenny**

The name Claudia chooses for the baby she gives birth to and decides to give up for adoption. Torey notes that for the next few years, she begins looking for a child who resembles Claudia, noting that the children of very young mothers are often those who wind up in resource rooms such as Torey's.

## **Edna Thorson**

Lori's teacher for the part of the day that she's not in Torey's resource room. Edna is very disciplined and believes Lori's problems stem from her own refusal to focus on her work and to try. When Lori rushes into Torey's room crying and hides under the art supply cabinet, Edna says that someone should pull her out. She tells Torey that she's too lenient. Though the principal notes that Edna is too hard on the kids and that she's "killing" some, she is near retirement and no action is taken.



## **Dan Marshall**

The principal at the school where Torey teaches. Dan stands behind Lori for the most part but calls in Birk when Edna and Torey clash over the curriculum that should be followed for Lori.

## **Jocco**

Torey's boyfriend for most of the year spend with the four children, Joc says he loves Torey but hates the fact that she is so dedicated to her job. He asks her to marry him but says he knows she's right when she refuses. Torey knows that they will never hold their relationship together and is only vaguely surprised when the breakup occurs, though she is tremendously hurt.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Torey's Classroom**

The main setting of the story, this room is used by Torey for intensive time spent with only one to four students at a time.

### **The Monkey Bars**

The playground equipment Boo is climbing on when he falls and has to be taken to the emergency room to have his tongue sewn up.

### **The Hospital Emergency Room**

Where Boo is taken after his fall from the monkey bars and where Torey clashes with a physician who refuses to administer anesthetic before sewing up Boo's tongue.

### **The Art Cabinet**

The place where Lori hides after an encounter with her teacher, Edna Thorenson, sends her running into Torey's room.

### **The Town Sixty Miles From Torey's Home and School**

Where Torey goes on the day after Lori's breakdown, indulging in a hot fudge sundae and eating it outside though it's very cold.

### **We Look and See**

The "Dick and Jane" book Torey uses to introduce Lori again to reading.

### **Texas**

Where Thomaso's Uncle Iago lives and where Thomaso is going to live near the end of the school term.

### **Montana**

Where Torey's family lives and where she goes for visits, both at Christmas and during the summer vacation.



## **Under the Birch Tree**

A particular spot on the playground where Torey takes the children to study on a hot day.

## **The Playground Garden**

A particular project Torey arranges for Lori, the garden is soon growing vegetables and provides Lori a sense of accomplishment.



# Themes

## Caring for Others

Though Torey is officially a teacher, there's no doubt that she cares deeply for the student who arrive in her class. For the most part, she calls them beautiful and tells the story of each. Her caring drives her to something well past what is absolutely necessary. For example, Torey spends a great deal of time trying to find a support group for Claudia only to find that such a group doesn't exist in their community. There are many other examples, all testament to Torey's deep love for the children.

Another person who exudes this caring attitude is Lori. Though facing her own troubles, Lori feels a deep compassion for others. When Boo falls from the monkey bars, Lori's reaction is immediate hysteria. She later explains that to Torey, saying that it's much easier if she is the one injured because the means she knows how badly it hurts and what to do to help. When Thomaso indicates his belief that everyone hates him, Torey says it isn't true. She wants to say that she loves him but knows he won't believe it, so she points out that Lori obviously cares for him. Thomaso doesn't object to that statement, obviously recognizing it as the truth. Instead, agrees that no one can reasonable hate Lori either, which indicates the child's ability to prompt caring in others.

## Some Children Can't be Reached

Though Torey refuses to accept that she shouldn't try, she admits that there are some children she simply can't reach. That's a difficult lesson for the children of her class. For example, it's a Valentine gift given by Lori to Boo that prompts Boo's brief moments of lucid interaction with the rest of the class. As the moments pass, Torey knows that Boo will soon return to his vacant stares and lack of interest or control. It does happen and Lori is desperately disappointed.

It's important to remember that Torey continues to search for methods that will work for each child, never giving up on the belief that they can learn some things even if they can't learn everything. An example of this is her dedication to toilet training Boo. A next example is her determination to eliminate reading and writing from Lori's curriculum. Instead, she searches for other things Lori can learn and other ways to learn them, including using a Braille clock for telling time. Though Lori never masters the clock at any more accurately than the quarter hour, she does manage that much. Torey notes that Lori, faced with all the trials, never stops dreaming that she'll be able to learn.

## Faith in the System

Torey notes that a federal mandate requires that children be mainstreamed or placed in the "least restrictive" atmosphere available. For Torey, this means that she has children only on a "resource" basis, a few hours each day. Torey doesn't believe this to be an



acceptable idea and notes that it's less fulfilling for Torey than when she'd had her own classroom. When necessity puts four students in Torey's class for a half day, she is soon caught up in the joys of teaching and in trying to find ways that will reach each of the students, but she notes that she isn't equipped to handle a child like Boo who needs intensive interaction and specialized care.

Then Torey comes up with the idea to eliminate reading from Lori's daily lessons, though Lori's teacher in the "regular" class had included it as part of her curriculum. Torey does so without consulting the teacher or her superior, but knowing that it will sooner or later come out and that she hopes she'll have enough guts to stand up for her decision. When that confrontation occurs, her boss supports her plan but points out that the situation could have been diffused had Torey had enough faith in the system.

# Style

## Perspective

The book is written in first person from a limited perspective. Because this story is being told by Torey from her first-hand observations, there is really no other method that can be used. Only those things known by Torey at the time are included in the story though the epilogue provides a very brief glimpse into the lives of each of the children over the coming years. Some information outside Torey's immediate vision is included, usually through her quest for information. For example, she learns what happened in Edna Thorson's room that sends Lori into a breakdown from Libby, Lori's sister.

What is difficult about the book is that the reader is left to fill in some gaps, which could be distracting for some readers. For example, Torey explains about Lori's arrival in her room after the breakdown in Edna Thorson's class, including the hours Lori spends under the cabinet and the way she eventually convinces her to come out. However, the story then skips ahead several hours to the point where Torey is driving down the highway to a small town some sixty miles away. It's easy to get caught up in how Lori's father might have handled the situation when he arrived and what Lori's response to him would have been. Those details are not included in the story and it's left to the reader's imagination. There are several similar scenes.

## Tone

The overall tone of the book is mixed between hope and despair. For the most part, the hopeful sections are when Torey believes she is about to reach someone, or when she's expecting another new child. The times of despair are when Torey fails to reach a particular child, sees setbacks or even sees that the child makes no improvement under her tutelage. The story is written in a straight-forward style and any reader with an average vocabulary base will have no trouble understanding the story.

There are many humorous scenes and some instances of sarcasm. For the most part, the sarcasm is toned down to the level of the children Torey teaches. For example, when Boo runs from Torey's classroom on his first day there, Torey finds him in a kindergarten classroom with a rug over his head. As she carries Boo out, a child asks what that little boy was doing in their room. Torey answers that he was "looking at things under the rug. The sarcasm here is also humorous. Torey's humor in the face of many trying situations is admirable and makes a great story. Torey refers to this as "experience," saying that her superiors realize that a teacher of special needs children doesn't have the luxury to get angry. It seems likely that the humor remains one of her weapons against the trying situations. When Boo walks very stiffly around the classroom, Torey notes that he looks as if his underwear had been heavily starched.



## Structure

The book is divided into thirty-six chapters, varying in length by several pages with no consistent average. The chapters are numbered rather than named. The chapters typically cover one or two events. For example, the events of the Valentine's cards given to everyone by Lori that prompts Boo's brief moments of lucid reaction to the children is included in a single chapter. That chapter begins with Lori's insistence regarding the cards she'd made and ends with the disappointment of seeing Boo revert back to his vacant stares. Another chapter begins with a conversation between Torey and Boo's mother, Mrs. Franklin, regarding Boo's lack of progress and ends with the showdown in which Thomas admits to Torey that his father is dead. The story falls in chronological order with background information presented mostly as facts Torey finds from some outside source, such as the discussion with Mr. Sjukheim regarding Lori's brain injury and the files on the various students.

The book includes a brief dedication at the beginning which reads, in part, "This book is for Adam, Jack and Lucio, but especially for Clifflie, whom I could not help and whom I have lost to a lifetime of walls without windows." None of these four are included in the story and there is no indication as to whether the names used in the book are pseudonyms.





## Quotes

"I had not found resource teaching particularly fulfilling. I had missed the contained-classroom setting. I missed not having my own group of children. But by far the most, I missed the eerie joy I always felt working with the emotionally disturbed." Chapter 1, Page 11

"Before I could say more, Boo broke my grasp. One frenetic whirl around the room. Over a chair, around a bookcase, across the wide middle area I had cleared. To the door. And out." Torey describing her initial meeting with Boo, Chapter 1, Page 13

"I've been in the business for a long time now, and believe me, you get so you can tell who's going to make it and who isn't. I just cannot understand spending all the extra time and money on these little slowies who'll never amount to anything." Edna Thorsen, Chapter 3, Page 34

"The time spent within the walls of my classroom had formed fully my views of life and death, of love and hate, of justice, reality and the unrestrained brutal beauty of the human spirit." Chapter 5, Page 48

"My gosh, this kid had to be eating beans morning, noon and night to accomplish what he was capable of. I am sure that if sheet music were available, he could have farted 'The Star Spangled Banner.'" Chapter 8, Page 87

"It's that sometimes I wish it was me that got hurt. Then at least I'd know how bad it was and could I do something to make it better. But when somebody else gets hurt, there's nothing you can do to take the hurt away from them." Lori on why she cried when Boo was injured, Chapter 9, Page 100

"Over the years Birk and I had worked together he had sent me psychotics, garbage-eaters, screamers, fighters, inmates and one kid who had been armless, legless and had a hole in his head. I thought I had seen them all." Torey upon learning that she's about to have a pregnant twelve-year-old added to her class, Chapter 12, Page 121

"Yet, in the current state of the art, if one were bothersome, one usually gained attention and subsequently treatment. On the other hand, one could kill oneself quietly and as long as one did not disturb anybody else doing it, no one noticed. Or cared." Chapter 13, Page 134

"The girl is upset and hiding under my cabinet, for gosh sakes. Whatever reason she thinks she has for doing that, I think she needs to pull herself together before we attack her." Torey referring to Lori, Chapter 19, Page 190

"If Lori had been blind or deaf or without arms we would be brutes for bludgeoning her into a breakdown, but because she had a disability no one could see, we were able to



put the blame on her. And we could sit here guiltlessly and do what professional are so good at doing: playing God." Chapter 21, Page 212

"Nothing I could say to that. Seven years old and the cycle of destruction and abuse had already been passed on to her. And the hate." Torey on hearing Libby say she plan to kill her biological father when she grows up, Chapter 22, Page 223

"Somebody been April Fooling you a little too much today? You look lower than a run-over possum." Billie talking to Torey, Chapter 26, Page 260

"My classroom methods were pretty eclectic. I used whatever seemed to me like it might work." Chapter 29, Page 286

"Folding her arms across her knees she hid her face in them and wept the heavy, inconsolable tears of one who had really tried, of one who believed that evil old adage about trying hard enough. In the face of all the odds, Lori had never lost her dreams." Chapter 34, Page 327



## Topics for Discussion

How does Torey's teaching career change after the law demands that students be mainstreamed? Describe her new role as teacher. Does she believe this to be a fulfilling career? How does Torey explain her reasons for wanting to work only with younger children?

Describe the relationship between Torey and Jocco. What is it that drives them apart? Is this something that Torey could change if she so desired? What prompts the final breakup?

Who are the first two students assigned to Torey's class for the entire afternoon rather than for short periods? What are the challenges Torey faces in trying to keep both occupied in learning activities? What is the focus of learning for each of these students? Is Torey ultimately successful in teaching them? Support your answer.

Who is Thomaso? What happened in his past to prompt placement in Torey's classroom? What is his reaction to the placement? How had other educators tried to reach him? Were those methods successful? How does he change over the remainder of the school year?

Who is Claudia? What prompts her placement in Torey's classroom? What does Torey soon learn about Claudia's home life? What are her parents' reaction to Torey's suggestion that Claudia receive counseling? What finally prompts her parents to arrange counseling? What does Claudia say she believes will make her life happy? What is the eventual result of this dream?

Describe the relationship between Thomaso and Lori. What is the relationship between Thomaso and Torey? What is the relationship between Claudia and Boo? What is the relationship between Boo and Lori? What is the relationship between Torey and Jocco? Choose any two of these and write an in-depth comparison.

Who is Libby? What is the reason she has for coming by Torey's room in the afternoon? What is it that Torey eventually discovers to be the real reason for her visits? What does Torey see in Libby when the child talks about her biological father? How close is the relationship between Libby and her sister?