

# **Surviving the Applewhites Study Guide**

**Surviving the Applewhites by Stephanie S. Tolan**

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# Plot Summary

Surviving the Applewhites is the story of thirteen-year-old Jake Semple who after accidentally burning down his school, has been forced to live with an eccentric artist family to avoid being sent to a juvenile detention center. The experience of living with this open-minded and loving family changes Jake's view of the world and ultimately of himself.

From the moment Jake Semple steps foot on Wit's End, the sprawling land owned by the eccentric Applewhite family, he knows he doesn't belong. Jake has dyed red hair gelled into spikes, an eyebrow ring, and he wears all black clothing. All his life, people have been telling Jake that he's a bad kid and that no one has high expectations for his future. He is a foul-mouthed smoker bent on making his stay at the Applewhite home short lived. The Applewhites are an artistic family made up of furniture-making patriarch Zebediah, his two sons Archie, a sculptor, and Randolph, a theatre director, and their respective wives, Lucille, a poet, and Sybil, a bestselling mystery novelist. Archie and Lucille have no children, but they house Ravi Govindaswami, a spiritual guru and Jeremy Bernstein, a budding journalist as well as two adopted goats, Wolfie and Hazel. The other adult couple, Randolph and Sybil, have four children: Hal (a reclusive artist who lives solely in his bedroom with no interaction with the outside world); Cordelia (a ballet choreographer); E.D. (a scientifically-minded organization freak); and Destiny (a four-year-old singer with an insatiable amount of questions). Rounding out the Applewhite family is Winston, the family basset hound and Petey, Zebediah's foul-mouthed parrot.

The novel is split between the perspectives of E.D. and Jake, two teenagers who feel as if they don't properly belong anywhere. Jake, an outcast in society due to his bad behavior, feels as if he is misunderstood, that he is not as bad as everyone makes him out to be. E.D. on the other hand, feels invisible in her family of artists. She has no real artistic talent, and she feels as if her family ignores her because of this, that they have no appreciation for her talent: organization. When Jake arrives to live with the Applewhite family, everyone embraces him with open arms. Everyone, that is, except E.D. who does like the idea of sharing her academic curriculum with a delinquent. For the first few weeks of the new move, Jake is miserable. He hates the mostly-vegetarian diet the Applewhites subscribe to, hates meditating, hates monitoring his own school work, and most of all, hates the weird artistic family that has put their faith in him. All this changes when Randolph Applewhite is asked to direct the community theatre's new production of *The Sound of Music*. After a string of accidents and mishaps, he is left with no directorial team - no sound crew, no costume crew, no make-up girls, no assistant director, etc - and the show has been threatened to close. Showing their staunch support for each other and their familial love, the entire family bands together to keep Randolph's performance on the stage. Even Jake surprises himself by agreeing to act as Rolf, the teenager turned SS soldier, in the production. Randolph's colorful directorial choices have gained nationwide media attention, and a film crew has even been sent out to make a documentary about the family.



With only two weeks before the play is scheduled to open, the community theatre cancels the production after Randolph refuses to cast the theatre president's daughter as Gretle, the youngest von Trap singer, opting to cast his four-year-old son in the role instead. Rather than throwaway the family's month-long hard work, the Applewhites transform their barn into a community theatre and thinking creatively the whole time to avoid various mishaps, produce the play to rave nationwide reviews. Through the course of the production, the family, which had been fraying due to their focus on individual artistic projects, bands together as a unified front. After being hired as her father's assistant manger, E.D. realizes that her talents truly are valued in the family and Jake realizes that acting is the first thing in his life to bring him joy. By the end of the novel, all the individual character flaws have been smoothed out in a testament to family love, dependence on others, and above all, believing in yourself.



# Chapters 1 - 5

## Chapters 1 - 5 Summary

The novel opens with one of the protagonists, E.D. Applewhite explaining that her name is spelled with the letters and should be pronounced as such, not as "Edie" which is not her name. The twelve-year-old girl is explaining this to Jake Semple, a delinquent boy that has come to stay with her family. According to E.D.'s friend Melissa, Jake Semple is famous for burning down his old school. It just so happened that E.D.'s aunt Lucille had been leading a poetry workshop at the time when Jake was kicked out of school and told the headmaster about the Creative Academy, the school the Applewhites run from home, and that she thought it would be the perfect school for the troubled boy. The entire Applewhite family is happy to welcome Jake into their home, but E.D. is suspicious. As she sizes Jake up on the front porch, he pulls a cigarette out of his pocket and lights it. When E.D. says that there's no smoking allowed, Jake unleashes a long string of profanities.

Switching to Jake's perspective, the reader learns through the narration that Jake was two years old when he first learned that swearing could elicit a huge reaction from people. People didn't make a fuss when Jake's parents swore, but as soon as he did, people went white in the face and nearly fainted. Jake hates the idea of adults making decisions for him and he's decided to make his stay at the Applewhite home even shorter than his stay at the middle school. As Jake sizes up E.D., he hears a shriek from the woods and turns just in time to see a horned animal running toward him. Chasing after the animal is the most beautiful girl Jake has ever seen. In response to the screaming, nearly all of the Applewhite family tumble out of the main house to investigate, starting with the grandfather, Zebediah, who immediately snatches Jake's cigarette and grinds it into the cement. Zebediah is followed by his sons, Archie and Randolph, and their respective wives Lucille and Sybil, as well as E.D.'s younger brother, Destiny, and the family dog, Winston. The family immediately begins bickering, fighting about which one of them is the most artistic, and who is jealous of whose talent. Once they have settled down, Lucille takes Jake to the cabin he will share with her and her husband, Archie. Jake is not impressed by his tiny room. The rest of the chapter is spent with Lucille giving Jake a detailed tour of the house and grounds.

Over breakfast that morning, E.D. looks around dejectedly, feeling as if she is the invisible family member. Cordelia, the beautiful dancer Jake saw earlier, just went through a flower decorating phase, and now the entire house is overrun with dying bouquets of flowers the family once thought were staggeringly beautiful, like everything else Cordelia does. As she broods over her cereal, E.D. contemplates just why her family chose to take Jake in. None of the Applewhite children have attended traditional school since a teacher told Cordelia she couldn't paint her zebra black and purple. E.D. misses traditional school, although she appreciates that she can study whatever she wants at home. She muses that the Creative Academy is not so much homeschooling as it is "unschooling" which just means that the students don't follow any sort of



academic plan. Instead, they compose and follow their own curriculums in the pursuit of artistic individualism. E.D. is devastated to learn that, since he can't yet be trusted to create his own curriculum, Jake will be put in a "class" with E.D., following her proposed project deadlines. She is most disappointed that he will have to help with her butterfly project, a project that she's been diligently working on for the entire year and is within two butterflies of completion. After breakfast, E.D. walks down to the fields in search of the great spangled fritillary, the one butterfly that has eluded her all summer. She searches for two hours but finds nothing. Meanwhile, Jake is getting a tour of the vegetable garden with Lucille. E.D. is curious to note that Jake does not seem to be afraid of their pet goats, when she has seen grown men flee in terror from the unruly animals. She is also annoyed to see that, during his grand tour, Jake spends an awfully long time watching Cordelia choreograph and practice the ballet she is working on. When Jake is sent to help E.D. work on the butterfly project, she maliciously states that she heard there were no foster families willing to take Jake in, and that if things don't work out for him with the Applewhites, he'll be sent to a juvenile detention center, and maybe that would be the best thing for everyone. Jake says nothing, but slices his butterfly net through the grass like a scythe.

## Chapters 1 - 5 Analysis

The main point of this first section is to introduce the eccentric and wacky Applewhite family. Many readers will likely be lost as a string of Applewhite family members, without many distinctive characteristics, are introduced at once. This confusion may continue for a significant percent of the novel because the secondary characters - the adults - have little aside from their individual artistic projects to tell them apart. To clarify, Zebediah is the grandfather and a furniture maker. He has two sons, Randolph and Archie. Randolph, an amateur theatre director is married to Sybil, a best-selling novelist. They have four children: Hal, a reclusive artist who hasn't left his bedroom in months, Cordelia, a choreographer, E.D. an organized science nerd, and Destiny, who is four-years-old. Zebediah's other son, Archie, is married to Lucille, a poet. They have no children. The entire Applewhite family lives together on a massive lot of land known as Wit's End. Wit's End is comprised of the main house, various artistic cottages, the woodworking shop a large barn that is later transformed into a community theatre, a schoolroom, a goat pen, and a large lot of woods and fields.

In this first section, many of the emotional conflicts of the novel are set up. The entire Applewhite family is on the edge of fracture as their delicate artistic temperaments fuel jealousy and insecurity about each other's projects and which is the most important. Although the Applewhite family loves each other, Tolson casts them as selfish artists, each positive that they are working on "the next big thing." This mindset perhaps affects Sybil the most as she is attempting to shed her mainstream writing success in favor of a more critically acclaimed literary masterpiece, and she is struggling with writers' block in the process. Because the majority of the Applewhite family works in the visual arts, E.D. often feels as if she doesn't belong in the family, calling herself "the invisible Applewhite." E.D. is extraordinarily intelligent, creative when it comes to school work, and organized but she doesn't think her family values any of these qualities. Each of the



Applewhites is successful in their own skill, be it acting, writing, painting, dancing, or sculpting. Because everyone is focused on themselves and their own projects, there isn't anyone to encourage E.D.'s academic pursuits, which often leaves her feeling lonely and unappreciated. These insecurities fuel most of E.D.'s actions throughout the novel.

One thing E.D. is particularly insecure about is Jake's arrival at Wit's End. Although she tries to hide her insecurity about her family behind the assertion that Jake is unstable and violent, it is pretty clear that she fears the family already cares more about Jake than they do about her. For his part, Jake is also an extremely insecure teenager. He has affected a very tough persona - complete with dyed hair, a spiky dog collar, all black clothing, chain smoking, and of course, swearing. Jake has adopted this persona to help control his situation. Ever since he was a small child, he's been labeled as "a bad kid" that won't amount to anything. These expectations are easy to meet and don't provide disappointment in Jake's life. As the novel progresses, however, it will become clear that Jake is not a bad kid and all he needs to succeed in life is for people to believe he can do better.



# Chapters 6 - 10

## Chapters 6 - 10 Summary

Jake sits on the front steps of the family home thinking about what E.D. said to him in the field. Playing the bad boy has always been easy for him: no one has ever expected any different from him. For Jake, it's one thing to be considered a bad boy, but it's another thing entirely to be forced to live with them. As he sits brooding, Winston flops down at his feet requesting a belly rub. Jake obliges and finds himself actually laughing with delight at the dog. Soon after, Destiny joins them with a million, nonstop questions, mostly about Jake's spiky hair. Destiny also asks if Jake has any matches he could play with, which Jake refuses. This gets him thinking about the school everything thinks he burnt down, which he did, but no one seems to care that it was an accident. As Jake considers his unfortunate reputation, Randolph bursts from the house with Cordelia following behind him. Randolph is in a big hurry to get down to the community theatre which has just phoned to ask if he would like to direct the new production of *The Sound of Music*. Randolph would like Cordelia to join him as the choreographer, but she is irate that her father thinks his production is more important than the one-woman ballet she's been choreographing for over a year. Randolph jumps into his convertible and races off, only to return a few moments later because he forgot his music. Thoroughly frazzled, he careens down the driveway at breakneck speed only to smash into oncoming traffic.

Everyone comes screaming out of the house when they hear the crash. Randolph has plowed into a tall, thin, pale and pimply young man who looks as though he might cry. Randolph is red-faced and furious, refusing to accept any responsibility for the crash. As it turns out, the young man, Jeremy Bernstein, has been sent by a local literary journal to interview Sybil about her upcoming novel. In fact, he had been invited to dinner that evening. Confused, Sybil claims that the interview was scheduled for the 16th, which is days away. The rest of the family looks at her, shocked. Today IS the 16th. Their incredulous response prompts Sybil to claim that she is immersed in the most difficult and complex literary work of her career, and she receives absolutely no support from her family! Of course, this prompts another argument between Sybil and Randolph about whose artistic project is more valuable, and therefore more deserving of family support. In the midst of the argument, Jeremy Bernstein bursts into tears at the realization that his car is totaled, and he's arrived from out of town, without yet securing a place to stay. Lucille takes the young man under her wing and suggests that he can stay in the extra cottage on the family grounds.

Since no one was planning on Jeremy Bernstein coming for dinner, no one has done any grocery shopping and there is precious little food to go around the table. Despite this, Jeremy Bernstein is clearly pleased to be sharing a meal with Sybil Johnson, a writer whose work he deeply appreciates. As Bernstein rambles on and on about the effect Sybil's work has had on the literary world, Zebediah lets out a long breath and muses, "Who would have guessed that Debbie Applewhite would turn into a literary genius before our eyes" (Page 62). When Bernstein hears Sybil's legal name, he nearly





spits out his food in surprise. As it turns out, Bernstein reviewed Randolph Applewhite's off-Broadway revival of the play *Time Remembered* and was deeply moved by the performance. He is also a huge fan of Zebediah Applewhite's handicrafts, Lucille's poetry, and Archie's woodcarvings. He can barely breathe with excitement at being surrounded by so many accomplished and well-respected artists. Sybil sits coldly in her chair staring, unblinking at the journalist before saying, "I was under the impression that you were coming to interview me" (p. 64). Although her tone is icy, Sybil still uses the opportunity to praise her children's artistic talents - from Hal, the introverted painter, to Cordelia, the passionate dancer, to little Destiny, whose artistic drive hasn't even taken form yet. When he hears about all the talented children, and the art school started by the family - which has even taken in a lucky foster child! - he thinks it would be a great idea to pitch a reality show about the Creative Academy to his friend at a television network. When she hears this, E.D. gets up and angrily starts clearing away the dinner dishes, smashing around in the cupboards and sink. In all her boasting, Sybil had not mentioned E.D. once, not one single word.

## Chapters 6 - 10 Analysis

In this section, the reader learns that Jake did, whether accidentally or not, burn down his old middle school. To fit with his tough persona, Jake claims that he burned the school down with a Molotov Cocktail, but this is obviously a lie. Jake's insecurities are so high that he even feels as if he needs to impress a four-year-old with his toughness, which is why he makes up the elaborate lie about how the school burned down. As the novel progresses, the reader will learn that the school burned down accidentally and Jake simply took the blame for it because everyone believed he did it. Conflicts like this will come up numerous times in the novel - when bad things happen, people blame Jake.

The other important thing that happens in this section is that Randolph is hired to direct a performance of *The Sound of Music* for the local theatre. This production is the centerpiece of the novel's plot, and most of the novel's metaphors are built off of *The Sound of Music*'s storyline. Jeremy Bernstein is introduced as an integral new character who is not only fascinated by the entire Applewhite family, but also has the power to make them famous in either a reality television series or a documentary film. This suggestion taps into the artists' natural desire to be famous, and fans their egos into higher grandeur than ever before. Not surprisingly E.D. feels painfully left out of this excitement as she has no visual artistic skills and therefore would be an unimportant secondary character in the film.



# Chapters 11 - 15

## Chapters 11 - 15 Summary

As a part of her huge butterfly science project, E.D. has incorporated a teaching element because she read once that the best way to learn something is to teach it to another person. She has brought all the needed ingredients to make a papier-mâché chrysalis to teach Destiny about metamorphosis. In the classroom, Destiny continues to pester Jake about the color of his hair, but Jake has blocked out the boy's incessant questions with his headphones. This comes to an abrupt halt when Randolph, sleep still sticking his eyes together, enters the classroom and unceremoniously yanks the headphones from Jake's ears, claiming they'll make him deaf by the time he's twenty. Jake breaks into a cacophony of swearing, but Randolph barely notices because he's lamenting about his terrible audition process. Apparently, there is no one with any talent in all of Traybridge and Randolph has no idea how he will cast *The Sound of Music*.

When Randolph leaves, E.D. prepares the papier-mâché project for Destiny, then leaves Jake in charge so she can explore the fields in search of the elusive great spangled fritillary, the last butterfly she needs to complete her project. When she comes back an hour later, Jake is no longer in the classroom, and Destiny has used the wheat glue to gel his hair into spikes like Jake's. Jake is annoyed to learn that Sybil expects him to wash the paste out of Destiny's hair because she feels Jake was Destiny's inspiration. For a week after the wheat paste debacle, Destiny will not stop experimenting with his hair using watercolor paints and permanent markers. A week later, Jake stands in front of the mirror gelling his hair into the same spikes, thinking about how time consuming this process is, and how none of the Applewhites even seem to take notice of his punk-rock appearance, and they certainly aren't intimidated by it, so what's the point?

Randolph has been blasting the soundtrack of *The Sound of Music* through the house for over a week now, and every family knows every single word to every single song, and some of them are starting to go mad from the repetition. E.D. swears that if she hears those songs one more time, she will go crazy. Jake uses this as his last-ditch effort to annoy E.D. and takes to singing the songs at the top of his lungs whenever he's around her. Even when Randolph is away trying to complete his utterly futile audition process, E.D. can still hear the songs looping through her head, and now with Jake adding to her misery, she spends the majority of her time in the fields searching for the fritillary butterfly to no avail.

## Chapters 11 - 15 Analysis

In this section, E.D.'s butterfly project is explored in greater detail. This is an important project for E.D., who prides herself on her academic organization and ability to complete goals that she's set for herself with little motivation from the adults around her. In his



constant pursuit of annoyance, Jake often uses this project as a way to tease E.D. because it is very clear that she is sensitive about it. Although the project isn't artistic, as many of the projects in the Applewhite home are, it is clear that E.D. prides herself on the butterfly project in the same way that her mother prides herself on her novels, her father on his productions, and her sister on her choreography. E.D.'s seemingly endless pursuit of the fritillary butterfly is mirrored by her father's seemingly endless pursuit of a cast for his play. The two characters are equally determined, equally motivated, and equally prideful in their projects. Regardless of outside influence, they want to capture their rare star their own way. Butterflies will continue to be important symbols in the novel, particularly when Randolph succeeds in finding his star in Jake, who will undergo a major transformation - a metamorphosis of sorts - as the novel progresses.

In this section, Jake begins to feel that there is something fundamentally changing about who he is and how he fits into society. While he is standing in front of the mirror doing his hair, he realizes that this is actually a time-consuming process that none of the Applewhites seem to notice and certainly aren't intimidated by. In fact, none of Jake's bad behaviors get him the negative attention he is so used to receiving; none of them earn Jake the condemnation that he is "a bad kid" doing "bad things." At the Applewhite home, Jake's swearing goes completely unnoticed - except by Destiny who simply giggles when he hears it and E.D. who just rolls her eyes - his smoking elicits emotional speeches from Lucille about the exploitation of tobacco workers, not the ill effects on Jake's health, and he's beginning to notice that the family actually trust him with such responsibilities as looking after Destiny and monitoring his own schoolwork. For the first time in his life, there are expectations that Jake will do the right thing, that he will amount to something, but Jake doesn't quite know how to handle the positive energy. When he looks at himself in the mirror, he doesn't recognize who he is anymore and he feels as if the Jake Semple he's known for thirteen years is disappearing.



# Chapters 16 - 20

## Chapters 16 - 20 Summary

Jake rides with Randolph to the auditions for *The Sound of Music*. When they arrive at the theater, Jake is surprised to see that the building resembles a library and not a grand Shakespearean theatre. When they enter the theatre, everyone turns toward Randolph with a hushed quiet anticipation and a woman quickly approaches to say that she hopes the audition period will come to a close soon. Randolph has been auditioning people for too long without casting a single role. Today, Jake is here to audition for Rolf alongside a seventeen-year-old redheaded boy. Jake is pleased to see that while the red-headed boy is undeniably a better actor than he is, he cannot sing. As they drive back to Wit's End, Randolph says that he's decided to cast Jake as Rolf with Jeannie Ng, a Vietnamese girl, as Liesle because she is short, making it more believable that Jake is seventeen years old. As Randolph talks, he is interrupted by a horrible sound, like a siren wailing, and Winston hurls himself into the convertible. The dog has been having separation anxiety being away from Jake and hasn't stopped howling for the past four hours. Sybil, who is exasperated by her inability to finish her novel, insists that from now on, Jake will have to take the dog to rehearsals with him because Winston cannot be left alone. The family's hysteria about the howling dog is only interrupted by Randolph's excited shouts that he's finally cast the show! He has chosen the best singers and actors that he could find, resulting in a multi-ethnic cast of an African-American Maria, as well as two African-American von Trap children and two Vietnamese von Trap children. Some of the family members are confused by Randolph's casting choices as the von Trap's are a very famous Austrian - and therefore Caucasian - family, and they wonder whether the audience will be confused. Randolph hides the fact that there simply weren't enough talented actors to cast a single raced family behind the claim that he wants to make a political statement with his colorblind cast.

Rehearsals start for *The Sound of Music* and there is a general feeling of upset within the cast. Many seasoned veterans of the community theatre have been relegated to small roles without lines, while newcomers like Jake have been given large roles. The red-headed kid Jake auditioned against even goes so far as to say the audience would never believe that Jake is seventeen. Randolph settles the argumentative feel by saying that he expects his cast to act professionally both while they are on stage and off. He welcomes anyone unhappy with their casting to leave the production immediately, but no one does. When he reveals that a television crew from a national network will be coming to film bits from their production for a reality TV show about his family, the feeling of unrest lifts and everyone is excited again. After the rehearsal, Randolph and Jake drive home and discover that Ravi Govindaswami, Lucille's guru, has arrived to teach the family about meditation. Lucille enters the kitchen, obviously in emotional distress, to say that caterpillars have taken over her parsley in the garden. She's politely asked them to leave, but none of them will listen. Suddenly, Jake has a great idea. He rushes outside and carefully picks the caterpillars off the parsley and takes them inside, setting up a small ecosystem for them in an abandoned aquarium. While he builds, he



thinks about Zebediah's question from a week earlier, when he simply asked the boy, "What gives you joy?" (p. 123). Jake hadn't really understood the question, and of course had no idea how to answer it. Now at least he'll have an educational goal to show Zebediah, to prove that he's trying to figure it out. When E.D. enters the schoolroom to see what Jake has been up to, he excitedly shows her the aquarium, claiming it will be a far better teaching tool for Destiny than a papier-mâché caterpillar. Destiny is overwhelmed with excitement, but E.D. just glowers jealously at Jake.

E.D. is feeling more threatened in her own home than ever. She is annoyed that Jeremy Bernstein has overtaken the schoolroom computer to write his book about the Applewhite family, preventing E.D. from working on her math homework. She's annoyed that her mother doesn't seem to care about what's happening in her children's lives because she's too preoccupied with writing her novel. But most of all, E.D. is annoyed that Jake Semple has thought of the caterpillar project. Of course it's a better teaching tool than papier-mâché, and she's annoyed that she didn't come up with the idea. Jake had shown initiative, creativity, good sense and cooperation. Deep down, E.D. fears that he may be better at the one thing E.D. prides herself in: organization. Every day, Destiny rushes into the schoolroom to see if the caterpillars - many of which have already spun themselves into chrysalises - have emerged as butterflies. Today, there is no time to inspect the aquarium because Randolph comes running, shouting through the house. The entire technical staff of *The Sound of Music* - the designer, costumer, choreographer, lights, props, and the stage manager - has quit the production. After some pointed questioning, the family learns that they've quit because Randolph is too difficult, too bullying, to work with. Randolph begs his family to help him keep the production alive. Despite the fact that they are all working on individual projects, they eventually agree to help keep the production afloat so long as Randolph doesn't bully them into quitting as well. Even Hal, whose voice emerges from his bedroom, offers to design the sets and Jeremy Bernstein offers to play his accordion as the soundtrack. E.D. slinks off to the kitchen knowing that her skills would never be needed in this artistic project, but her father stops her short. "Of course I need you, more than anyone" he shouts. "There's nobody else in this family organized enough to handle the job [of stage manager]!" (p. 138).

With everyone now working diligently on their production projects, only Jake has enough spare time to care for Destiny because he is only expected to practice his lines and singing. Govindaswami becomes the full-time caterer, churning out delicious curries, chutneys, and gallon after gallon of Grape Kool-Aid. Because there is no one else around to watch Destiny, Jake must take the four-year-old to rehearsals with him, and immediately finds that it is difficult to concentrate on his role while keeping a child entertained for four, sometimes even five hours at a time. Destiny busies himself by getting into mischief, like unscrewing all the seats from the theatre chairs. Destiny is desperate to be apart of the play, but there are no roles left, which leaves the boy angry and sulking. Jake explains that acting is simply pretending to be someone that you're not, and that people act all the time. Destiny nods as if he understands. At rehearsal that night, Destiny continues sulking in the corner before disappearing. A few minutes later, smoke wafts through the rehearsal room and panic erupts. People start running and screaming in search of the fire. Destiny emerges from the ruckus with a lighter in



his hands. "I was acting!" he says. "I was pretending to be Jake, burning down his school. Only I didn't have any gasoline" (p. 147).

## Chapters 16 - 20 Analysis

In the first few sections of the novel, the reader sees that through all the craziness of living with the Applewhites, and despite his best efforts, Jake truly is beginning to form relationships with those around him, most notably with four-year-old Destiny and the family dog, Winston. Perhaps this is because forming relationships with children and animals requires less affectation than forming relationships with adults. Jake feels freer to be himself with these two because he doesn't feel they will judge him as quickly as adults do. In response to Jake making himself vulnerable in friendship, he is rewarded with a dog that has developed separation anxiety from being away from him, and a four-year-old that despite blood ties, refers to Jake as 'the bestest big brother.' Destiny's admiration comes at a steep price, however, as Jake realizes the effect his behaviors have on the young boy who looks up to him. For the majority of the novel, Destiny's desire to model his behaviors after Jake's have taken the innocent form of wanting to sport the same dyed, spiky hairdo. His admiration turns dangerous when, after his request to be an actor like Jake is denied, he sets fire to the community theatre, much like he believes Jake did to his middle school. Now Jake understands first-hand what it means to be a role model and how important his influence can be over Destiny. This realization is written alongside Jake's caterpillar project, in which he sets up a cage of caterpillars in the hopes of watching them transform into butterflies. This sets up the most important symbol in the novel: Jake's final transformation.

Aside from the butterfly symbolism, the other important symbolism in the novel surrounds the cast of Randolph's production of *The Sound of Music*. However accidental, Randolph has cast a multi-raced cast to play the traditionally Austrian von Trap family. In the play, a rich baron marries a woman and has seven children before the mother dies, leaving the widowed baron alone with a houseful of children. He then hires a young nun from the abbey to work as the children's governess, and he falls in love with her. This story unfolds during the Second World War with the Nazis expanding their occupation of Austria. At the end of the play, the von Trap family flees Austria and their eldest daughter's boyfriend, Rolf - who has become an SS guard for the Nazis - discovers the family. Instead of turning them in, Rolf's love for Lise drives him to let the family escape, whatever his punishment may be. The idea to cast the Austrian family as a mix of African-American, Vietnamese, and white children is an interesting one, and one that the Applewhite family itself has mixed reactions to, but it is the perfect metaphor to the Applewhite family itself. During the family discussion of Randolph's casting choices, Cordelia points out that the play itself is about falling in love and escaping Nazi rule - the Nazis were, of course, infamous for the most terrible example of racial hatred in modern times - so selecting a colorblind cast adds another dimension of symbolism to the play. Additionally, the casting reflects what has happened in the Applewhite home since Jake arrived. With small exceptions, the family has welcomed him into their family with open arms, with Destiny even going so far as to call Jake his brother. E.D. - the perpetual scientist - argues that, "The von Trap children all have the



same parents. There's biology to think about. You can't have three different races in one family! It doesn't make sense: (p. 114). This is a reflection of E.D.'s inability to welcome Jake into her family, because he doesn't belong by blood. Of course the rest of the family argues that love is more important than blood, which will be the overarching message of the novel.

Of all the Applewhites, Randolph has perhaps the most extreme artistic temperament, playing out the cliché characterization of a self-centered diva demanding perfection at all cost. The staff of his production rightfully interprets this behavior as bullying, and they quit. With no one left to turn to, Randolph must beg his family to help save his production, although he presents it as an opportunity for them to further their own artistic visions. Each protecting their own egos - Sybil, for example, pretends to be sacrificing her successful writing time even though everyone knows she is struggling with writers block and would welcome the break - to help Randolph. Finally, E.D.'s talents are recognized by her father who admits that he would never be able to stage the production without E.D.'s organization skills.



# Chapters 21 - 25

## Chapters 21 - 25 Summary

E.D. has very little time to revel in being the hero after extinguishing Destiny's garbage can fire because the little girl cast to play Gretel von Trap has fallen off the stage during the commotion and broken her arm. Randolph is devastated - not because the little girl was injured, but because there is absolutely no one else who can play her role. That night, Mrs. Montrose, the president of the theatre board, calls to speak with Randolph. She is obviously incensed about the fire and wants to cancel the show. E.D., who answered the phone, manages to sweeten Mrs. Montrose by saying that the television production company will be very disappointed to hear that the production has been cancelled, as they wanted to use it as the focal point for their news article about the Applewhite family. When that doesn't appease Mrs. Montrose, E.D. bravely claims that her father insisted on seeing Priscilla Montrose, Mrs. Montrose's daughter, one final time, claiming that Priscilla is the only child talented enough to step into the role of Gretel von Trap. She says that the associate producer of the television show will be coming over for dinner tonight, and wouldn't Mrs. Montrose like to join them? When Randolph hears of this, he is outraged, shouting that he would never, ever cast that untalented brat Priscilla in his production and that he would rather have the show cancelled! The rest of the Applewhite family, fearing that their hard work will go to waste, call Randolph selfish, bullying him into at least meeting with Priscilla one last time. When Mrs. Montrose and her daughter arrive for dinner, they look even primmer and more stuck-up than anyone imagined. Govindaswami has made an extra spicy fried chicken dish, which the Montroses look disgusted by. The dish is far too spicy for the uptight family, but they refuse to try the cooling yogurt sauce that Govindaswami has prepared. Instead, the family pushes the food around their plates, eating only small bites of rice.

Earlier, Jake had been in the schoolroom trying to avoid Destiny and his many questions. He listened to the boy walking around the garden singing the yodeling song from *The Sound of Music* at the top of his lungs. Suddenly, the singing turned to screaming as the boy was attacked by Wolfie, the goat he had been trying to herd as the song suggested. Jake ran from the room and saved the frightened boy, pushing the massive goat back into his pen. He took Destiny back to the schoolroom to watch as the first butterfly emerged from its chrysalis. When Priscilla Montrose has grown bored with the meal, Destiny offers to take her into the schoolroom to check if the emerged butterfly's wings had dried yet. A few moments pass in which the adults at the table discuss the production before a bloodcurdling scream rips through the dining room. Instead of taking Priscilla to the schoolroom, Destiny has taken her to the goat pen to show her Wolfie, who, of course, tried to attack Priscilla, terrifying her. Mrs. Montrose runs from the house, grabs her daughter's arm, shove her in the car, and quickly drives away. Inside, Jake helps quiet Destiny by helping him cook a sweet concoction for his butterfly, now named Blackie, to drink out of sugar, water, and Kool-Aid. Destiny is enraptured when he watches the butterfly drink the delicious meal. Later, Randolph





announces that he's decided to cast Destiny as Gretel, despite the fact that doing so will require a complete rewrite of the script to turn Gretel into a boy. In the end, his controversial decision doesn't matter, because Mrs. Montrose phones to say that she's decided to cancel the show. Everyone in the family is devastated, knowing that their weeks of hard work have been for nothing. Destiny, whose woken up early to feed his butterfly, uses the Kool-Aid powder to dye his hair, along with his forehead and ears - dark purple. Meanwhile, E.D. works on a plan to save her father's production.

## Chapters 21 - 25 Analysis

Quick thinking E.D. not only extinguishes the garbage can fire that threatens to burn down the Traybridge Little Theatre, she also acts quickly on the phone to prevent Mrs. Montrose - who has been out for blood ever since Randolph refused to cast her nine-year-old daughter in his production - from canceling the play. E.D. understands the relentless pursuit of fame present in a many artists, and their mothers in this case, and manipulates that desire for her father's benefit. Not surprisingly, Randolph refuses to budge and will not, under any circumstances - even to save his production - cast Priscilla Montrose in his play. This outrages his family because they fear the play will be cancelled and all their hard work will be for nothing. Randolph is steadfast in his artistic integrity and will not compromise for anyone. While the rest of the Applewhite clan argue for their own personal success within the play, only E.D. thinks about how the family can work together, putting their own egos aside, to save the production.

Before the Montroses arrive for dinner, there have been numerous instances of foreshadowing to prepare the reader for Wolfie's attack on Priscilla. In the chapter before Mrs. Montrose's arrival, Destiny, who is still desperate to be cast in his father's production, has been singing the famous yodel of the lonely goatherd for days. On this particular day, he decides to actually herd the goats as practice for the song and is attacked. It should be no surprise then when Destiny takes Priscilla out to the goat pen after hearing the girl sing the goatherd yodel for her audition. It is possible that Mrs. Montrose would have accepted Randolph's decision not to cast Priscilla in the play, but this disappointment, coupled with the outrageously spicy food Govindaswami serves, and the goat attack on Priscilla is altogether too much. Mrs. Montrose has no patience or understanding left and so she cancels the show.

Meanwhile, the caterpillars that Jake saved have started to emerge from their chrysalises, preparing the reader for Jake's final transformation. Keen readers may be reminded of Zebediah's probing question from chapter 18 when he asked Jake what brought him joy. Jake had no idea how to answer this question at the time, perhaps because he had never thought about what truly makes him happy, but the reader should be prepared for Jake to discover the answer, and ultimately discover his true happiness, by the end of the novel. In a way, Jake is like the freshly emerged butterfly, with wet, unattractive wings. This will all change in the novel's final section.



# Chapters 26 - 30

## Chapters 26 - 30 Summary

Jake finds an old cigarette mixed in with his belongings and takes it deep into the woods to smoke. He is surprised to find that the cigarette tastes terrible and he has no desire to continue smoking after these months away from it. When he walks back home, he finds that Applewhite family all aflutter with the decision to transform their huge barn into a stage for the production of *The Sound of Music*. Even Hal has come out from his room to help transform the barn, and Jake gets his first ever look at the reclusive artist. With the decision to build a theatre on the family premises, things are busier than they ever have been. They have only ten days before the show is set to open, and all of Wit's End is aflutter with actors coming and going to rehearsal, construction workers vigilantly building the sets and stage, and of course, the entire Applewhite family running amok, shouting orders and trying to get things done. Govindaswami continues to cook up a storm, but no one can even stop for proper meals. Since Mrs. Montrose called the local paper to announce her cancellation of the show, newspaper reports and journalists have been stopping by to interview Randolph about his reaction, and have been shocked into forming new stories with new angles about the new production. They are especially interested in the fact that the Applewhites have practically adopted Jake, the boy accused of burning down the local middle school, questioning whether he had anything to do with the arson attack at the Traybridge Little Theatre. Due to all the publicity, the Applewhite production of *The Sound of Music* has been selling out extraordinarily well. Today, the television production company is set to arrive for filming, and the Applewhites frantically clean their home - which hasn't been cleaned in months - in preparation. Jake sneaks off into the bathroom and when he emerges, he shocks everyone. He has shaven off his dyed-red, spiky hair and removed all his facial piercings in the hopes of looking more like his character, Rolf, the teenager who joined the German SS during the Second World War. The change is so unsettling for Winston that he barks and snaps at the new Jake. Eventually, he is goaded back into friendship with a full bag of liver treats.

Later that day, the news reporter, Marcia Manning arrives. Jake had seen her on television many times and always thought she was sweet and polite, but when she arrives, she is nasty and rude, snatching things out of people's hands and shoving them out of her way. She manipulates the Applewhite family to get particular shots - like Destiny rubbing the dog's belly - but she refuses to film Jake with his new look, claiming that he doesn't look damaged enough anymore, and says she'll just run old footage from the school fire if she needs filler material. On the morning of the play's opening, no one in the Applewhite family has slept for days. E.D. looks outside and fears that it is going to rain, but her father claims the theatre gods are on their side. E.D. takes a deep breath as the theatre fills up, well past its capacity, and calls for the houselights to be brought down. Her hands shake as she lights the nuns candles, one by one, for the opening sequence set in an abbey, but everything seems to go to plan. Halfway through the play, the rain starts, and grows to swell so loud that the lines can't be heard above the rain pounding against the barn roof. In the final scene, in which the von Trap family



run away from the Nazi SS and hide in that same abbey, lightning strikes the building, killing the power. Thinking quickly, E.D. calls for the nuns to be brought back on stage with the candles to light the final, emotional scene. The play closes to uproarious applause. In the days that follow, the Applewhite family basks in the glow of rave after rave in the local newspapers. The colorblind cast was a massive success, and many newspapers suggest that the Applewhite family theatre will rival the Traybridge Little Theatre in popularity in the coming years. The novel closes with Jake thinking that he finally has an answer to Zebediah's question about what brings him joy. He knows what it is now: acting. For once, Jake Semple believes he is worth the dreams of a future.

## Chapters 26 - 30 Analysis

In the final section of the novel, the Applewhite family has completely transformed from the argumentative, tense, egotistical family presented in the opening section of the novel. Through the production of *The Sound of Music*, they have begun working together as a proper team, putting the production first, not their own interests. The transformation is so great that even Hal, a reclusive through the whole novel, has come out of his room to help. The family is eating together, caring for the house, and sharing both the responsibilities and joys of the play. Lucille, Cordelia, and Sybil become the costume designers, E.D. becomes the organized stage manager, Hal, Archie, and Zebediah design and construct the stage and lighting, Jeremy handles the music, while Destiny and Jake fill on as actors on stage. In the end, the production is a smashing success, and the family sees each other's talent in a new light, realizing for the first time, the artistic value of family unity. The success of the production teaches the Applewhites, and indeed the readers themselves, that artistic integrity should never be compromised, and that when you truly believe in yourself as an artist, you will ultimately reach success.

The symbolism of the butterfly continues as Jake undergoes an extreme physical transformation, much like a caterpillar does, in shaving his trademark spiky hair and removing all his facial piercings. Through these actions, Jake is shedding his old, bad-boy appearance and has emotionally prepared himself to start his new, happy life afresh with a new look. By the end of the novel, all the characters' individual conflicts have been smoothed out in a testament of family love. E.D. realizes that her talents truly are valued in the family, and Jake realizes that acting is the first thing in his life to bring him joy. The moral of the novel is that with love, dependence on others, and above all, believing in yourself, you will find life's happiness.



# Characters

## Jake Semple

Jake Semple is the thirteen-year-old protagonist of the novel. All his life, people have been telling Jake that he's "a bad kid" and that he won't ever amount to anything. From the age of two, Jake has been using vile curse words just to get a reaction out of people, and it has worked. When swearing no longer gets him the negative attention he craves, Jake changes his look, incorporating dyed-red hair gelled into spikes, spiked dog collars around his neck, and all black clothing. When this no longer frightens people, his behavior turns more violent, culminating in Jake accidentally burning down his middle school, although no one believes him when he says it was an accident. At first Jake is sent to live with his grandfather, but when that placement fails, he is threatened with a permanent placement in a juvenile detention center. His last hope is a temporary placement with the artistic Applewhite family who run a progressive and independent art school in North Carolina.

When Jake first arrives at the Applewhite home, he does everything to try to annoy the family, from smoking on the smoke-free campus to cursing wildly to ignoring his academic assignments. When all of this fails to convince the Applewhite family that Jake truly is "a bad kid," he feels as if he is disappearing and is forced to consider the fact that maybe the Applewhites are right and that maybe he isn't "a bad kid." In Jake's final attempt to annoy the Applewhite family, he begins singing the show tunes from *The Sound of Music* - the play Randolph Applewhite is directing - at the top of his lungs, but this too backfires as Randolph convinces himself that only Jake can play the part of Rolf, the lovesick Austrian teenager turned SS guard in the play. Surprising even himself, Jake excels in the role and finds that acting is the one thing that has ever brought him joy in his life. By the end of the novel, Jake's bad behavior has ceased and he excels not only on stage but in the classroom as well. He takes on responsibility well and becomes a productive member of the Applewhite family.

## E.D. Applewhite

E.D. Applewhite is the middle child in the eccentric and artistic Applewhite family. At twelve years old, she is very sensitive to the family's emphasis on artistic talent, particularly because she doesn't feel like she possesses any. E.D. regularly feels that she is the invisible Applewhite and that her family doesn't even know she's there because the projects she focuses her time on are more scholarly and academic than artistic. E.D. is the only Applewhite who takes offense to the idea of Jake Semple coming to live with them primarily because she has been asked to let Jake borrow her academic curriculum, something she took months to create specifically for her own academic journey. Having to share her work makes her feel that her family doesn't appreciate her own individuality.



E.D.'s anger toward Jake reaches a boiling point when Jake completes E.D.'s prized butterfly project; a project that she's been working on all year and for which she has been hunting all season to locate one of the elusive fritillary butterflies. Everything changes for E.D., however, when her father loses his production of *The Sound of Music* scheduled to be staged at the Traybridge Little Theatre. After he asks E.D. to step in as the production's stage manager - he claims she is the only person he knows organized enough to handle the responsibility - it is E.D.'s idea to stage the play in the family barn, thus saving the production. On the opening night's performance, E.D. makes a series of creative and organized decisions that bring the production national acclaim. By the end of the novel, E.D. realizes that her family loves and respects her talents and she becomes a self-assured and confident member of the Applewhite family.

## **Cordelia Applewhite**

Cordelia Applewhite is the eldest of Sylvie and Randolph's children. She is an extremely talented dancer who, during the course of the novel, is choreographing and dancing in a one-woman ballet. She is extraordinarily beautiful, but is somewhat stuck-up and focused solely on her own artistic career.

## **Sybil Johnson (Debbie Applewhite)**

Sybil Johnson (Debbie Applewhite) is a best-selling author known primarily for her mystery novels starring Petunia Grantham, a florist-turned-amateur detective. She spends the majority of the novel locked away in her writing room penning the next great literary masterpiece, which is clearly a struggle for her although she would never admit this.

## **Randolph Applewhite**

Randolph Applewhite is an amateur stage director who is scatterbrained and somewhat self-centered. During the novel, Randolph has been hired to direct a community theatre performance of *The Sound of Music*, which he treats as if it were a multi-million dollar Broadway production. After a series of conceited, selfish, and self-centered directorial decisions that ultimately preserve Randolph's artistic integrity, his production of *The Sound of Music* is cancelled and he is forced to beg his family for help once again, this time to save the play. E.D. comes up with the idea to transform the family barn into a theatre, thus saving the production and earning it national acclaim.

## **Archie Applewhite**

Archie Applewhite is a wood carver specializing in coffee tables that one would never actually rest a cup of coffee on.



## Lucille Applewhite

Lucille Applewhite is a poet, deeply concerned with the spirituality of the entire universe - not just the spirituality of humans, but of animals, nature, even furniture.

## Hal Applewhite

Hal Applewhite is the reclusive eldest son of Rudolph and Sylvie. In his pursuit of art, Hal has resigned to his bedroom and no one has seen him for months. He only leaves his room at night to steal food when he is relatively sure that the rest of the family is still sleeping. By the end of the novel, he emerges from his bedroom to build the sets for his father's production of *The Sound of Music*.

## Jeremy Bernstein

Jeremy Bernstein is the young journalist sent to interview Sybil for *The New World Literary Review*. He is described as young, thin, pale, and pimply with a long stringy ponytail and a deep infatuation with the talented Applewhite family. When he arrives at Wit's End, he is involved in a traffic accident with Randolph that totals his car. Eventually, he succeeds in getting a television station to produce a documentary about the Applewhite family. He also plays the accordion in Randolph's production of *The Sound of Music*.

## Ravi Govindaswami

Ravi Govindaswami is Lucille's spiritual guru. He comes to stay with the Applewhite family to teach them about meditation, but ends up being roped into becoming a the fulltime caterer to the family as they struggle to complete Randolph's production of *The Sound of Music*. Govindaswami's food is so delicious that it lures construction workers from around the city to help in the stage construction.

## Destiny Applewhite

Destiny Applewhite is four years old and the youngest of the Applewhite children. He is obsessed with Jake's dyed hair and spends the majority of the novel trying to dye his hair with everything from watercolor paints to permanent marker to Kool-Aid. He practices his singing and is eventually cast as Gretel, the youngest von Trap family singer in his father's production of *The Sound of Music*.

## Mrs. Montrose

Mrs. Montrose is the president of the Traybridge Little Theatre. After Randolph refuses to cast her young daughter, Priscilla, in the role of Gretel von Trap, she makes it her



mission to ensure that the production is cancelled. Eventually, she succeeds, but is shocked when the Applewhites banded together to finish the play's production, staged in their barn to national acclaim.

## **Priscilla Montrose**

Priscilla Montrose is the nine-year-old daughter of Mrs. Montrose desperate to be cast as Gretel von Trap in Randolph's production of *The Sound of Music* despite the fact that she has no physical grace, is too tall to play the youngster, and cannot sing.

## **Marcia Manning**

Marcia Manning is the news reporter sent to the Applewhite home for the on-camera interviews with the family for the documentary. Although Jake expected Marcia to be as sweet and docile as her television personality, she turns out to be conceited and very rude.



# Objects/Places

## Wit's End

Wit's End is the large allotment of land on which the Applewhite family lives. Wit's End is comprised of the main house, various artistic cottages, the woodworking shop a large barn that is later transformed into a community theatre, a school room, a goat pen, and a large lot of woods and fields.

## The Creative Academy

The Creative Academy is the school started by the Applewhite family in an attempt to combat the "clumping" of students in the public school system. In a constant pursuit of artistic individualism, students at the Creative Academy create their own curriculum, work at their own pace, and grade their own work. The only subject studied with any real guidelines is math, which is studied online.

## Wolfbane (Wolfie)

Wolfbane (Wolfie) is the Applewhite's goat, adopted after one of the family members found him wandering along the side of the road. He is massive, the size of a German Shepherd, with giant horns and a reckless personality that leads some family members to claim that he is evil personified.

## Traybridge Middle School

Traybridge Middle School is the school Jake is rumored to have burnt down, resulting in his permanent expulsion from the public school system. Lucille Applewhite happened to be working at the school at the time of Jake's expulsion, and it was her idea for Jake to join the Applewhites at the Creative Academy. It was also at Traybridge Middle School that an art teacher told Cordelia Applewhite that she couldn't paint her zebra black and purple, an order that so infuriated her parents that they started their own school, the Creative Academy, to nurture her artistic spirit.

## Winston

Winston is the Applewhite family's dog. He is a basset hound with long ears and a lazy disposition. He is regularly found lounging around under the table, eating the scraps of food fed to him by Jake. He is desperately attached to Jake, and howls whenever he is forced away from him.





## **The Traybridge Little Theatre**

The Traybridge Little Theatre is the community theatre that hires Randolph to direct a new production of *The Sound of Music*. After an unfortunate string of mishaps, the theatre cancels Randolph's production, forcing him to complete the performances in a makeshift theatre built in his family's barn.

## **The New World Literary Review**

The New World Literary Review is the literary journal Jeremy Bernstein works for, and for which he has been sent to interview Sybil Johnson. The journal won the Brohmer East Coast Arts Foundation award for the three years in a row.

## **The Sound of Music**

*The Sound of Music* is the Rogers and Hammerstein musical production that Randolph Applewhite is hired to direct for the Traybridge Little Theatre. Randolph makes some very artistic directorial choices, such as casting a multi-racial family to play the von Traps, which leads to national attention and acclaim.

## **The Butterfly Project**

The Butterfly Project is E.D.'s largest science project for the entire year. She is most jealous of having to share this project with Jake, after working on this project for nearly a year. She is devastated when Jake completes the project by locating an elusive fritillary butterfly, and by besting the project by introducing a metamorphosis element that involves live caterpillars.

## **The Barn**

The barn is the area of Wit's End that is transformed into a community theatre after the Traybridge Little Theatre cancels Randolph's production of *The Sound of Music* after an unfortunate fire and debated casting choices. The Applewhite family bands together to transform the barn, complete with lights, a stage, and sets in the two weeks leading up to the production's opening night.



# Themes

## Metamorphosis

The theme of metamorphosis is put into place by the main science project the children are working on: the butterfly project. The children spend almost the entirety of the fall searching for elusive butterflies and eventually, Jake has the great idea of capturing caterpillars to watch them build their chrysalises and transform into beautiful butterflies. When the butterflies emerge, everyone comments on how ugly they are and that they don't look like butterflies at all, but given time, they pump up their wings and take flight. Similarly, when Jake arrives at the Applewhite home, some of the family members - most notably E.D. - don't think he is much to look at. He has unattractively dyed hair gelled into spikes and wears tough-looking black clothing. He has a bad attitude, foul language, and no desire to become a part of the Applewhite clan. In time, however, he is given space to metaphorically spread his wings and eventually is cast in Randolph's production of *The Sound of Music*. On stage, Jake realizes that he has found joy, perhaps for the first time in his life. Through the production period leading up to opening night - symbolic of the metamorphosis period of the caterpillars as they transform into butterflies - Jake sheds all his bad behaviors, including his swearing and smoking. Like a butterfly, he even undergoes a physical transformation by shaving his head and removing his facial piercing, remnants of his past life. By the end of the novel, Jake is a transformed character, having shed his bad behaviors and lack of ambition. Jake has become an eager, affectionate, and passionate member not only of the Applewhite family, but for the first time, society as a whole.

## Family Unity

At the opening of the novel, the Applewhite family is in a state of constant chaos. Everyone is working on their individual projects - E.D. is working on her butterfly project, Cordelia on her ballet, Archie on his upcoming gallery show, Randolph on his stage production, Lucille on her poetry, Hal on his mystery project, and Sybil on her great literary masterpiece. The family lives in a constant state of discord, arguing constantly about whose project has the most artistic value and is therefore most deserving of the family's support. Because the family refuses to work together, it seems to fall apart. No one can be bothered to do basic chores around the house, including the grocery shopping, and no one spends any time together. Hal has taken his individuality so far that he has withdrawn completely into his bedroom, refusing any contact with the outside world. This all begins to change when Jake arrives to stay at Wit's End. E.D. is forced to reevaluate her individuality when she is asked to share her individual academic curriculum with Jake. For the first time in her academic career, E.D. is asked to work alongside someone else, sharing in the work and praise of the butterfly project. A teamwork attitude soon invades the entire family when Randolph nearly loses his production of *The Sound of Music* after the Traybridge Little Theatre cancels the production. With no one left to turn to, Randolph begs his family to help him complete



the show, and the entire family puts aside their individual projects to help Randolph complete his. Lucille, Cordelia, and Sybil become the costume designers, E.D. becomes the organized stage manager, Hal, Archie, and Zebediah design and construct the stage and lighting, Jeremy handles the music, while Destiny and Jake fill on as actors on stage. In the end, the production is a smashing success, and the family sees each other's talent in a new light, realizing for the first time, the artistic value of family unity.

## Artistic Integrity

Creative and artistic integrity is at the heart of the Applewhite family and their artistic school, The Creative Academy. The school was started after a teacher dared to tell Cordelia that she couldn't paint a zebra black and purple. Outraged that a school would stifle his child's artistic creativity, Randolph started the Creative Academy as a way of avoiding "clumping," or requiring students to study something simply because everyone else is. As a result of this, he has raised four individual, artistic, and successful children. This mantra has permeated Randolph's own life as well. After being hired to direct the Traybridge Little Theatre's production of *The Sound of Music*, Randolph immediately begins making controversial directorial decisions to preserve his vision for the show, refusing to compromise his integrity to please the theatre board. These decisions include the compilation of a mixed-race cast to play the traditionally Caucasian, Austrian von Trap family - including an African-American Maria and two Vietnamese von Trap singers - and casting his four-year-old son Destiny to play the youngest von Trap daughter, Gretel. Many people, including some members of the Applewhite family, beg Randolph to reconsider his choices, but Randolph refuses to compromise. His tireless pursuit of artistic integrity reaches boiling point when Randolph refuses to cast Mrs. Montrose's daughter in the role of Gretel von Trap, even though he knows this may be the only way to prevent Montrose from canceling the production. The Applewhite family is outraged when Randolph refuses to cast the untalented child, calling him stubborn and selfish. Despite the conflicts along the way, Randolph's controversial production of *The Sound of Music* is staged in the Applewhite family barn and receives national accolades for its artistic choices and Randolph is heralded as an inspired director. This success teaches the Applewhites and indeed the readers themselves, that artistic integrity should never be compromised and that when you truly believe in yourself as an artist, you will ultimately reach success.

# Style

## Point of View

The point of view of this novel is the third person and limited omniscience, but the narration fluctuates between both E.D.'s perspective and Jake's perspective. This point of view is important to the novel so the reader can be given access into both E.D. and Jake's thoughts and emotions. In doing so, the reader learns much more about these two characters and the rising tension between them. The main conflict of the novel occurs between these two characters, and structuring the point-of-view as vacillating between them sides the reader equally with both characters. Neither character is considered the hero and neither is the villain - the reader sees the complexities of both.

The story is told mostly through exposition, with scenes of dialogue. The story is completely filtered through the thoughts and emotions of the point-of-view character - either E.D. or Jake - so the reader sees the world through either of their eyes. Both of these characters spend much of their time, feeling somewhat isolated from the rest of the Applewhite family, so hearing their thoughts and emotions is extremely important for the reader to understand what is happening in the novel. Without insight into the character's thoughts, the reader would likely be confused as to the motivations of each character, particularly when dealing with their conflict about Jake's apathetic attitude.

## Setting

The entire novel is set on the Applewhites' land known as Wit's End in Traybrook, North Carolina. Wit's End is comprised of the main house, various artistic cottages, the woodworking shop, a large barn that is later transformed into a community theatre, a school room, a goat pen, and a large lot of woods and fields. Each of the Applewhite families lives in their own individual cottages with Jake staying with Archie and Lucille. The cottages are spaced out in a semi-circle to the left of the big house where Sybil, Randolph, and their four children live. The porches of the cottages are all covered with vine, with backyards that lead straight into the fields and woods. When they aren't exploring the surrounding land, the Applewhite children and Jake spend the majority of their days in The Creative Academy schoolroom. The Creative Academy is the school started by the Applewhite family in an attempt to combat the "clumping" of students in the public school system. In a constant pursuit of artistic individualism, students at the Creative Academy create their own curriculum, work at their own pace, and grade their own work. The only subject studied with any real guidelines is math, which is studied online. The schoolroom looks like it would in a traditional school except that there is no teacher's desk and no blackboard. There are however, bookshelves overflowing with books, maps, hand-drawn posters and projects, and four student desks. The most important element in the schoolroom is E.D.'s massive butterfly project, which shows photographs of all the species of butterflies living in the family's wooded backyard.



## Language and Meaning

As the novel is written for young readers, the language tends to be very conversational and easy to follow. The sentences are constructed in a way that is not only easy to follow, but also gains momentum as the reader reads on. The sentences are constructed to entice the reader to turn the next page and often this structure works. Occasionally, there are passages utilizing artistic words and phrases that may be a hindrance to some readers. Additionally, E.D. often uses scientific phrases, notated in italics in the text, that are typically defined for the reader within the paragraph. Aside from these definitions, most readers should be able to deduce what these vocabulary words mean contextually, and this language, in fact, adds a depth to the novel that allows the reader a glimpse into a world that is made believable through the language used by not only the characters but by the narrator as well. Most of the novel is told in exposition so there is not a lot of dialogue to distinguish secondary characters - although the reader does learn a lot about E.D. and Jake, the large cast of Applewhite characters have very little - aside from their art projects - to define them individually. Because the narration quickly jumps between E.D. and Jake, it is important that the narration remained streamlined and to the point.

## Structure

The novel is comprised of thirty short chapters ranging in length from 3 to 11 pages. The chapters tend to be short and full of action, propelling the reader through the story to see how the various conflicts are resolved. Each chapter also highlights a new aspect of the crazy Applewhite family and the way they interact with each other. The plot of the novel is fairly simple with few subplots to muddy up the narration. The surface conflict of the novel surrounds Randolph Applewhite's stage production, *The Sound of Music*. Since he is an eccentric and determined director, various mishaps and accidents pepper the production, creating miniature disasters throughout the novel. For a large portion of the novel, the main plot surrounds whether or not Randolph will be able to actually stage his production, or if it will all blow up in his face. Underneath the surface, the emotional conflict of the novel surrounds both E.D. and Jake's feelings that they don't fit in with the Applewhite family. Both teenagers feel as if they are disappearing and that no one appreciates who they truly are. Throughout the course of the novel, and through helping resolve the various problems with the stage production, both characters find a sense of belonging and emotional peace, which happens to coincide with a successful staging of *The Sound of Music*.

## Quotes

"He hated adults making decisions for him and expecting him to just go along with whatever they said" (p. 7).

"Real science demands creativity and individuality...without creativity and individuality, there would be no scientific discovery. No Galileo, no Newton, no Einstein" (p. 18).

"It had been easy to blow off Traybridge Middle School. Everybody - kids, teachers, even the principal - had been scared of the bad kid from the city. Bad kid. Living up to that label was what Jake did best" (p. 43).

"Jeremy Bernstein was worried about a television show invading their family's privacy. That just showed how little he understood them. Every last one of them lived to be the center of attention" (p. 70).

"Jake sighed. It wouldn't be possible for Destiny to grow up to be a delinquent - there didn't seem to be any rules for him to break" (p. 74).

"Jake was beginning to feel he was disappearing altogether. Nobody except E.D. and Destiny noticed when he swore. Destiny giggled and E.D. just sighed and shook her head. Nothing he'd done before to show people who he was and what he stood for worked here" (p. 85).

"He did not know for certain that he could act, at least not with a script and lines somebody else make up. But something told him he could. Now that he thought about it, acting was what he'd been doing his whole life" (p. 98).

"Never fear, Sybil, there's a shift in consciousness happening these days all over the world. Unity out of diversity. It's surely happening in Traybridge, too" (p. 116).

"Jake thought about what had happened ever since Randolph Applewhite had asked his family for help. And then he smiled. Little by little, he felt his stomach unclenching. E.D. was wrong. How could she, an actual member of the Applewhite family, possibly think it could all be over?" (p. 173).

"Jake didn't know any more about the meaning of life than he had the first day he came to Wit's End. But whatever else he could say about the way the Applewhites lived, it certainly was an adventurous quest. And he was beginning to get some idea of the value of thinking things through" (p. 216).



## Topics for Discussion

Describe the academic setup at The Creative Academy. How is it different from the setup of your own school? In your opinion, what are the benefits to this type of study? What are the downfalls? Do you think you would succeed in this kind of academic environment? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

What is the importance of E.D.'s butterfly project in the novel? Why doesn't she want to share this project with Jake? Can you understand her emotionality about the project? Why or why not? In what ways is this project a symbol or metaphor for the characters in the novel? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe the transition Jake's character goes through after joining the Applewhite family at Wit's End. How would you describe Jake's character at the beginning of the novel? How would you describe Jake's character at the end of the novel? What event or relationship do you think had the biggest change on Jake's character? Why? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Why doesn't E.D. feel like she belongs in the Applewhite family? Do her feelings of discontent make sense? Why or why not? Overall, do you think the Applewhite family values E.D. as a member of their clan? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

What interesting decisions does Randolph make in his production of *The Sound of Music* for the Traybridge Little Theatre? How do these decisions impact the production as a whole? How do they impact the family? What lessons can be learned about society through Randolph's directorial choices? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

How does Randolph's production of *The Sound of Music* impact the Applewhite family? In what ways does this play band the family together as an artistic unit? In what ways does it tear them apart? In your opinion, which character do you think is most impacted by the play? Why? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

On page 70, E.D. fumes that, "Jeremy Bernstein was worried about a television show invading their family's privacy. That just showed how little he understood them. Every last one of them lived to be the center of attention." Do you think this is an accurate characterization of the Applewhite family? Why or why not? In what ways do they prove this statement to be true? In what ways do they dispel it? Overall, what do you think is the novel's message about vanity? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.