

True Believer Study Guide

True Believer by Virginia Euwer Wolff

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Plot Summary

True Believer is the story of fifteen-year-old Verna LaVaughn's coming-of-age and deals with themes of love and loyalty, in a poverty-stricken and crime-riddled neighborhood.

Picking up where Wolff's *Make Lemonade* left off, Verna LaVaughn is fifteen years old and lives in a dangerous, run-down and poor neighborhood. Although many kids around her succumb to life on the streets, Verna LaVaughn, who just goes by LaVaughn, is saving money to go to college one day. LaVaughn's father was shot and killed when she was just a little girl and since then, it's just been LaVaughn and her mother working for their future. LaVaughn's mom works hard, saving money from each paycheck to ensure that LaVaughn is given the opportunity to go to college. LaVaughn, too, works hard for her future, finding a job washing laundry at the local children's hospital. LaVaughn also enrolls in advanced science classes and a grammar club so she can catch up with the kids at "rich schools" who didn't get a poor education like everyone in LaVaughn's neighborhood did.

Although LaVaughn is focused on her future, a plethora of problems threaten to distract LaVaughn from her duties. First, LaVaughn's childhood best friend, a boy named Jody, returns to the projects where they grew up, looking more gorgeous than LaVaughn knew a boy could be. When the two friends reunite, LaVaughn is struck silent with awe. Jody calls her "Buddy," brings homework to her from school when she's sick, and invites LaVaughn to swim at the local pool with him. LaVaughn is sure Jody must be in love with her, hopefully as much as she's in love with him. But sometimes Jody's behavior is confusing: he acts interested in LaVaughn's life one day, but is distant the next. After their first kiss, Jody chuckles under his breath, traumatizing LaVaughn. Confused and insecure, LaVaughn spends her days hiding from the boy she loves rather than confronting him about his strange behavior. The conflict in their relationship comes to a boiling point when LaVaughn walks in on Jody in a romantic embrace with another teenager. However, this time it's a boy. Shocked by Jody's homosexuality, LaVaughn sinks into a crippling depression.

Meanwhile, LaVaughn's other best friends - Myrtle and Annie - are increasingly distant as the religious group they've joined to keep them out of trouble with boys, morphs into a cult separating the girls from all unbelievers, including LaVaughn. Abandoned by Jody, separated from Myrtle and Annie, the only person LaVaughn has left to rely on is her mother, until she starts dating a new man, the first new man since LaVaughn's father died. Suddenly, LaVaughn's mother doesn't have much time for her anymore, and when she does, Lester is always right by her side. To top everything off, the fellow students in LaVaughn's study group accuse her of thinking she's better than everyone, calling her self-centered and snobby. Slowly but surely, LaVaughn learns how to stand on her own two feet, without the support of her mother, her friends, or a boyfriend. She learns to value her own future and to work hard for what she wants to achieve. It is a humbling and gratifying realization. Once LaVaughn learns the value of self-respect, it emanates out to everyone around her and the broken relationships begin to repair.



Part One: Chapters 1 - 5

Part One: Chapters 1 - 5 Summary

The novel opens with LaVaughn remembering a picture she drew as a little kid of a stick figure with a huge circle head and arms wide open like a hug. That's all the picture was. It consisted of a stick figure smiling because that's all life was and it showed her happiness. Now that she's older however, LaVaughn realizes that's not life at all. Life is complicated, messy, and mysterious.

Being fifteen years old, there are three ways that LaVaughn knows to stay out of trouble or how to not get pregnant. First, be mean to all boys all the time so that they will stay away from you. She knows one girl who used to be like this, but she got raped and now she's a person you pity and so this plan doesn't work for everyone. Second, you can join Cross Your Legs for Jesus, a club that teaches girls how to be Christian and how to save their bodies for their perfect husband. Third, you can refuse to go anywhere on your own. That way, boys won't rape you and your friends will keep you accountable. Despite all her ideas, LaVaughn is still desperate to be kissed.

LaVaughn lives in a dangerous neighborhood filled with poverty and crime, but she still counts herself lucky. She has a mother who loves her, good friends, her own bed to sleep in, and pretty good grades at school.

Part One: Chapters 1 - 5 Analysis

This section introduces the reader to LaVaughn, her family, and her neighborhood. LaVaughn's story is set in an unnamed neighborhood in an unnamed city. LaVaughn and her friends likely live in the projects, but that's never stated explicitly. All the reader knows is that LaVaughn lives in a run-down apartment building with many other poor, hard-up families. LaVaughn's school is clearly an inner city school that doesn't even shut down when school shootings occur; they're simply too common. Teenage pregnancies are common. Drug addicted parents are common. Kids joining gangs is common. Despite living a very dark, adult world, LaVaughn still has a sense of naivety. She has no idea what it feels like to be kissed, for example, but knows the dangers of letting a boy get too close: pregnancy.

Although LaVaughn faces the dangers of poverty everyday, she has a strong support network. Her mother, for example, works extra hours each week to save money for LaVaughn's college account. For LaVaughn, unlike many kids in the projects, college is absolutely expected. Her mother preaches the dangers of teen pregnancy and the value of education. This is especially important because LaVaughn's father is dead. He was shot to death on the streets. LaVaughn thinks about her father often and desperately wants to make him proud.



Part One: Chapters 6 - 11

Part One: Chapters 6 - 11 Summary

Myrtle and Annie's, LaVaughn's two best friends, have joined Cross Your Legs for Jesus, and are very dedicated to the group's message. They are determined to recruit LaVaughn, even though LaVaughn has hesitations about it. They constantly tell LaVaughn that she's missing out on the miracle of Jesus' redemption, and that everyone who doesn't believe in Jesus, including Muslims, Hindus, and Jews, will go to Hell. LaVaughn worries that her friends are slipping away from her, but she's not willing to sacrifice her personal beliefs to stop it.

Out of nowhere, LaVaughn's best childhood friend, a boy named Jody, returns to the neighborhood after years away. LaVaughn is shocked to see him, and also excited: she's never seen a boy as handsome as Jody. She remembers playing cards for days at a time with Jody, riding bikes, coloring in coloring books. Their mothers even exchanged apartment keys so the kids would always have somewhere safe to play after school, in case one of the mothers had to work late. Time passes, with LaVaughn too nervous to speak to handsome Jody, but the two slowly fall back into their friendship. Jody even calls LaVaughn "buddy" at school, which melts her heart. For some reason, Annie and Myrtle aren't fans of Jody, but LaVaughn ignores them. She learns that Jody has taken up swimming and that he hopes to use his athletic skills to earn a college scholarship.

Part One: Chapters 6 - 11 Analysis

Cross Your Legs for Jesus is a super conservative Christian group targeting poor girls from the inner city, promising better lives - both now and eternal - for those who believe in Jesus. On the surface, there's nothing innately wrong with this message of hope, but as the novel progresses, the reader will see the club transform into a dangerous cult. Throughout the novel, LaVaughn will deal with many questions and doubts, particularly about religion. Although LaVaughn wants to join the club to stay best friends with Myrtle and Annie, she doesn't believe the message. How could a wonderful God allow her father to die? With so much rape, crime, death, and poverty around her, how can she believe the message that Jesus loves her? Furthermore, how can a loving God hate so many people (like the Muslims, Hindus, and Jews) and send them to Hell? LaVaughn's refusal to join the club despite her desires showcases her strong personal belief. She is unwilling to change for anyone or anything.

Jody returns to the apartment complex in this section, transforming LaVaughn's life. All the sexual curiosity and excitement she felt in the opening section is now projected onto Jody, and LaVaughn can't stop thinking about him. In a way, Jody represents the American dream. After a school shooting claimed the life of Jody's best friend, his mother tried to move the family away to a safer neighborhood, a better school. It worked for a few years, but in time, the mother couldn't afford her rent and had to move back to



the cheaper, more dangerous neighborhood. She keeps dreaming that her son will have a better future and recognizes that this future comes through education. Jody has taken up swimming in the hopes of earning a college scholarship. It's interesting to note that when Jody says he'd like to go to college, LaVaughn thinks, "That is a mysterious coincidence, two people in the same dirty building both going to college when nobody here ever did that before" (p. 32). Thoughts like that, in the same chapter where LaVaughn lists all the kids she knows who have died due to poverty-related crimes, emphasize the story's setting for the reader. LaVaughn's narration gives readers unprecedented access to a world they might otherwise never visit.



Part One: Chapters 12 - 18

Part One: Chapters 12 - 18 Summary

To help prepare for college, LaVaughn joins a Grammar Build-Up Club to improve her vocabulary, helping place her at the same educational level as students who attended private schools. The teacher, Dr Rose, is a no nonsense woman determined to send each of her students to college. She regularly spouts inspirational mottos and slogans, encouraging the children to rise above themselves and their situations. Even though it's difficult, LaVaughn knows it's where she's meant to be, that she deserves to better her life. There are many things giving LaVaughn unexpected hope for the future: the grammar class, the bird mural she's recently painted on her ceiling, and of course, Jody returning to her life. There are many things that leave her feeling sad such as her friends pulling away from her, Myrtle's father's return to rehab, and violence at school, but she still feels hopeful.

To help with her plan toward college, LaVaughn gets a job to help pay her future tuition. She finds a job at the children's hospital folding laundry. Although it's a menial job, LaVaughn feels great pride working at a hospital, helping make children's lives better. With her first paycheck, LaVaughn adopts a kitten for Myrtle whose father has just returned to rehab. She hopes the kitten will bring the two friends back together and give Myrtle something to love while her father is gone. Myrtle is grateful for the kitten but more concerned with attending her Cross Your Legs For Jesus meeting. LaVaughn is desperate to tell Myrtle about her new crush on Jody - isn't that what best friends are for? - but doesn't feel like now is the right time. Instead, she says goodbye and walks away.

In addition to the grammar club, LaVaughn has also been placed in an accelerated science class. Her lab partner is a boy named Patrick who wears the same shirt every day. He's very quiet but clearly very intelligent. LaVaughn immediately feels a connection to Patrick because they're the lucky ones, the ones with a chance to leave their dirty neighborhood and make a new future for themselves. Patrick clearly has a crush on LaVaughn and often asks if he can help carry her books. LaVaughn ignores Patrick because she's too busy thinking about Jody, and how much she wishes Jody would ask to help carry her books.

Part One: Chapters 12 - 18 Analysis

On the first day of her grammar class, Dr Rose asks each of the students why they are there. LaVaughn thinks how interesting it is that no one laughs at the students' answers, particularly when one boy says that he's here to "rise above himself." Hope for the future has been beaten out of these children at an early age, so much so that in normal classes, it is considered normal to laugh at one's hopes for the future, they are that unattainable. LaVaughn is also shocked by how many students there are in the



grammar class, and can't imagine that they will all go to college someday. With Myrtle and Annie beginning to pull away from her, LaVaughn finds herself befriending students from the grammar class, perhaps because they all have the same objective: to better their lives. There are many things giving LaVaughn hope, and as a result, she fluctuates between believing and disbelieving in God. How could God allow something as ugly as murder but create something as beautiful as Jody's face? While LaVaughn prays that God will lead Jody to love her, she still places faith in her own quest for success, not waiting for God to provide it for her (as Annie and Myrtle arguably are).

LaVaughn's job at the children's hospital is important in many ways. First, it gives LaVaughn a new sense of purpose. As she better her own life, she is bettering the lives of those in her community as well. It also further highlights the life LaVaughn hopes to leave behind in her endeavors. Seeing crack babies in the maternity wing are commonplace, for example, and it's regular business for young kids to arrive in the E.R. for gang related injuries. Joining the grammar club and accelerated science class are small steps toward a better future, if LaVaughn can perform. It's interesting to note that when LaVaughn's teachers heard she wanted to go to college, they began presenting her with these opportunities. These classes aren't available to all the students, only those who show promise and MAY attend college someday. It's clear that the students at LaVaughn's school are simply living up to the low expectations set by the teachers and community at large. Dr Rose proves to be a much needed voice of reason, setting very high standards for the students in her grammar club and demanding that the students reach them, regardless of their many excuses.



Part One: Chapters 19 - 26

Part One: Chapters 19 - 26 Summary

LaVaughn's school is throwing their annual flashlight formal, a dance where all the students bring flashlights to light up the room when the lights go out. Of course, LaVaughn is desperate for Jody to ask her. Myrtle and Annie have no intention of going to the dance, saying that it promotes sexuality. Their club is throwing its own party that night. For the rest of the week, LaVaughn tracks Jody's every move, hoping that he'll spot her in the hallways, pull her into his arms, and ask her to the dance. LaVaughn is so intent on this daydream that when Patrick asks her to the dance in science class, she is stunned. She's never been asked out on a date before, but she doesn't want her first date to be with Patrick. She says no, clearly breaking his heart.

Even though LaVaughn doesn't yet have a date for the dance, she goes to Goodwill on her payday in search of the perfect dress. She finds it. It's a beautiful blue crushed velvet dress with a lace collar. LaVaughn can't believe she would buy something so impractical, but she wants to look perfect when Jody picks her up. She realizes that if she and Jody go to the dance together, he might kiss her at the end of the night, which is a fantasy come true. In the hallway the next day, Jody asks if LaVaughn would like to go to the pool with him tomorrow. She shouts "Yes!" before he's even finished his sentence. The next day, the two take the bus from school to the nice part of town, where the public pool is. LaVaughn has borrowed Myrtle's turquoise bathing suit and can't believe Jody is going to see her half naked. He's practicing his lifeguard skills and all LaVaughn has to do is pretend to drown so he can save her. They repeat the exercise over and over, LaVaughn memorizing the way it feels to have Jody's arms wrapped around her, saving her. After a few hours of this, Jody tells her she can go home; he still has more practicing to do. Disappointed that he didn't ask her to the dance, LaVaughn quietly changes and takes the bus home, sulking the entire way.

The next morning, LaVaughn wakes up with a new determination. She finds Jody as soon as she gets to school and asks him to the dance. He thinks about it for a moment, shrugs his shoulders, and says, "Why not?" LaVaughn is over the moon. A few days later, she puts on her crushed velvet dress and Jody picks her up at seven, just like he promised. They dance the night away and LaVaughn is over the moon. She feels herself falling in love. At the end of the night, she leans in close and tells Jody he can kiss her - her first real kiss. Jody looks puzzled, smiles, and quickly kisses her, their teeth clattering together. She wasn't even ready. The worst part about the kiss is that when it's over, Jody chuckles. He laughs under his breath. LaVaughn is devastated and spends the next few days in bed, weeping.



Part One: Chapters 19 - 26 Analysis

LaVaughn's imagination of a life with Jody reaches new heights when her school announces the flashlight formal. She begins making plans before Jody has even asked her, hoping that if everything is perfect, he'll fall in love with her too. LaVaughn is so intent on her imagined vision of happiness that she is downright rude to those around her: she is rude to Myrtle and Annie when they ask her to join them at the Jesus Club dance - LaVaughn laughs in their faces: why would she go to that dance when she could dance the night away with Jody? She is also rude to Patrick, flatly turning him down when he asks her to the dance, unaware of how her coldness breaks Patrick's heart. He looks down at his books and doesn't make eye contact with LaVaughn for the rest of the day. All LaVaughn cares about is Jody: his are the only feelings that matter, whether he loves her or not.

It's clear that LaVaughn views Jody as a savior, someone who can bring extreme happiness into her life. She feels that all her happiness, for the rest of her life, rests on whether or not Jody loves her. When they are in the pool together, LaVaughn thinks, "Oh, Oh, Oh. I'll be all right, all right. He is holding me, kicking for both of us, saving my life the whole length of the pool, and I'll be all right" (p. 77). With her father dead, LaVaughn looks to other men in her life - like Jody - to make her happy. As the novel progresses, LaVaughn will learn to find happiness in herself, not in the affection of others, a classic trait in coming-of-age novels.



Part Two: Chapters 27 - 35

Part Two: Chapters 27 - 35 Summary

LaVaughn remains horrified by the kiss and the way Jody laughed afterward. She has always imagined marrying Jody and having a houseful of children, but how is that going to be accomplished if Jody can't even kiss her? LaVaughn mourns this loss for days, unable to talk to anyone about her problems. She can't tell Myrtle and Annie - they're too distant and they never liked Jody anyway - she can't tell her mother; she wouldn't possibly understand. She can't tell Jolly; she has her own problems, and she certainly can't tell Jody, which leaves her with no one. Meanwhile, LaVaughn's mother seems very distracted lately. She gets dressed up for nights out, even wearing dresses and lipstick. It doesn't take long for LaVaughn to realize that her mother has a new boyfriend. A strange mixture of happiness and jealousy overtakes LaVaughn. LaVaughn actually enjoys having some private time, without her mother breathing down her neck, but she feels jealous for her dead father. LaVaughn's mother has never dated another man and photos of LaVaughn's father still hang all around the house. For LaVaughn, who never really knew her father, the photographs are very comforting, as if he's always there watching over her.

A few days later, LaVaughn's mother invites her new boyfriend, Lester, to the house for dinner. On the surface, LaVaughn is very polite, nodding to Lester and answering all his questions, dressing up and letting her mother brag about her, but inside, LaVaughn is aching for her own dead father. She repeats his name over and over during dinner, imagining what kind of father he would be now, what advice he would give her about Jody, how he would comfort her hurting heart. From the get-go, Lester seems too good to be true, but LaVaughn's mother is supremely happy, and LaVaughn hasn't seen her with a smile like that for years, so she decides to give him the benefit of the doubt but keeps her memories of her father close to heart.

Part Two: Chapters 27 - 35 Analysis

While LaVaughn is struggling to come to grips with Jody's rejection of her, Jolly calls. In the previous book in this series, *Make Lemonade*, the novel focused on LaVaughn's friend Jolly: an eighteen-year-old mother of two, living in poverty and struggling to make ends meet without a man in her life. Jolly is a clear foil for LaVaughn in the novels - although LaVaughn is three years younger than Jolly, she is more mature and has a brighter future. Jolly is a symbol for children lost in the vicious cycle of poverty and the dangers of growing up without positive role models in one's life. To feel better about her own life, LaVaughn agrees to meet Jolly and help her look after the kids one afternoon. Jolly is clearly overwhelmed with her life. She can't keep up in school - and is only reading at roughly a 5th grade level - has no food other than what the local food pantry has provided in her cupboards, and basic parenting skills, like keeping sharp knives away from toddlers, are lost to her. Fifteen-year-old LaVaughn helps Jolly with her



schoolwork, cooks nutritious meals for the children, and teaches Jolly how to be a better mother. She had hoped to discuss her Jody situation with Jolly, but how could she? Jolly's whole life has been rearranged by men abandoning her, and LaVaughn wants to complain about a missed kiss?

LaVaughn's relationship with her dead father is an interesting one. While she did think of him from time to time, it isn't until after her mother starts dating Lester that she truly begins to miss him. Before Lester arrives, LaVaughn's mother begins taking down her ex-husband's photos. She even uses a blue vase, which had been a wedding present, for the flowers Lester brings. LaVaughn fears that her father is going to be replaced, that if she doesn't repeat his name over and over in her head, she'll forget who he is. For LaVaughn, it's actually quite convenient that her father is dead, meaning that she can imagine a perfect, flawless man who would never wrong or disappoint her, and her father isn't there to ruin the illusion of perfection. In a way, this imagination is similar to her imagination of Jody. She avoids him at school and refuses to talk to him in the apartment so that she can keep her perfect imaginations of him. She even wants to keep her perfect disappointment. She is terrified of speaking to Jody about the kiss because she doesn't want to further embarrass herself. She doesn't want to hear his reasons for laughing. She would rather live in her imagination than face the reality of the world.



Part Two: Chapters 37 - 42

Part Two: Chapters 37 - 42 Summary

The photos from the dance arrive and LaVaughn purchases two copies: one for her and one for Jody. She still isn't ready to speak to him, so she waits for an afternoon when she knows Jody will be at the pool and uses her key to get into his apartment. She tapes the photo to his aquarium and, before she leaves, sneaks into Jody's bedroom and smells his pillow. She feels like a criminal running out of Jody's apartment, but she clings to private moment she's just had, and the sweet smell of chlorine that lingers in her nose. A few days later a note from Jody appears on LaVaughn's locker. It says: "Thanks for the pic. Where are you, Buddy?" and LaVaughn's heart nearly bursts out of her chest (p. 117).

Meanwhile, LaVaughn has grown accustomed to seeing Lester in the house when she returns from school, even though his presence still makes her feel uncomfortable. On Thanksgiving, Lester offers to pick-up LaVaughn's great aunts for the meal, but the car he intended on borrowing breaks down and LaVaughn has to pick them up on the bus, like she has done every year before. As soon as her aunts - after whom she's been named "Verna" and "LaVaughn" - arrive at the house, LaVaughn shows them the tree and bird's nest she's painted on her bedroom wall. They're very impressed with her artistic work. They are not so impressed with Lester even though he falls all over himself with politeness. When one of the aunts mentions that she needs a new hearing aide battery, Lester promises to bring over a whole box. Even this doesn't impress the old women. Jolly, whose stove has broken down, also comes over for the meal with her two children. Despite the excitement of the busy house, Jody constantly interrupts LaVaughn's thoughts.

LaVaughn is studying for the Science Aptitude Test. It's an important measure for whether or not they will get into college. As the test approaches, LaVaughn realizes how badly she wants to do well, how badly she wants to go to college. On the bus on the way home from the test, Patrick sees the name "Jody" written all over LaVaughn's notebook. He asks who Jody is, and when LaVaughn responds, "A friend of mine," Patrick nods and says, "Then it's not your boyfriend" (p. 129). LaVaughn is deeply offended by this. Patrick makes it sound like there's no way Jody could be her boyfriend and she doesn't think that's fair. A few days later, LaVaughn attends the play Myrtle and Annie have been practicing with their Jesus group. LaVaughn is proud of her friends but troubled by how much they have changed. A few days later is Valentine's Day. Patrick gives LaVaughn a handmade card, and she laughs. She didn't want to be mean, but she was surprised. Bravely, LaVaughn drops a handful of candy hearts into Jody's locker. They all say, "WHY NOT."



Part Two: Chapters 37 - 42 Analysis

In this section, it becomes clear that LaVaughn's mother is not just a good parent but also an all-around good woman. On Thanksgiving, she allows Jolly and her two children to join them for the meal even though there isn't really enough food. As she looks around the packed dining room, LaVaughn thinks how lucky she is: "Everybody here wouldn't have a place to go if it wasn't for my mom...That's my mom with her small working wage feeding 6 people that wouldn't have anywhere else to go" (p. 125). It's clear that LaVaughn views her mother as a role model, even though she's difficult at times. Having a good role model makes all the difference for kids growing up in the projects. Without role models, they have no idea what they can achieve and they are much more likely to fall into the traps of street life.

Also in this section, LaVaughn attends the play Myrtle and Annie have been practicing with their church group. In the play, the children all dress up as eternal sins - including abortion, homosexuality, murder, drug use, and premarital sex. The message of the play is that individuals who commit these sins are sentenced to eternal damnation, so if one wants eternal life, they should abstain. The real message of the play is that sinners should be avoided, and it encourages religious superiority and condemnation rather than love. In a way, religion creates an "out" for impoverished children like Annie and Myrtle, for whom further education isn't an option. For LaVaughn, salvation comes through education. It is a tangible path to escaping life in the projects. For Anne and Myrtle, salvation comes through something intangible, and though they believe they will receive eternal life, their earthly lives will be difficult. When LaVaughn leaves the play, she sees a kitten with "ignorant eyes" running down an alley (p. 132). This description insinuates that LaVaughn and arguably Virginia Euwer Wolff believe that religion feeds into ignorance, and that fear fuels religious fervor.



Part Three: Chapters 43 - 50

Part Three: Chapters 43 - 50 Summary

Lester has found a house, away from the projects, that he wants to move to with LaVaughn and her mother. He woos LaVaughn's mother with descriptions of the carpeting, the big backyard, the bedrooms. Sure, it needs work, he says, but it will be ours. LaVaughn is horrified. She can't imagine leaving Jody, no matter how lovely the garden is. She also can't stand the thought of leaving her father's memory behind. Even though it means leaving the projects, she doesn't want to live in a house where her father never was. Lester says that there are no metal detectors at the schools and no one "hassles you for rent" (Page 148). Myrtle and Annie say they'll pray for God's will to be done in LaVaughn's life, but that doesn't make sense to her either: if God's will is always done, what's the point of praying?

At school, LaVaughn is discussing her job at the Children's Hospital with a boy named Artrille who says that he works there as well, doing janitorial work. Without any sense of irony, Artrille says he got the job because he'd like to be a doctor there one day. This admission startles LaVaughn, who can't imagine a kid from the projects growing up to be a doctor. Later that week, Myrtle and Annie say they're not coming over to LaVaughn's for their annual sleepover because they have church duties to attend to. LaVaughn is devastated and focuses her energy on science homework. She's studying jellyfish.

Part Three: Chapters 43 - 50 Analysis

Lester's promise of a new home is important for two reasons: first, it highlights the conflict LaVaughn feels about living in the projects, and second, it showcases LaVaughn's relationship with her imagined father. From the beginning of the book, LaVaughn has been hoping and praying to move away from the projects. She has always seen education as the only pathway from the slums, but now Lester provides an alternate route. Immediately, LaVaughn dislikes the idea as it would take her further away from Jody and her friends - even though Myrtle and Annie are already lost to her. LaVaughn is fifteen years old and romance is far more important to her than a safer neighborhood. Leaving Jody now would feel like a betrayal to LaVaughn, just as leaving her childhood home would seem like a betrayal of her father. LaVaughn hates the idea of leaving her father's memory behind because, in a way, she would be replacing her biological father with Lester, just as her mother has replaced photos of her ex-husband with photos of Lester. She says, "I always say I want to get out of here. But not yet. We would be living where my dad never was" (p. 140). LaVaughn's internal conflict showcases her loyalty and determination. Lester's statement about how no one "hassles you for rent" in the new neighborhood is foreshadowing to the revelation of his financial troubles.



Also in this section, LaVaughn realizes that she is not the only child in the projects with aspirations outside of the slums. It's interesting to note that when Artrille says that he would like to be a doctor, no one in the room laughs, which LaVaughn wasn't expecting. Because they're in the advanced grammar class, each of the students is being groomed to attend college. It's sad to think that in "regular" classrooms, the thought of a student wanting to become a doctor would be laughable. Even though LaVaughn is one of the "chosen" students, she is still surprised to hear of Artrille's dream: "Artrille is no richer than us. He lives in a slum like us. He would be valuable in a gang, he memorizes things well, he has quick eyes, they could scare you in a dark alley" (p. 152). The thought of Artrille becoming a doctor is so exciting to LaVaughn she begins to dream that she might become a nurse someday, and it gives her life a new sense of purpose. At the end of class that day, Dr Rose has the children chant together, "We will rise to the occasion which is life," but LaVaughn doesn't yet understand what that statement means (p. 153). Finally, in biology class, LaVaughn is studying jellyfish. She is particularly intrigued by the pink jellyfish that lives in an uninhabitable lake without a food source or light. The jellyfish has evolved to produce its own light source and search out food at the bottom of the lake in order to survive. The jellyfish is a symbol of adaptation - changing to survive in one's environment. Like the jellyfish the children living in the slums - LaVaughn, Jody, Myrtle, Annie - must adapt to thrive.



Part Three: Chapters 51 - 57

Part Three: Chapters 51 - 57 Summary

Two days before her big biology test, LaVaughn is riding the bus when two little kids accidentally get off at the wrong stop. They're only six or seven years old, and they're completely panicked. LaVaughn helps them get on the next bus, find the right stop, and locate their grandmother in the crowd. When LaVaughn gets home, she's tired and angry at the children's parents for letting them travel alone when they're obviously too young to do so. She falls asleep and is woken by Jody peeking his head in her room. He's here to drop off the biology book she accidentally left at the bus stop. He tells her he likes her ceiling, that he's going to miss her if she moves, and that she should clean her room. LaVaughn's heart soars. The next day, Jolly grabs LaVaughn as she's preparing for the biology test and asks for help picking her kids up from daycare. LaVaughn agrees even though she's overworked and overtired. Jolly has a new boyfriend, a man named Ricky, and she swears Ricky is teaching Jeremy how to read even though he's only four-years-old.

Meanwhile, LaVaughn's mom goes to the house Lester's found to check it out. Although it has everything Lester promised - a yard, two bedrooms, a garden - it's in an almost derelict state. LaVaughn continues to study hard, even when school shootings happen. They're so common at her school, they don't even bother to shut down when one occurs. Dr Rose encourages the children to persevere with their studying so they can overcome life in the projects, to get away from the dangerous schools and dangerous streets. LaVaughn's entire life feels shaken up, but at least she has her friends, or so she thinks. Out of nowhere, Myrtle and Annie confront LaVaughn, saying she thinks she's too good for Jesus, that she's being groomed and that she thinks she's better than everyone. LaVaughn is shocked. In biology class later that day, Patrick, too accuses LaVaughn of thinking she's better than him.

Part Three: Chapters 51 - 57 Analysis

Much of this section deals with children, particularly children growing up in the projects. LaVaughn is old enough to have some control over her future, particularly because she had a mother who fought for her while raising her, but this isn't the case with most children. The children on the bus, for example, are children that were put in great danger by their parents simply because they didn't have enough time to care for them properly. There's no doubt that the children are loved - the grandmother embraces and kisses them when they are finally reunited - but their parents simply didn't have the time (or perhaps money) to travel with them, despite the dangers of such young children traveling alone. This danger is a reality for many poor children. Jeremy is another interesting example. He's clearly very bright, but if it were up to Jolly alone, it's very likely he would end up like the kids at LaVaughn's school, laughing at the dream of a bright future. What's interesting is that Ricky, Jolly's new boyfriend, is doing what he can



to give the kids a better future. Although LaVaughn is happy for Jolly, she doesn't believe Ricky is as perfect as she describes him. LaVaughn must see him for herself to know that he's real. In a way, this mirrors LaVaughn's views of religion. She doesn't believe God is as great as the church claims, and since she can't see him for herself, she's more content in her atheism. LaVaughn is a strong believer in science, and would rather believe in things that can be scientifically - or statistically - proven than things that rely on faith. The only problem is that many relationships are based on emotion, not statistics.

As a result of LaVaughn's analytic mind, many of her relationships have suffered. Many of LaVaughn's friends accuse her of being uppity, and now that she is faced with that reality, LaVaughn realizes they are right. She has been acting "better than." It is Patrick's accusation in particular that startles LaVaughn. When he reminds her that she laughed at his Valentine, LaVaughn is speechless. She remembers how terribly she felt when Jody laughed at her, and she's done the same thing to Patrick.



Part Three: Chapters 58 - 61

Part Three: Chapters 58 - 61 Summary

LaVaughn comes home from school one day to hear her mother and Lester fighting about money. Lester is "being harassed" for not paying his bills and makes the terrible mistake of asking LaVaughn's mother for a loan from LaVaughn's college fund. Her mother gives him three minutes to collect his belongings and get out of the house. Her mother spends the next three days ironing. Trying to put her energy somewhere positive, LaVaughn decides to bake some cookies for Jody one afternoon when he's home sick from school. She has the plan of backing the cookies, using her key to drop them off in the bedroom - the same place where she dropped off the dance photo - blow Jody a kiss, and sneak silently back to her room. It doesn't go as planned. LaVaughn quietly opens Jody's apartment door and is startled to see that Jody is not alone. In fact, he's kissing someone. Another boy. LaVaughn's heart nearly stops. She drops the plate of cookies, stifles a scream, and runs from the room.

Part Three: Chapters 58 - 61 Analysis

This section is arguably the turning point in the novel, when LaVaughn realizes that Jody is gay. This singular event causes LaVaughn to question everything she thought about the world, her relationships, and religion. Of course LaVaughn is devastated that Jody is in a relationship with someone else, but angry and confused that Jody's new partner is a boy. Simultaneously, LaVaughn's mother realizes that Lester is not the man he advertised himself to be. These two relationships highlight the theme of appearances versus reality. . On the outside, he is a popular, athletic kid, nothing out of the ordinary. But the reality is that Jody is hiding a secret, his homosexuality. This secret personally affects LaVaughn who feels cheated. She has based all her life's fantasies on the idea that she and Jody would one day be romantically linked. As a result, LaVaughn must learn the painful lesson that appearances can be deceiving. LaVaughn's mother learns the same lesson through her relationship with Lester. Based on his appearances, Lester is kind, determined, sensible, and good with his money. In reality, Lester is a con man, looking to take advantage of LavVaughn's mother and the college savings account she has worked so hard to create. The moral of the story is that you can't judge a book by its cover. Everyone is unique and surprising. That's life.



Part Four: Chapters 62 - 69

Part Four: Chapters 62 - 69 Summary

LaVaughn wakes in the middle of the night with cold sweats thinking about Jody and that boy. She pulls her blue crushed velvet dress out of the closet and slices it open like a wound. The next day, she tries to pull a sickie from school, but her mother knows something fishy is going on. She threatens to buy a car with the money she's saved for LaVaughn's college education and forces her daughter to school. LaVaughn feels hopeless, even suicidal, moping around the hallways. For the next few days, she mopes around school, at home, at work, feeling nothing but pity for herself. One afternoon, a flower arrives for LaVaughn, sent through a florist from Jody. There's a note attached but LaVaughn doesn't open it. Instead, she imagines what it might say, and even the most beautiful words don't make her feel any better.

Part Four: Chapters 62 - 69 Analysis

In this section, LaVaughn realizes, for the first time in her life, how painful and tragic life can be. With the realization about Jody, suddenly LaVaughn sees her entire life from a new perspective: she lives in the projects, her father is dead, her friends have abandoned her, the boy of her dreams is gay. LaVaughn understands how "the suicide kids" feel when they take their own lives, that there is no hope left in the world. LaVaughn tries to distract herself at work, but even that depresses her. All the children she works with are dying. There's no hope for them either. While she is at work one day, she spots a beetle on the sidewalk. LaVaughn can identify the beetle's scientific name, but not even that brightens her mood. She watches the beetle dodging all the dangers in his path - the feet, the bicycles, the cars - but LaVaughn says it's all worthless. No matter how careful that beetle is, it's going to get crushed or eaten in the end. The reader might interpret this scene differently. The beetle has crawled up from the darkness beneath the sidewalk, just as LaVaughn is crawling up from the darkness of her depression, or even more literally, the emotional darkness of the ghetto. There are many dangerous obstacles to overcome along the way, but if that beetle or LaVaughn wants to thrive, it must fight for its future.



Part Four: Chapters 70 - 78

Part Four: Chapters 70 - 78 Summary

During the time LaVaughn was moping around, she performed poorly on a biology test, so her guidance counselor has called her into his office to discuss her falling grades. He reminds LaVaughn that the school has "gone out on a limb" for her and he questions whether or not she even wants to go to college. LaVaughn has always said yes, she wants to go to college because she knows how badly her mother has worked for this moment. But today, sitting in the office, LaVaughn realizes that she wants to go to college for herself too, to ensure her life doesn't end up a tragedy, like so many lives in her neighborhood have. Yes, she says, she wants to go to college and she wants to be a nurse. The guidance counselor is intrigued and promises to check her biology grades every week to make sure she's on track. He also arranges for her to take a nurses' tour of the children's hospital where she works, to see what a true working day is like for pediatric nurses. Suddenly, LaVaughn is filled with hope again.

LaVaughn apologizes to Patrick and asks if they can be friends again. Reluctantly, Patrick agrees, but as they days go on, it is clear that there's no love lost between them. Patrick tells LaVaughn all about the terrible foster homes he grew up in, and how he wears the crucifix around his neck as a reminder that there will always be evil in the world. His comments intrigue LaVaughn mostly because they provide a much different view of religion than what she's heard before. She asks everyone she knows whether they believe in God, and she's flabbergasted by how many different responses she hears. Nothing is cut and dry, and there are many different ways to interpret the Bible. She is particularly surprised to hear that her mother believes in God, and that she used to take LaVaughn to church every week before her father died. On her way home from school one afternoon, LaVaughn impulsively enters a church to ask the minister some questions, particularly about homosexuality. The minister is very kind and nonjudgmental. LaVaughn is too embarrassed to ask her questions in the end, but the minister assures her that at this church, everyone is welcome and that no one is put on this earth to judge anyone else. When LaVaughn asks how he can be so sure there's a God, the minister smiles and says, "We can only hope. We can only be as sure as our faith" (Page 228).

Also in this section, LaVaughn attends the nurses' tour of the hospital and decides she would like to work in the emergency room. She imagines the emergency room nurses that must have fought so hard to save her father when he was shot; did they even know he had a little girl?

Part Four: Chapters 70 - 78 Analysis

After weeks of wallowing in her own self-pity, LaVaughn finds the internal strength to embrace hope again. For many of the characters in the novel, religion and hope are



inextricably intertwined: hope for a better life and hope for an eternal future, thanks to Christ's sacrifice. Surprisingly, it is Patrick, not Myrtle or Annie, who brings LaVaughn to truly question her spirituality. Patrick has grown up in horrible foster homes, has been the victim of unspeakable abuse, and lives a life plagued by feelings of abandonment. He spend a lot of time living in a convent where nuns told him religious story after religious story. He proudly wears his crucifix - a necklace with a pendant shaped like Jesus hanging on the cross - as a reminder of evil. In Patrick's view of religion, every individual who struggles as a result of evil in the world can be seen as a Christ figure, hanging painfully on a cross waiting for the sweet relief of death and knowing that their treasures are stored in heaven. He wears the crucifix as a reminder of the evil in the world and the passion he has in his heart to overcome it. Everyone in LaVaughn's life has a different view of religion, from the extremely conservative views of Myrtle and Annie to the liberal science-based views Ronell introduces her to: "Maybe God is the beginning. The start of protons. The first breath of anything" (Page 221). The religious views LaVaughn sides with are unimportant; the important lesson LaVaughn learns is that there is always a middle ground. Nothing, not even science or religion, is black and white. Everything is open for interpretation.

The true meaning of religion, at least the universally accepted definition of religion, is introduced through the church minister LaVaughn impulsively engages with. He reminds LaVaughn that, "we're mere human beings. God doesn't turn anyone away, and neither do we" (p. 227). His words strike a chord with LaVaughn, particularly in light of her friends' recent accusations of superiority. According to the minister, everyone is created equal, regardless of their upbringing or sins, God loves them all, and as humans we should do our best to love, not judge, each other. He closes their conversation by urging LaVaughn to "go in peace," which truly strikes her as remarkable. Truly, peace and love are the things humanity should invest their trust in. When she gets home, LaVaughn realizes her questions about religion have been answered: "Religion must be for trusting. And trusting, what is that for? I figured it out: It helps you go on when you can't go on" (p. 236).



Part Four: Chapters 77 - 85

Part Four: Chapters 77 - 85 Summary

In preparation for her sixteenth birthday, LaVaughn invites all her friends to her house for a party. Remembering the minister's words, she decides to invite everyone she cares for, regardless of how they feel about her. She invites Myrtle and Annie but her best friends question whether they should attend. The church has asked them to limit their contact with nonbelievers so they don't slip back into their sinful lives. LaVaughn is horrified, surely this is the opposite of true religion, at least the way the minister explained it to her. Despite their fears of contamination, Myrtle and Annie agree to come to the party because it's LaVaughn's Sweet 16. When LaVaughn gets home from school that day, her mother is replacing all the photos of LaVaughn's father she had taken down while dating Lester. She claims that Guy - LaVaughn's father - came to her in a dream and said, smiling, "That was pretty dumb, wasn't it" (p. 242).

On the day of her party, all LaVaughn's friends arrive: Myrtle and Annie, Jolly, Ricky, and the kids, The Brain Cells (the kids from LaVaughn's biology class), and Patrick. In the middle of the party, another guest arrives: Jody, even though LaVaughn wasn't brave enough to invite him. He presses a beautiful present into LaVaughn's hands and smiles sweetly at her. Even though her heart feels like it might burst, LaVaughn forgives Jody in that moment and her love for him becomes a fierce, protective love. He is her friend, regardless of his sexuality. The gift is a book of Michelangelo's paintings: "He painted on the ceiling, too," Jody says (p. 259). LaVaughn has the most beautiful birthday of her life, surrounded by her friends and family. She raises her eyes to the heavens and gives thanks for how far she has truly come.

Part Four: Chapters 77 - 85 Analysis

In this final section of the novel, the true meaning of the novel's title, True Believer is realized. After many long conversations about religion and hope and the future, LaVaughn says, "'I believe in possibility. In the possibility of possibility. Of the world making sense someday" (p. 243). When it comes to hope, LaVaughn is a true believer that things can change and things can always get better. At her party, LaVaughn looks around at the obstacles her friends have overcome, from Patrick and the foster homes to Jolly and her two babies with no fathers, but everyone is together, laughing and surrounded by love. Patrick scored twelfth in the state biology test and most certainly has a bright future ahead of him. Jolly, "a throwaway girl" has a new boyfriend who actually wants to build a family with her. Everyone's future is filled with possibility. When Jody arrives at LaVaughn's party, she realizes the true depth of her love. She feels fiercely protective of him and prepares herself to defend him if anyone should question why he is there. LaVaughn realizes that loving is extremely dangerous, you set yourself up for heartbreak, but love is what fuels your heart and, like a bird, lets you open your wings and soar.



Characters

Verna LaVaughn

Verna LaVaughn is the fifteen-year-old protagonist and narrator of the novel. She is named after her two great aunts, Verna and LaVaughn, but only goes by LaVaughn. At the opening of the novel, LaVaughn is preparing to go to college, although she's not enthusiastic about the idea. It's her mother's dream for her more than it is her own. It seems that the world goes on without LaVaughn's direct influence - her teachers select her for special classes, her mother insists that she finds a job, her friends come and go - and LaVaughn often feels she has no control over what's happening to her. The turning point in LaVaughn's life happens when Jody, an old friend from her childhood, returns to the neighborhood and LaVaughn develops a massive crush on him. Suddenly, her life seems to have meaning, yet she still struggles to actively pursue her desires. She waits for Jody to notice her, to talk to her, to ask her out. As the novel progresses, LaVaughn learns to take initiative and action in her life. She struggles to deal with many friends abandoning her and accusing her of acting superior. LaVaughn has many obstacles to overcome in her life, but she eventually learns to stand on her own feet and embrace her future. When her guidance counselor asks if LaVaughn is truly interested in college, she realizes for the first time that she actually is, for herself, not just for her mother. The novel is a coming-of-age story of LaVaughn's journey from whiny, confused teenager to mature young woman.

Jody

Jody is LaVaughn's fifteen-year-old love interest. He is described as beautiful with silky eyes and a swimmer's physique. Like all the other characters in the novel, Jody is not given any further physical description as it might identify his race. In all her novels, Wolff makes an effort to keep the race of her characters unidentified so that more readers can identify with their journeys. When dealing with families living in the slums, it also prevents racism or stereotypes from clouding the reader's vision. A few years ago, Jody's mother hoped to give him a better life by moving him away from the slums into a "real" house in a better school district. Unfortunately, she couldn't afford the rent and a few years later, had to return to the ghetto. When Jody returned, he had a new interest in swimming and showed promise. He was working hard to improve his athletic skills in the hopes of earning a college scholarship. Throughout the novel, Jody is nothing but kind to LaVaughn, which only fuels her romantic imaginations. Everyone around Jody, except for LaVaughn, seems to realize that Jody is gay, although this is never explicitly stated in the text. It's unclear whether Jody is comfortable with his sexuality or if he's hiding it from his family and friends. At the end of the novel, Jody shows up, uninvited, to LaVaughn's birthday party in an act of friendship and true platonic love for his dear friend.



LaVaughn's Mother

LaVaughn's Mother is the main reason why LaVaughn is planning to attend college after graduating from high school. She is an unnamed single mother working extra hours to help pay for her daughter's education. LaVaughn's mother is extremely supportive and loving toward LaVaughn but has very high standards for her behavior. She is also very lonely. In this novel, LaVaughn's mother starts a new romantic relationship but ends it when the new boyfriend asks to borrow money.

Myrtle

Myrtle is LaVaughn's best friend from childhood. She is not as determined to go to college as LaVaughn is, but she is determined to stay on the right path. She chooses to join a church group that preaches strict Christian beliefs and has very high standards for the members' behavior. Myrtle has grown up in a house with a drug-addicted father who is in and out of rehab.

Patrick

Patrick is LaVaughn's friend in biology class. Patrick grew up in the foster care system and spent most of his life being raised by nuns. He has an unnamed speech impediment that causes him to speak very slowly, but he is clearly brilliant. Patrick is a genius when it comes to science and scores the twelfth highest score in the entire state in the science-standardized test. Patrick has a crush on LaVaughn that isn't returned and he accuses LaVaughn of acting superior when she laughs at the homemade Valentine he makes her.

Jolly

Jolly is one of LaVaughn's friends from the neighborhood. She is eighteen years old with two fatherless children and it's clear that motherhood overwhelms her. Jolly struggles with everything in her life, from paying her bills to completing her homework. Jolly is a clear foil for LaVaughn in the novels - although LaVaughn is three years younger than Jolly, she is more mature and has a brighter future. Jolly is a symbol for children lost in the vicious cycle of poverty and the dangers of growing up without positive role models in one's life.

Lester

Lester is LaVaughn's mother's boyfriend. He appears like a flash in LaVaughn's life, making it very clear how lonely her mother is. When she starts dating Lester, LaVaughn's mother takes down all the photos of her ex-husband (LaVaughn's father) and begins cooking delicious food. It seems that Lester is the perfect man, but

appearances are often deceiving. It's revealed that Lester has a crooked history when it comes to finances, and LaVaughn's mother ends their relationship when he asks to borrow money from LaVaughn's college savings account.



Objects/Places

The Joyful Universal Church of Jesus

The Joyful Universal Church of Jesus is the church that Annie and Myrtle join to help keep themselves on the right path. The church preaches extremely conservative Christian ideals with rigid guidelines for member behaviors. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the organization is more of a cult than a religious institution.

Grammar Build Up

Grammar Build Up is the special English class LaVaughn is enrolled in when it becomes apparent that she is college material. The class is taught by Dr Rose who teaches the students new grammar words to help prepare them for college (to compete with the students from better school districts). She also gives them valuable advice about their lives.

The Ceiling Painting

The Ceiling Painting is LaVaughn's expression of freedom in her bedroom. She paints a beautiful tree on the ceiling complete with a bird's nest filled with chicks. LaVaughn, and the rest of the kids in her neighborhood, are like the bird she's painted on her ceiling: symbols of possibility, of dreams taking flight. But like the birds, they're babies, and need the helpful guidance of adults to show them the way. Unfortunately, most kids don't have access to great role models. Luckily, LaVaughn and the rest of the Brain Cells do, and their futures look far brighter than their neighbors.

The Brain Cells

The Brain Cells are the students in LaVaughn's grammar study group. The Brain Cells consists of LaVaughn, Ronelle, Doug, and Artrille.

The Food & Flashlight Formal

The Food & Flashlight Formal is the school dance LaVaughn attends with Jody. She is so excited to go to the dance with Jody specifically, LaVaughn turns down Patrick's invitation even though he invites her first. At the dance, LaVaughn and Jody kiss for the first time, which is both a magical and horrifying at the same time.



The Children's Hospital

The Children's Hospital is where LaVaughn gets her first job, washing laundry. LaVaughn loves working in the children's ward and dreams of becoming a nurse there one day.

The Blue Dress

The Blue Dress is what LaVaughn dies is preparation for the Food and Flashlight Formal. She buys the dress from Goodwill with her first paycheck after falling in love with the beautiful crushed velvet. After LaVaughn sees Jody kissing another boy, she pulls the dress out of her closet and cuts it open like a wound.

The Swimming Pool

The Swimming Pool is where Jody spends most of his time when he's not at school. The swimming pool is Jody's ticket out of the slums and he hopes to earn a college scholarship for his efforts. As a result of his time at the pool, Jody always smells like chlorine, a welcome aroma to LaVaughn.

The Chain of Faith

The Chain of Faith is a special program put together by The Joyful Universal Church of Jesus. Students chosen for this program are given permission to drop out of school and the church will help them earn their GED in exchange for spending their time ministering, pulling new members into the church. Myrtle takes advantage of this program, saying goodbye to any dreams she might have had of going to college.

The Science Aptitude Test

The Science Aptitude Test is a statewide standardized test to grade each college-bound student on their science potential. Students from LaVaughn's school district are never expected to do well, so it is a shock when Patrick scores twelfth highest in the entire state.



Themes

Appearances Versus Reality

Much of the novel deals with the theme of appearances versus reality, particularly as it pertains to the people in LaVaughn's life. LaVaughn grows up in the projects, where those outside her community, and even those within it, make harsh judgments based on their perceptions of the area. For example, no one within the community, and many outside of it, believe that the children have futures off the streets. LaVaughn's school is surprised to hear that she is interested in going to college; it's so rare in their school district. On the surface, it appears that inner-city children are less motivated, or even less intelligent, than students in better school districts. However, the reality is that LaVaughn and her classmates are just as motivated, just as intelligent, just as determined to create better lives for themselves than the other students, they simply don't have the same opportunities to thrive. Patrick, for example, is perceived as a poor kid with a bad upbringing, and no one expects him to go very far in life. But Patrick is wildly intelligent, scoring twelfth in the city on his science exams. After living a life in foster care, Patrick could have fallen through the cracks of the public school system and faced a life on the streets if one teacher hadn't identified him as a promising student. LaVaughn, too, judges Patrick based on his appearance, thinking that he is lesser than because he only has one shirt in his wardrobe and speaks slowly. As the novel progresses, LaVaughn realizes that he is a valuable member of society and that, like her, he is going places.

There are many other characters whose reality is much different than their appearance. Jody is perhaps the best example of this. On the outside, he is a popular, athletic kid, nothing out of the ordinary. But the reality is that Jody is hiding a secret - his homosexuality. This secret personally affects LaVaughn who feels cheated. She has based all her life's fantasies on the idea that she and Jody would one day be romantically linked. As a result, LaVaughn must learn the painful lesson that appearances can be deceiving. LaVaughn's mother learns the same lesson through her relationship with Lester. Based on his appearances, Lester is kind, determined, sensible, and good with his money. In reality, Lester is a con man, looking to take advantage of LavVaughn's mother and the college savings account she has worked so hard to create. The moral of the story is that you can't judge a book by its cover. Everyone is unique and surprising. That's life.

Freedom

For many of the characters in the novel, there is no such thing as freedom. They were born in the projects, work (or don't work) in the projects, and will die in the projects. Their lives have no further momentum, no freedom to spread their wings and fly. The reader sees this reflected most poignantly in the attitude of the school children that laugh at the idea of becoming doctors or nurses. It isn't until LaVaughn joins the



grammar club that she even begins to dream big. All around her, her fellow students admit to wanting to become television presenters or doctors and no one laughs. Without any sense of irony, Artrille says he got the job because he'd like to be a doctor one day. This admission startles LaVaughn, who can't imagine a kid from the projects growing up to be a doctor: "Artrille is no richer than us. He lives in a slum like us. He would be valuable in a gang, he memorizes things well, he has quick eyes, they could scare you in a dark alley" (p. 152). Where LaVaughn comes from, it's highly unusual for kids to escape the vicious cycle of poverty in the slums, and even more unusual for kids to aspire to career dreams. LaVaughn, and the rest of the kids in her neighborhood, are like the bird she's painted on her ceiling: symbols of possibility, of dreams taking flight. But like the birds, they're babies, and need the helpful guidance of adults to show them the way. Unfortunately, most kids don't have access to great role models. Luckily, LaVaughn and the rest of the Brain Cells do, and their futures look far brighter than their neighbors. Another symbol of this freedom is seen in Jody's fish tank. He collects beautiful specimens of fish, but keeps them caged in a tiny tank where they have no hope of swimming freely in the waters. They're stuck in their tank, as many of the slum children are stuck in their ghetto. At the end of the novel, LaVaughn realizes that she wants freedom for herself, not for her mother's dream but for her own, and her heart sprouts wings and flies.

Religion

Religion is one of the most pervasive and complicated themes in the novel. Even the title "True Believer" calls religion into the reader's mind. Throughout the novel, LaVaughn struggles with her beliefs, whether God is real and what God's plan means in her life. Although the novel is not religious, it tackles the conflict of atheism and Christianity head-on. For many of the characters in the novel, religion and hope are inextricably intertwined: hope for a better life and hope for an eternal future, thanks to Christ's sacrifice. Surprisingly, it is Patrick, not Myrtle or Annie (LaVaughn's devout friends) who brings LaVaughn to truly question her spirituality. Patrick proudly wears his crucifix - a necklace with a pendant shaped like Jesus hanging on the cross - as a reminder of the world's evil. In Patrick's view of religion, every individual who struggles as a result of evil can be seen as a Christ figure, hanging painfully on a cross waiting for the sweet relief of death and knowing that their treasures are stored in heaven. He wears the crucifix as a reminder of the evil in the world and the passion he has in his heart to overcome it. Everyone in LaVaughn's life has a different view of religion, from the extremely conservative views of Myrtle and Annie to the liberal science-based views Ronell introduces her to: "Maybe God is the beginning. The start of protons. The first breath of anything" (p. 221). The religious views LaVaughn sides with are unimportant; the important lesson LaVaughn learns is that there is always a middle ground. Nothing, not even science or religion, is black and white. Everything is open for interpretation.

The true meaning of religion, at least the universally accepted definition of religion, is introduced through the church minister LaVaughn impulsively engages with. He reminds LaVaughn that, "We're mere human beings. God doesn't turn anyone away, and neither do we" (p. 227). His words strike a chord with LaVaughn, particularly in light of her



friends' recent accusations of superiority. According to the minister, everyone is created equal, regardless of their upbringing or sins, God loves them all, and as humans we should do our best to love, not judge, each other. When she gets home, LaVaughn realizes her questions about religion have been answered. She realizes that "Religion must be for trusting. And trusting, what is that for? I figured it out: It helps you go on when you can't go on" (p. 236).



Style

Point of View

True Believer is told in the first-person and limited omniscience narration through LaVaughn's perspective, which means that LaVaughn speaks using "me" and "I" and that the only character whose thoughts the reader has access to are LaVaughn's alone. The reader is held very close to LaVaughn's emotions and thoughts, as these are the most important factors to understanding the novel as a whole. Because the reader is held so close to LaVaughn, the point-of-view is completely reliable. As LaVaughn is struggling to understand what is happening to her, she has no reason to manipulate the circumstances for her own personal gain. LaVaughn's situation - struggling to understand the many relationships in her life, both with friends and family - provides the perfect opportunity for the reader's questions to be answered. Whenever the reader is confused about the events in the novel, whether physical or emotional events, LaVaughn asks the same questions simultaneously, which strengthens the relationship the reader forms with LaVaughn. As the reader traverses the novel, they may have the feeling they are reading LaVaughn's diary because the prose aligns the reader so closely to her emotions. Although it isn't discussed directly in the text, the conflict between appearances and reality is a major theme in the novel. Through LaVaughn's point-of-view narration, the readers are thrust into an impoverished world where their own stereotypes and assumptions are challenged. It is LaVaughn's unblinking eye, curiosity, anger, and eventual reconciliation with her surroundings - all of which the reader experiences through LaVaughn's point-of-view that not only endears her character to the audience, but forces the audience to examine their own beliefs through her experiences, which makes for an incredibly powerful novel.

Setting

True Believer is set in an unnamed city in America. The reader knows nothing about the city where LaVaughn and her friends live except that it is quite poor. LaVaughn's story is set in an unnamed neighborhood in an unnamed city. LaVaughn and her friends likely live in the projects, but that's never stated explicitly. All the reader knows is that LaVaughn lives in a run-down apartment building with many other poor, struggling families. LaVaughn's school is clearly an inner city school that doesn't even shut down when school shootings occur; they're simply too common. Growing up in the projects, those outside LaVaughn's community, and even those within it, make harsh judgments based on their perceptions of the area. For example, no one within the community, and many outside of it, believe that the children have futures off the streets. Teenage pregnancies are common. Drug addicted parents are common. Kids joining gangs is common. For LaVaughn, the only saving grace in her life is her dedicated, headstrong mother who works long hours to ensure LaVaughn will rise above her surroundings and make something of herself. Just as Wolff refuses to identify the race of her characters, it is likely that she refuses to identify the novel's city setting to provide more readers the



opportunity of recognizing their own city in the pages. By refusing to identify LaVaughn's hometown, Wolff gives readers opportunities to see their own home town reflected in the story, begging the question: how can I make a difference in my own city? It also provides an excellent opportunity to build background knowledge for the readers about urban life.

Language and Meaning

True Believer is written as a long free verse (unrhymed and unmetred) poem, even though it is written in full sentences. The shortened, sometimes enjambed lines may reflect LaVaughn's broken, scattered life, or it may reflect her educational level at the novel's opening: LaVaughn struggled with many subjects in school, including English. The broken, almost Pidgin language may reflect urban discourse and the use of Ebonics, although LaVaughn's race and culture is never explicitly stated. The language of the novel is very conversational, written from the point-of-view of a teenager. Since Lavaughn lives in the inner city, where the English language has evolved in new ways, some of the dialogue may be difficult for readers to understand, but it helps create a vivid portrayal of the LaVaughn and her relationships. 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 the characters.

This novel is written for teenaged, young adult readers, and stars characters of the same age range. Because of this, the language is very conversational, with the voice of each character ringing true to what readers would hear everyday in their high school hallways - or what they remember of their high school hallways. Virginia Euwer Wolff has clearly researched the voice of her characters deeply, which makes all the language, including LaVaughn's inner thoughts and dialogue completely believable. Wolff does not shy away from the over-sexualization and profanity in teenage language, nor does she shy away from the dangers of impoverished living (teenage pregnancy, drug use, gang violence, and rape) and it is justly evident in the text.

Structure

This novel consists of 85 short chapters, averaging five pages in length. The novel is broken into four parts divided between four major events in LaVaughn's romantic life. The first section deals with the reintroduction of Jody, LaVaughn's love interest. The second section deals with LaVaughn's emotional upheaval after her first date with Jody. The third section focuses on LaVaughn's imagination and the way she avoids the clues about Jody's true identity. The fourth and final section deals with LaVaughn's eventual understanding: she and Jody will never be together. The four sections also roughly plot LaVaughn's path to maturity: from lovesick teenager to broken-hearted wretch to analytic, daydreaming young adult to a mature, self-confident woman.

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reflect LaVaughn's broken, scattered life, or it may reflect her educational level at the novel's opening: LaVaughn struggled with many subjects in school, including English. The novel is quite easy to read and the plot is engrossing once the reader gets past the unique structure and language. The story line is linear with no flashbacks or long sections of back-story to contend with. The novel is easy to read and entertaining in its entirety.



Quotes

"I seen many youngsters change their minds, forgetting their life plan or they pretend they never had one. You need a long memory, LaVaughn. You can't go forgetting the minute it gets too hard" (p. 9).

"And I looked in the eyes of them and wishes I could have everybody together all liking each other like the picture in my mind of how we would all be" (p. 51).

"Oh, Oh, Oh. I'll be all right, all right. He is holding me, kicking for both of us, saving my life the whole length of the pool, and I'll be all right" (p. 77).

"This Lester has some special stomach to need all these special plates and holiday glasses. Is it because he has a good job? Is it because my mom is lonely? I'm lonely, and I eat on the regular plates every single time" (p. 106).

"What could I say to Myrtle & Annie? Their play didn't make me want to join their club. I don't want their club telling me what to hate. I wondered why Jesus would destroy people like that...What was different about us now? Where was it that we changed?" (p. 132).

"I always say I want to get out of here. But not yet. We would be living where my dad never was" (p. 140).

"What we need to believe in - to believe in thoroughly - is that you and you and you can stand up tall, shatter those statistics about students in the 'poorer schools,' as they call us, and make a difference in the vast and terrifying and magnificent world" (p. 170).

"Defining moments present themselves to us, often disguised, when we must make momentous decisions that shape our lives" (p. 203).

"Religion must be for trusting. And trusting, what is that for? I figured it out: It helps you go on when you can't go on" (p. 236).

"I believe in possibility. In the possibility of possibility. Of the world making sense someday" (p. 243).



Topics for Discussion

Describe LaVaughn's relationship with the neighborhood she grew up in. What does she love about her home? What does she hate? In Chapter five she says "I am lucky to have a room of my own, instead of sleeping on a fold-out like Annie in her house" (p. 15). Why do you think LaVaughn chooses to show gratitude instead of being bitter? What does this tell you about her character? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Compare and contrast the upbringing LaVaughn has with the upbringing Myrtle has. What is the same about their lives? What is different? How is it that two girls from the same neighborhood, who attend the same school, have very different futures? What does this tell you about life in the slums? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Myrtle and Annie join a conservative church group to help keep them on the right path. What opportunities does this group afford its members? At what cost? LaVaughn admits to feeling left out of the group, yet she refuses to join. Why? What frightens LaVaughn about the group's rules? Is she right to be worried? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

When LaVaughn's school discover that she is "college material," they make many changes to her schedule, including signing her up for Grammar Build Up and a new biology class. How do these classes help prepare LaVaughn for college, both academically and emotionally? Why aren't all the children at LaVaughn's school given access to these opportunities? Is this fair? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe the relationship between LaVaughn and Jolly. In what ways is Jolly a foil for LaVaughn? How the two girls the same? How are they different? At the end of the novel, Jolly's future looks bright: she has a new boyfriend, is studying for school, and her children seem well adjusted. Do you think this will last? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe the role of mothers in the novel. Choose two mothers and compare and contrast the ways their decisions have affected the lives of their children? What does this tell you about the importance of good parents, both in the slums and out? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

What do you think it means to be a "true believer?" What does LaVaughn believe in? How do LaVaughn's beliefs compare / contrast to the beliefs of those around her? When thinking about her future, where does LaVaughn place her hopes and dreams? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.