

# **The Wednesday Wars Study Guide**

## **The Wednesday Wars by Gary Schmidt**

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# Plot Summary

The Wednesday Wars by Gary D. Schmidt is a coming of age story about a young man, Holling Hoodhood, who learns over the course of his seventh grade year that there is more to life than what he sees in his own world. With the help of a strict but caring teacher, Mrs. Baker, his flower child sister, Heather, a host of friends and heroes, and even Shakespeare, Hoodhood learns lessons about discrimination, becoming an adult, war, and determining one's own destiny.

Holling Hoodhood is a young man beginning seventh grade in a small suburb on Long Island in New York. His life is filled with worries about the family architectural business, friends, and immediate threats from older classmates. He doesn't realize the other dangers in the world in 1967, including the Vietnam war, discrimination, and the pain and suffering of those around him.

Hoodhood, who believes his teacher Mrs. Baker hates him, is forced to spend each Wednesday afternoon in class alone while his classmates, Catholic and Jewish, attend religious instruction. Hoodhood, a Presbyterian, is instead asked to do chores. Over time, however, Mrs. Baker sees in Hoodhood the spark of brilliance, and she begins teaching him Shakespeare. Through the words of Shakespeare, Hoodhood begins to understand there is more to the world than he initially realized.

At home, his sister is slowly changing her political views and begins to align herself against the Vietnam war, much to her father's dismay. Father is primarily concerned about his business and his standing in the community, and Hoodhood knows he is to follow in his father's footsteps. In school, Hoodhood begins to see discrimination as a classmate, a recent refugee from Vietnam, is tormented not only by classmates, but by teachers who have lost loved ones in the war. Hoodhood himself feels discrimination as he is denied an autograph from Mickey Mantle due to how he looks, and he begins to understand that the world is never fair, and often cruel. Although Mrs. Baker does try to make things better for Hoodhood, even she is down as her husband is missing in Vietnam.

When his sister leaves home to find herself, Hoodhood realizes his love for her, as well as understands her need to strike out on her own. He is able to relate his teachings back to the readings of Shakespeare, and he finally understands the true meaning behind Mrs. Baker's decision to teach him the plays. He learns to stand up for himself and those he cares about, and to find beauty and life whenever possible, in spite of the knowledge that war and death are prominent in the world. By the end of the novel, Hoodhood has learned that life is about compromise, and about finding your own destiny.



# September

## September Summary

The Wednesday Wars follows a young seventh grade boy, Holling Hoodhood, on his journey to young adulthood during the Vietnam war, civil rights movement, and with existing family issues. With Mrs. Baker, his teacher, instructing him about Shakespeare, Holling learns that the world is much bigger than his existence encompasses, and that there is both tragedy and comedy in life.

In "September", readers are introduced to Holling Hoodhood, a young man just beginning the seventh grade. Holling is convinced his teacher, Mrs. Baker, hates him, because he is the only Presbyterian in class. Holling admits that living in the middle of town, between the Catholics to the south and the Jews to the north, is troublesome, as on Saturdays it is difficult to start a baseball game, but until recently, things were tolerable. However, when the only other Presbyterians in his class moved, Holling was left behind. Now, on Wednesday afternoons, the Catholics and the Jews are excused from class to attend religious instruction, but Holling is left behind with Mrs. Baker. He believes this is why she hates him, following role call on the very first day.

Following school, Holling returns to the family home. Their house is referred to by Holling as the "Perfect House", due to his father's impeccable upkeep of it. The living room is perfect, with furniture covered in plastic and a baby grand piano no one has ever played. Rarely has anyone even set foot on the carpet. Inside, Holling finds his mother fanning out the kitchen. Mrs. Hoodhood smokes, but pretend to everyone, especially Mr. Hoodhood, that she doesn't. Although Holling tries to convince her Mrs. Baker has it in for him, Mrs. Hoodhood calmly explains that she doubts Baker dislikes Holling, primary because she doesn't know him. Holling is left to wonder if parents are born able to come up with such nonsense ideas, or if the ability is triggered by childbirth.

After supper, Holling seeks out his father for advice, but he is busy watching Walter Cronkite on the news, who is discussing the casualties figures from Vietnam and the ongoing war in general. Following the newscast, Holling attempts to discuss Mrs. Baker's hatred of him, but when Mr. Hoodhood understands who the woman is, his primary concern is that Holling be on his best behavior, as she is related to the family who owns a sporting emporium in town who is looking for an architect. As one of the three architects being considered, Mr. Hoodhood only cares that Holling make a good impression, to make the family, and therefore his father's business, seem more desirable. Holling next seeks out his older sister, who is of little help.

At school the following day, Holling is sure Mrs. Baker is eying him all day. When he fears she has booby trapped his desk, he asks Meryl Lee Kowalski, a classmate with a crush on him, to open the desk, feigning that there may be a surprise in it for her. When there isn't, she is upset, but Holling doesn't understand why. At recess, Holling tries to stay inside, fearing Mrs. Baker has recruited an eighth grade hooligan like Doug



Swieteck's brother to harm him, but she forces him out. When Doug Swieteck's brother's asks Holling to play soccer, he is certain Mrs. Baker has a hand in things. Determined not to be beaten, Holling defends the goal, but trips Doug Swieteck's brother as he attempts a goal. Doug Swieteck's brother hits his head on the goal post and is nearly knocked out. Several classmates, such as Danny Hufper, Doug Swieteck himself, and Meryl Lee, all congratulate him, particularly after the announcement that Doug Swieteck's brother would be in medical observation for ten days. Mrs. Baker merely looks at him, and again Holling is convinced of her hatred of him.

When asked to diagram sentences later in the afternoon, Holling is given an extremely difficult one, unlike others in the class, such as Mai Thi, who has recently emigrated from Vietnam. He is saved by an announcement on the PA, asking him to go to the principal's office. Mr. Guareschi, the principal, is a dictator type and even calls Holling by the wrong name, and sticks to it when Holling corrects him. He informs Holling that Mrs. Baker wants him to repeat sixth grade math, on Wednesday afternoons, as she feels he could benefit, but Guareschi decides to leave Holling where he is. Holling sees this as another show of hatred from Mrs. Baker. When Holling tells her Guareschi has decided Holling will not retake math, she seems disappointed, but Holling continues to watch her for "murderous intentions". Later that day, Guareschi announces Tybalt Baker, her husband, is being deployed overseas to the war in Vietnam, and Holling notices her face never changes, commenting that this is normal for those with murderous intentions.

## September Analysis

The opening chapter for the Wednesday Wars introduces several main concepts in the story, as well as many of the main characters, at least briefly. Holling Hoodhood is a smart young man, growing up in a seemingly small suburb. His life, much like that of any preteen, is filled with bullies, teachers, parents, and other basic happenings. Holling is little concerned, it seems, with the Vietnam war, or the knowledge that many of the people he knows, including his new teacher, have loved ones fighting in the war. Holling, throughout this chapter, shows he is very self absorbed, in that he worries only about his own "war" with Mrs. Baker, and with Doug Swieteck's brother. This foreshadows the advancement of Holling's character throughout the novel as he learns about the outside world. His treatment of Meryl Lee, along with the knowledge that she has a crush on him, foreshadows the development of their relationship throughout the novel.

This chapter also introduces Mrs. Baker, Holling's teacher. Although it is unclear as to why, it does seem from Holling's depiction that Mrs. Baker does not want to spend Wednesday afternoons with Holling. However, it is clear in the novel that the perspective is that of Holling's. One can imagine many reasons for Mrs. Baker's various reactions in the novel, not the least of which is the knowledge that her husband is about to go off to war. Her unchanging features at the end of this chapter show she is good at hiding emotion, while Holling's depiction of her lack of emotions only shows his own selfish view of the situation. It is clear, from this introduction, that Mrs. Baker is a complicated character with much to offer Holling.



Holling's family is also introduced in this chapter. It is obvious from the beginning that Holling's family is highly concerned about how they appear to others. The fact that his mother refuses to admit she smokes even to her own family, and particularly to her husband, shows a high level of self consciousness. His father's concern for how the house looks, his clear preference for the business over any personal issue of Holling's, and his continued pressure on Holling to behave well shows that he highly prizes how others see him. The Hoodhood's living room is proof of their need to present themselves in a seemingly perfect manner. His sister also seems angry, and little concerned about Holling.

Several other characters are briefly introduced in this chapter, as well. Mai Thi, a recent immigrant from Vietnam, is mentioned briefly, as is the current conflict in the Vietnam war. These two two elements, combined with the knowledge that teachers in the school have family's fighting in the war, foreshadow friction between these characters. Danny Hufpar, Doug Swieteck's brother's, and Doug Swieteck are all mentioned in this chapter, and all become important characters later in the novel. Mr. Guareschi is also discussed, and readers understand he is seen as a local dictator.

In addition to introducing several characters, this chapter also introduces several concepts important to the novel. First, this chapter shows the novel takes place during the Vietnam war. Holling seems to pay little attention to this fact, but this becomes a major contributor to the events in the novel. Secondly, the concept of discrimination is hinted at in this chapter, as readers learn of the plight of the sole Presbyterian in class. Finally, the knowledge that Holling will be spending every afternoon with Mrs. Baker foreshadows their journey together throughout the novel.



# October

## October Summary

In "October", for several weeks on Wednesday afternoons, Holling is left in the classroom to clean erasers, wipe down blackboards, and straighten the room while his classmates attend religious studies. Holling doesn't even complain as he is asked to clean out the coat closet, where Doug Swieteck's collection of rotting food—to be used in attempts to torment teachers—is held, because he knows his father is counting on him. One Tuesday, Doug Swieteck's brother was scheduled to return to school, but used chalk from erasers in other classrooms to chalk his face and pretend to be insane. He was given more time for observation, and on the following Wednesday, Holling feels Mrs. Baker somehow blames him for the event. He explains this to Meryl Lee, who calls him paranoid.

Following recess, Mrs. Baker sends Holling down to retrieve trays of cream puffs from Mrs. Bigio, the school cook, that she will be serving to the Wives of Vietnam Soldiers later in the day. Holling obeys, and places them by the open windows in the classroom to cool. When his classmates leave that afternoon for religious instruction, they warn Holling they will be angry if he is allowed to eat a cream puff, since they were not. Mrs. Baker asks Holling to not only clean the erasers from her room, but brings him erasers from all other classrooms as well. As a reward, she offers a cream puff. While Holling happily obeys, he realizes minutes later that the chalk dust drifting from his work on the playground is wafting through the open windows onto the cream puffs. Unfortunately, they are sprinkled with powdered sugar, so Holling knows they are ruined, but fearfully does not tell Mrs. Baker. As promised, she gives him a cream puff, which he hides in the coat closet with the other rotting food. At the get together later, everyone assumes the horrible tasting puffs are a result of bad powdered sugar.

At dinner a few nights later, Mr. Hoodhood begins questioning Holling about the cream puffs, but is distracted when Holling's sister comes in with a flower painted on her face. He and she argue about her wishes to be a flower child, both because Mr. Hoodhood is in favor of the war, and because he is nominated for Businessman of the Year of 1967, and doesn't want his image to be tainted by his daughter. He forces her to wash her face, and later, she argues with Holling, questioning his lack of support, and his lack of concern in general for the Vietnam war.

The following day, Mrs. Baker explains that a change will happen Wednesday afternoons in the future, but that Holling will be asked to do one more chore, possible for another cream puff. The class, hearing this, is very angry, and demands that Holling bring them all cream puffs within three weeks. Meanwhile, Mrs. Baker informs him the following Wednesday that they will begin learning Shakespeare, beginning with *The Merchant of Venice*. She lets him know she needs him to clean the rat cages first, but immediately following, they will begin their new lessons. As Holling cleans, Mrs. Baker gently lets him know she does not teach Shakespeare to bore him, and as he turns to



discuss it with her, the rats escape to the coat closet. Following a desperate attempt to capture them by Mrs. Baker, Holling, and Mr. Vendleri, they are forced to get Mr. Guareschi. The rats escape from the closet, cream puff all over them, and scurry into the radiator and into the ceiling. Together, the adults are unable to capture the rats, but determine not to tell anyone they have escaped.

Back in the classroom, Mrs. Baker briefly notes Holling never ate his cream puff, but drops the subject and moves on to Shakespeare. Holling is prepared to be bored, but instead finds he enjoys Shakespeare. At the end, Mrs. Baker explains that the play is a tragedy, because Shylock is unable to be himself, because those around him will only allow him to be who they want him to be.

## October Analysis

This chapter helps to set up several situations that are played on throughout the rest of the novel, as well as gives a deeper understanding into Holling's family dynamics. First, again, Holling's father is shown to care little about his son's plight, but more about his business as his son is left to do manual labor so that his company might get a bid to redesign the Baker Emporium. His father also clearly ignores Holling's sister's issues, as he demands that she wash the flower from her face that represents she is a flower child. He doesn't seem to care that she is passionate about her cause, but only cares that she fall into line, so as not to make him look bad. Mr. Hoodood continues to show readers where he priorities lie. In addition, Holling's sister shows her own disdain for her younger brother's lack of concern for the outside world. Her comments clearly fall on deaf ears, and Holling really doesn't at this point in the novel care about the war or really anything about society. This is shown by his lack of responsibility for the cream puff incident. This foreshadows their strengthening relationship later in the novel, as well as Holling's growing concern later in the novel for the world around him.

To be fair, Holling has his own concerns in this chapter. His friend are resorting to death threats in relation to the cream puffs, and he is unable to afford any. This situation foreshadows his necessary questions to the baker, which eventually lead to his playing of Ariel in later chapters. It also shows that Holling's behavior is typical for a seventh grader, as they care more about their own situation than that of the world. This changes over the course of the novel as the children begin to mature, and these types of situations help the reader to see this development throughout the novel.

The situation with the rats in this chapter actually serves several purposes. First, the rats continue to provide comedy throughout the book as they keep reappearing at inopportune times. Secondly, the rats are a secret held by Mrs. Baker and Holling, which helps to strengthen their relationship throughout the novel. Lastly, the rats are used later in the novel in several situations to help develop different plot lines.

Finally, it is in this chapter that Holling begins to learn Shakespeare, and as a result, begins to care more about the world around him. As Mrs. Baker and Holling discuss Merchant of Venice, it is clear Holling understands the relation between himself and





Shylock, and begins to see why Mrs. Baker is using the time in the classroom to further his education. One can sense from her a desire to build Holling's character, and a strong faith in Holling's ability to really understand Shakespeare's meaning.



# November

## November Summary

In "November", Holling and his family notice that their living room ceiling is leaking, and has been for some time. Mrs. Baker has assigned Holling "The Tempest", and he finds he is able to relate to the storms in the play. As part of learning "Tempest", Holling begins to teach himself the Caliban curses spread throughout the play, and uses them consistently, although quietly. Arriving at school early one morning to practice, he finds Mr. Guareschi and Mr. Vendleri placing rat traps in the ceiling. In class, Mrs. Baker catches Holling blending curses, and she notes she enjoys the rhythm. In choir, when he is asked to sing soprano, his cursing draws the attention of Meryl Lee. Later, Doug Swieteck's brother hears Holling use the phrase "pied ninny" and asks its meaning.

On Wednesday, Holling is given a hundred fifty question quiz on "Tempest" and does fairly well, but not well enough, as Mrs. Baker asks him to reread the play. Holling knows, however, he will enjoy it the second time as much, and is in a good mood as he walks home. However, as he passes the bakery, he recalls the death threats for cream puffs, and realizes he has to come up with a plan. He asks his parents for an advance on allowance, but they are too happy celebrating Hoodhood's being awarded the contract for the Baker Emporium design. The following Friday Holling approaches the baker, asking to buy twenty two cream puffs, but he is over two dollars short. Mr. Goldman, the baker, and Holling make a deal that he can have the remaining cream puffs he can't afford if he is willing to play a part in the local Shakespeare company's Holiday Extravaganza. On Monday, then, Holling arrives at school with the required cream puffs, which Mrs. Baker makes the class wait to eat. When they return from lunch, however, they find the two escaped rats have pillaged the cream puffs, and as they escape back into the ceiling, Holling's friends warn him he has only ten days to produce more.

Holling laments that the week before Thanksgiving break is usually enjoyable, but that for him, this year, it is not. He discovers he is playing a fairy in the Shakespeare production, and the costume is a pair of yellow tights with white feathers. Further, Holling is unable to convince his father to advance his allowance for more cream puffs, and when he complains to Meryl Lee that his father is too worried about the Baker Emporium contract, she bursts into tears. Even more, Holling is in trouble for teaching Doug Swieteck's brother "pied ninny".

When Holling tries to bring in a few cream puffs as a bribe on Wednesday, his friends are even more upset. However, after lunch, they find twenty two cream puffs waiting for them, as Mrs. Baker explains Holling was only playing a joke. That afternoon, she and Holling discuss "Tempest", and Holling notes that Caliban in the story can't win, as he is a monster. Mrs. Baker reminds Holling that even monsters can grow beyond what people think of them, and that she wishes Shakespeare would have written a more positive ending.



As they are ending class, Mrs. Bigio arrives in the room, clearly shaken. Mrs. Baker asks if they found her husband, and she breaks into sounds of deep despair. Holling is sent home, but he notes he will never forget the sounds of sorrow and despair. The following day, Holling learns Mrs. Bigio's husband was killed in Vietnam. After the funeral, the Catholic Relief Agency, home of Mai Thi, is vandalized with the words "Go home Viet Cong". Holling notes that Shakespeare is wrong, in that most stories in real life do not have happy endings.

## November Analysis

"November" serves to show the beginnings of Holling's transformation into a young man. At the beginning of the chapter, Holling spends a considerable amount of time learning curses from "Tempest", showing his immaturity. At the same time, he does understand the link between the storms in the play and the rainy seasons in Long Island, showing he is beginning to make connections between his reading and his current life. Holling also, by the end of the novel, begins to see that reality differs greatly from stories, in that real life is much harsher. His experience listening as Mrs. Bigio laments to loss of her husband sticks with him, and the harrowing sounds of someone who has lost their loved one is a sound Holling knows he can't ever forget. He also sees the discrimination against Mai Thi, and begins to understand there are real live monsters in the world. Mrs. Baker teaches him, in their discussion of Caliban, that even monsters can grow from their mistakes, but Holling wonders if this is really possible. This foreshadows Holling's own dealings with monsters in the next few chapters, and the terrible situation that ensues between Mai Thi and Mrs. Bigio.

This chapter also introduces Holling as an actor, as he begins his debut with the Shakespeare company, which leads to several revelations later in the novel. The outfit he is forced to wear bothers him, as he does realize he will be made fun of, but he knows he has no choice, as he must obtain cream puffs for his class. The rats make an appearance again in this chapter, ruining the entire reason Holling is even in the play. However, Mrs. Baker comes to his rescue, showing she cares for Holling. The cream puffs also bring the monster theme back into play, as the "real" monsters of the story, the rats, continue to wreck havoc on the classroom.

There is also a subtle point in this chapter that foreshadows future information. Meryl Lee's tears as Holling talks about his father's deal foreshadows the knowledge later in the novel that her father, too, is an architect, competing for the same bids as Holling's father. While Holling misunderstands the reasons for her tears, this does suggest a future relationship between these characters.

# December

## December Summary

In "December", Holling and his friends learn that everyone will soon be taking the Standardized Achievement Tests. The school is decorated for the holidays with a combination of Jewish and Christian symbols, but Mrs. Baker refuses to put anything up in the classroom. When another teacher brings a crock of apple cider, Mrs. Baker has Danny Hupfer place it in the closet, on the top shelf, unopened. Holling notes he is not in a festive mood, either. He has been trying to get out of wearing the yellow tights for the play, but has not been successful. His mother thinks it will be cute, and his father wants him to behave, in case Goldman ever wants to expand his business.

Holling's spirits are soon raised, however, when Mrs. Baker announces that Mickey Mantle will be at Baker's Emporium, signing autographs on the same night as his play. She also tells people about his play, which annoys him, but notes that people can easily attend both events. His friends are suspicious, and ask if he is playing a girl, but he assures them he is playing the role of Ariel, the warrior. As they leave the classroom, Mai Thi warns Holling softly that it isn't good to be a warrior, but he wonders what she could possibly know about it.

On Wednesday, Mrs. Baker helps Holling with his lines for the play, and he seems to improve. The night of the play, his parents elect not to attend. In the audience, he sees Mrs. Baker and Mrs. Bigio, as well as Danny's parents, but he does not see classmates. Once on stage, Holling is flawless, and plays the part well, but on curtain call, he realizes Meryl Lee, Danny, and Mai Thi are all in the front row. However, they are not judgmental, but are impressed by his talent. Danny suddenly realizes he needs to leave to make it in time to get Mantle's autograph, and urges Holling to hurry.

Realizing the door to the dressing room is locked, Holling is forced to go to the signing in his yellow tights with feathers. Once outside, he is further disappointed, as his father has forgotten to pick him up. Saved by a bus driver who agrees to drive him for free, Holling arrives, but without a baseball. The bus driver happens to have one, and gives it to Holling with a "Merry Christmas". Holling races into the Emporium in time to see Danny, in awe, taking his baseball from Mantle. When Holling shyly approaches, however, Mantle refuses to sign his ball, after making fun of his costume. Holling is completely crushed, but Danny, who has seen it all, returns to the table, and gives Mantle back his signed ball, calling him a pied ninny. Danny and Holling leave the store together.

Back at the theater, Holling is given a hearty congratulations, but Holling notes how painful it is when the gods inside us die. Back at school, Mrs. Bigio is clearly upset about her husband, but one day as she serves lunch, she verbally attacks Mai Thi. Mai Thi merely walks to her seat, head down, and Holling wonders if these two people can ever heal from their pains. Holling is miserable as Wednesday arrives, but Mrs. Baker



asks Danny and Doug to remain behind, instead of going to religious study. Mrs. Baker gives the boys new baseballs and gloves. She tells them to go play in the gym, and when they arrive, they find Joe Pepitone and Horace Clark, two major Yankee players, in the gym waiting. They play ball with the boys, sign their mitts, and even give them Opening Season tickets, as well as their hats and jackets. When they go to thank Mrs. Baker, she has left, but Doug removes the bag of rotting food from the closet, a sign that he respects Mrs. Baker.

## December Analysis

"December" returns the reader to several of the themes used throughout the novel. First, Mrs. Baker is clearly upset about the holiday season, and Holling seems to dismiss this as merely Mrs. Baker not being in the holiday mood. As a reader, however, one knows Mrs. Baker is likely suffering as a result of missing her husband, and her concern over the war. Her friend, Mrs. Bigio, has recently lost her own husband in the war and one can only imagine the fear Mrs. Baker has. And yet, Mrs. Baker again never seems to show this fear to her class directly, indicating her strength as a person. Holling, still unaffected by the Vietnam war, has difficulty understanding. Additionally, Holling's comments about Mai Thi not understanding what it is to be a warrior again show his own lack of understanding about the world. Mai Thi comes from a country filled with war and violence, and knows far more than Holling what being a warrior really means.

This chapter also brings discrimination back into the story, in several different ways. First, Holling's experiences with Mantle and his discrimination of Holling due to the way he is dressed finally lets Holling understand the pain of rejection. This is the same feeling he is finally able to understand toward the end of the chapter, as Mai Thi is mistreated by Mrs. Bigio. Holling is able to commiserate with Mai Thi because he himself has felt the pain of discrimination, if not on the same level. Additionally, Mai Thi's mistreatment by Mrs. Bigio is a clear indicator of discrimination. While it is easy to understand Mrs. Bigio's anger at the situation, it is difficult to "watch" her treat a student with such disrespect. It is clear both she and Mai Thi are in deep amounts of pain after the encounter, and again Holling is able to see the "monsters" from Shakespeare's play in real life.

Additionally, the dynamics of Holling's family become more clear as his mother and father show their priorities. When Holling is concerned about his costume, his mother merely blows off his concern, while his father is again more worried about his business relationships than his own son. They choose to watch a Christmas show on television instead of watching their own son perform on stage, and this clearly bothers Holling, although he blames his tears on watching the audience through a small peephole. Holling is hurt that Danny Hupfer's parents are willing and able to come watch him perform, but his own parents are not. This is made worse when his father even fails to come pick him up to obtain Mickey Mantle's autograph. It is painfully obvious that Mr. Hoodhood cares less for his son than for his business, and equally clear that Holling is



aware of his position. This foreshadows Holling's eventual stand against his father later in the novel.

Holling's experience with Mickey Mantle in the sporting goods store reiterates the theme of hero worship and the dangers of lost heroes. Mantle was an important part of Holling's life, but when Mantle refused him an autograph simply because of the way he looks, Holling is completely crushed. He likens it to gods dying within him, and one can only imagine the pain and humiliation he feels at that moment. Danny, too, loses his hero in that same moment, as symbolized by his returning of the autographed ball. It is clear that Danny cannot respect someone who would behave in such a way, but this doesn't change the boys' pain at losing their hero.

This pain, however, is again softened by Mrs. Baker's actions. With the help of her brother-in-law, who also understood the pain these boys experienced, Mrs Baker manages to bring two great Yankee players to the boys in school, for far more than an autograph. While this doesn't take away the pain Holling felt, it does help him see that heroes are real, even if they are found in everyday people such as Mrs. Baker. Even Doug is able to see this, as he removes the bag of rotting food meant for playing tricks on his teacher. In this way, Mrs. Baker gains respect from the boys, and while Holling may not completely get over the loss of his hero, he is able to regain his love for baseball, and for the Yankees. The giving of the boys Opening season tickets foreshadows events on opening day, as well.



# January

## January Summary

In "January", Holling's picture is in the newspaper, depicting him flying over the stage in his yellow tights. Doug Swieteck's brother cuts the photo from all the newspapers he can find, and hangs them all over the school. Holling is humiliated. At home, even Holling's sister is angry, as a picture was taped to her locker. But when Holling suggests military school to his parents, they scoff, noting that Hoodhood and Associates has been invited to put in a bid for the new junior high, and having a child in the school helps the bid. Mr. Hoodhood and Holling's sister argue about the existing high school, as Holling's sister notes how restrictive it is on clothing, and how ridiculous those restrictions are. Mr. Hoodhood reminds her she is not a flower child. Later, Holling's sister comes to his room, and notes that his going to military school really is silly, as she knows he would then go off to war, and she doesn't want anything to happen to him.

The following day, as Mrs. Baker and Holling discuss Macbeth, she notes that Shakespeare wrote to convey that malice is small compared to the power of love. Holling reminds her of the photos pasted all over school, and explains how this shows that malice can be powerful. When she disagrees, Holling tells her it isn't her picture in the halls, and that she has little to worry about. After he says it, he realizes his stupidity, but it is too late. Mrs. Baker sends him quietly to his desk and doesn't speak to him the rest of the day.

The following day, the town is covered in a layer of ice, and Holling slides himself to school. When the school loses power, the children sit, studying for the achievement tests in the dark and cold, listening to the rats in the ceiling. Mrs. Bigio is kind enough to bring up hot chocolate, but Holling notes Mai Thi does not reach for her cup when Mrs. Bigio passes them out, and Mrs. Bigio does not lay one on her desk. Holling knows no one else saw Mrs. Baker softly place her cup on Mai Thi's desk after Mrs. Bigio leaves. As he goes home, Holling realizes Mrs. Baker did not speak to him throughout the day.

At home, his family is upset about the lack of power. Mrs. Hoodhood continues to try the television, while Mr. Hoodhood angrily speaks to his employees, as they call to ask if they need to come in. Holling's sister is upset because she can't put on her makeup in the dark and she is missing a Beatles special. The following day, the town is covered in massive amounts of snow, but school is not canceled because of the planned achievement tests. Holling treks to school, and once there, he sees Doug Swieteck's brother. In a moment of revenge, he throws a snowball at him. By the time Doug Swieteck's brother realizes what happened, Holling is safely inside. The students suffer through the day, taking their tests, and the heat finally comes back on. Holling, after the test, goes to the bathroom to remove his long underwear, only to find Doug Swieteck's brother who threatens him, knowing he threw the snowball.





Following school, Holling sees Doug Swieteck's brother and his friends waiting for him, armed with snowballs. However, before they can fire, a school bus begins sliding across the road toward them, as the roads are icy. Holling sees his sister in the bus's path, and immediately runs forward, pushing her out of the way. Holling is hit in the rear by the bus, which sends him flying across the road. He lands in a snow pile, and comes to moments later. Mrs. Baker, his sister, and the principal are all standing over him. They take him to the hospital, stopping only to drop Holling's sister off at home so she can tell his parents. At the hospital, Mrs. Baker and Mr. Guareschi stay with him, as his father has decided that, since it is not serious, he will not need to come to the hospital. As they wait, Mrs. Baker watches the news about the war, and Holling can tell she is worrying about a loved one.

Holling is allowed to go home, as nothing is broken, and he sees a photo of him on the front page, as he is flying across the street. The following day, someone tapes the photo throughout the school, and Holling is hailed as a hero.

## January Analysis

"January" shows Holling maturing in his thoughts about the world, and in his relations with others. Holling is embarrassed by the photos spread all over the school, and this embarrassment causes him to make a statement to Mrs. Baker that he regrets. He knows Mrs. Baker has much to worry about in the world, as her husband is overseas at war. His statement, although showing immaturity, is immediately regretted, which does show a maturity on Holling's part that he has not shown before. He is taking how someone else feels into consideration, and this dark feeling in him continues. When he is at the hospital with Mrs. Baker, and he watches her sorrow and fear as she watches the news, it is also clear Holling is beginning to understand the feelings of others far more than he was able to do at the beginning of the book.

In addition, Holling notices the situation between Mrs. Bigio and Mai Thi, whereas he previously may not have even paid it any attention. Holling knows the pain Mrs. Bigio felt when her husband was killed, as he was there to hear her sorrow. He also saw how Mrs. Bigio treated Mai Thi at lunch, and he saw her humiliated reaction. Holling is able to combine this empathy with the current situation, and he understands the pain both individuals are feeling. He is also aware when Mrs. Baker gives her own hot chocolate, which she was clearly enjoying moments before, to the young woman. The "old" Holling at the beginning of the book would likely not have noticed any of these occurrences. His comparison of situations to Shakespeare shows not only that he is learning to apply his lessons about humanity from the books to his own life, but also that he is gaining an understanding of what Shakespeare was really writing about.

Holling's brave rescue of his sister shows this new compassion for others even more clearly. Throughout the novel, Holling and his sister have struggled with their relationship. This chapter, however, shows a shift in that relationship. First, Holling's sister expresses concern for his well being after he mentions military school, and she admits she doesn't want Holling to go to war, or to have something happen him.





Although they fight, they also love one another. This is further expressed when Holling instinctively risks his own life to save his sister. Although nothing serious happens to him, his heroic gesture does serve to show he cares for his sister, and foreshadows a deepening of the relationship between these characters. The situation also helps to heal his relationship with Mrs. Baker, and his reputation at school.

This chapter also again shows Mr. Hoodhood's complete failure to even attempt to relate well with his children. He and his daughter do not see eye to eye, but Mr. Hoodhood refuses to even recognize that she has opinions, much less allow her to discuss them. Mr. Hoodhood is unwilling to look beyond his own world, much like Holling was unable to do at the beginning of the novel. When Holling is taken to the hospital, Mr. Hoodhood doesn't even bother to go, even if just to be with him, and to make sure he was safe. Again, this shows Mr. Hoodhood's selfish manner, and the widening difference between Holling and his father foreshadows their eventual confrontation.



# February

## February Summary

In "February", Holling and his family prepare for the Kiwanis Club dinner, where his father will be receiving the Commerce Businessman of 1967 Award. Holling's sister and Mr. Hoodhood argue about the flower she is asked to pin on her lapel, as Mr. Hoodhood makes fun of her desire to be a flower child. While arguing, the living room ceiling that was recently repaired comes crashing down, ruining everything in the room. Mr. Hoodhood tears up his own flower as he swears about the carpenters, but the family has to leave for the dinner. Mr. Hoodhood gives an elegant speech, and he talks about the legacy he is building so his son can carry on the business. Once home, he calls the carpenters and demands they return. Holling wishes he could have the carpenters come to the school, as the classroom ceiling is bulging in several places, due to damage from the rats.

Mrs. Baker assigns Holling "Romeo and Juliet", and Holling is amazed at the stupidity of the characters. Mrs. Baker and Holling argue, as Holling points out that the couple could merely have left their families behind. Mrs. Baker points out their fate was not theirs to decide. When Holling discusses it with Meryl Lee, he finds himself asking her out for Valentine's Day, caught up in the idea of romance. Holling, however, realizes he doesn't have much money. At dinner, Holling asks about where to take her, and his father laughs, noting that he needs to hurry, as Meryl Lee's father is an architect, and if Hoodhood gets the junior high school bid, Meryl Lee's father will likely go out of business. Mr. Hoodhood has brought home a model of his design, and Holling admits it is modern.

The following day, Holling learns Danny is taking Mai Thi to a very nice restaurant, and to a play following, as his father is planning to take them. Holling explains to Mrs. Baker his dilemma, and she notes that it isn't how much is spent on a girl, but how much you are willing to give of yourself. Later, when Holling is sent to Mrs. Bigio for Valentine cupcakes for the class, she gives him two tickets to Romeo and Juliet for that evening. That night, Holling has an outstanding date with Meryl Lee as her father takes them to the play, and they share soda at Woolworth's. The two discuss their parent's designs for the new school, and to show Meryl Lee, Holling draws his father's design. Meryl Lee keeps the drawing as a souvenir.

The following week, Holling's father makes him attend the competitive bidding meeting for the new junior high school. At the meeting, Meryl Lee's father presents first, and Holling is shocked to see his design mimics Mr. Hoodhood's. Holling, feeling betrayed by Meryl Lee, walks out of the meeting. At school, Meryl Lee and Holling avoid speaking to one another, and Holling notes their relations are much like the weather, cold and dark. Meryl Lee wears dark sunglasses she refuses to take off, and Holling's essay on "Romeo and Juliet" is filled with anger and resentment. When Meryl Lee and Holling finally confront one another, Meryl Lee explains that she merely showed her father the



drawing because she thought it was so good. When Holling dismisses her excuse, she throws her sunglasses at him, and he sees her red, swollen eyes. The following day, Meryl Lee is not in school. Holling writes a new essay about "Romeo and Juliet", and this time it is filled with understanding about being torn between love and family. Mrs. Baker accepts the new essay, asking what Holling plans to do about his situation. That evening, Holling arrives at Meryl Lee's home with two sodas, and they again become friends.

Days later, Mr. Hoodhood announces Meryl Lee's father has dropped his bid for the new school, and his comments are cruel and rude. Holling begins to wonder if his father ever had a choice in what to become, or if he merely became what he was because it was expected. He also wonders if his father ever resents his life, or wishes he had another. When he begins to tout that he will win businessman of the year the following year, Holling begins to wonder if he really wants to follow in his father's footsteps. The following day, Meryl Lee and Holling are at the board, when a telegram is delivered for Mrs. Baker. After reading it, she rushes from the room, and Holling reads the telegram. Mrs. Baker's husband's helicopter has crashed, and her husband is missing in Vietnam.

## February Analysis

"February" is the turning point for Holling, in terms of his decisions about his future. Holling sees his father receive the award he has so desired, and he hears him later as he talks badly about his competition, which happens to be Meryl Lee's father. He hears his father's disregard for others, and finally finds himself wondering if his father is happy with his life, or if he merely lives it because he is supposed to. Holling recognizes that his father is not always nice, and that he is arrogant and selfish, and for the first time, Holling wonders if he really wants to be like him. This shows again that Holling is using the lessons he is learning, and applying them to his own life as he matures.

Holling also shows his developing nature in his relations with Meryl Lee. His date with Meryl Lee is wonderful, and Holling finds himself thoroughly enjoying himself, thanks in part again to Mrs. Baker and Mrs. Bigio for their kindness. However, when Holling believes Meryl Lee betrayed him by showing her father his drawing of his own father's design, he is understandably angry and hurt. Although he shows a lack of maturity when Meryl Lee first confronts him, he does improve once he realizes she did not initially betray him. Again using Shakespeare, Holling notes in his essay that he now understands Meryl Lee's situation, in that she had to choose, essentially, between her own family and Holling.

Holling's father in this chapter shows again that he is a less than desirable character. In comparison with Danny's father, who clearly plays an active role in his son's life, Holling's own father seems to care little about the desires of his children. He doesn't offer to help Holling with his date, and even makes smart alack comments about the likely fall of Meryl Lee's father's business, showing his lack of care for his son. He also shows little care as his only concern at the bidding meeting is for his own business. It is, in part, this behavior that pushes Holling to question whether he really wants to be like

his father. This foreshadows his decision later in the novel to choose his own destiny. His questions about his own father's decisions show he is aware that his father, like him, may have simply been acting as was expected.

The final scene in the chapter is heartbreaking, as Mrs. Baker learns her husband is missing. This foreshadows not only Mrs. Baker's own struggles in the rest of the novel, but also Holling's reactions to the news, as his new found care for others emerges.



# March

## March Summary

"March" opens with Holling's note that the news from Vietnam continued to be more grim, as he and his family, including his sister, watched the news nightly together. Holling finds himself watching for Mrs. Baker's husband, but he doesn't see him. He is in awe at her composure each day. In school, Mr. Vendleri uses a mallet and, with Holling's help, removes the bulging tiles, which turn out to be bulging due to rat nests of shredded paper and other materials. Holling tries to read "Julius Caesar", but finds it difficult with Mrs. Baker, who claims she has a cold, always wiping her eyes. Holling is impressed that she always manages to go on, even when she announces the school board is coming to evaluate her teaching. In gym, Holling learns he, and everyone else, is expected to try out for the track team.

At home, Holling's father is furious, as his sister is campaigning for Bobby Kennedy, whom he strongly dislikes. The two argue constantly, so Holling practices his running to get away. Holling himself finds he likes Bobby Kennedy, and hopes he wins the election. Holling realizes this wish is against his father.

Back at school, Mrs. Baker gives Holling advice on how to run properly, improving his time. Although he wonders how she knows proper running form, he has to admit that he runs much faster by following her advice. In payment, Holling instructs her on how to improve her teaching, to do well in front of the board. At the end of the day, Mrs. Baker shows Holling her Olympic red ribbon, won by her and her relay team in 1956.

On the day of both the school board review and the track try outs, Mrs. Baker and Holling argue about Holling's interpretation that Shakespeare is about fights and poisons. Mrs. Baker lectures that it is about love and the weakness of armies against humanity. She is in the process of taking his Shakespeare book, but at that moment, the school board arrives. To save face, Mrs. Baker allows Holling to take the book, and when the board asks what he knows of Shakespeare, he recites several lines from memory, which Mrs. Baker commends, using their code. As the afternoon wears on, there is a sudden crash as the rats tumble from the ceiling, breaking through the tiles, and land directly in a school board member's lap. She and Mai Thi are the only two who do not panic, and she grasps the creatures, carrying them from the room.

That afternoon, Holling runs in the track tryouts, and is doing marginally well. Suddenly, someone carrying the cages with the rats to be exterminated drops them, and the rats escape. Holling runs faster as he is chased by the rats, and as they enter the parking lot, the rats are run over by a bus. Still, the added speed allowed Holling to set a new state record for the three mile run, and he makes the varsity track team, while Danny makes junior varsity. In school, everyone is hailing the school board member as a hero, but Mai Thi is made fun of. Instead of calling her a hero for her bravery with the rats, she is talked about, loudly, with people claiming she and others from Vietnam eat rats.



At lunch one day, an older boy makes fun of her openly, causing her to cry. In her defense, Danny hits the young man. He is suspended for four days, but on the day of his return, after recess, the children are surprised to find Mrs. Bigio in their classroom with Mrs. Baker. Together, the women have made a Vietnamese dish of fried bananas. Mai Thi is touched by the gesture, and when Mrs. Bigio apologizes to the young woman, they hug, and Holling notes they appear not to want to let go.

## March Analysis

"March" again shows that Holling is becoming more aware of the world around him. His nightly watching of the news shows he cares about the war, and about the people in it as he scans the scenes for Baker's husband. The war is personal for Holling now, as he knows people who are suffering as a result of it, and he can now relate to that suffering. His awe of Mrs. Baker shows he knows how difficult it must be for her, and he admires her strength, something Holling couldn't understand before. He seems to know that her "cold" is simply a cover up for her sorrow, as he notices her frequently staring off into space.

This chapter also again shows the growing distance between Holling and his father. It is clear from Mr. Hoodhood's argument with Holling's sister that he does not think much of Kennedy, or of civil rights. Holling, however, finds himself rooting for Kennedy, in that he now understands there is a need for truth in government. Although quiet, this defiance of his father shows Holling is beginning to be able to disagree with his father, a sure sign that he is maturing.

The rat's return in this chapter not only provides humor, and furthers along the plot for Holling's run, but they also serve to set up Mai Thi and Mrs. Bigio's renewed relationship. Mrs. Bigio has been horrible to Mai Thi, but once she sees others behaving in the same way, she is able to see the fault of her actions. Mrs. Bigio is shown in this chapter to be kind, and her apologies to Mai Thi show she is now able to see the error of her ways. Their hug at the end of the chapter foreshadows Mrs. Bigio's offer for a home later in the novel.

Mrs. Baker is shown in this chapter not only as a strong woman in her every day life, but also as a woman who has been places. When she coaches Holling, it is clear she knows what she is talking about but it is not until the end of the chapter that readers learn Mrs. Baker is actually an Olympic runner. Holling realizes in this moment that he has never thought of Mrs. Baker outside of the school, and he now knows she is more than simply his teacher. She is a woman with a life, and a past.

Holling's run, and his subsequent acceptance onto the team, combined with his comments in this chapter about the eighth graders not liking to be showed up by a seventh grader, foreshadows his race later in the novel, where he wins against several eighth graders. Additionally, his running to escape his family, and the increase in the fighting of the family, foreshadow Holling's sister's departure later in the novel.



# April

## April Summary

In "April", Holling makes the cross country team, and Mrs. Baker learns that the Marines are headed into Khesanh to find missing soldiers, like her husband. At home, Holling's sister and Mr. Hoodhood argue about political issues, as Mr. Hoodhood announces that Kowalski, Meryl Lee's father, is giving up on his business. Holling is extremely concerned, and he and Meryl Lee painfully discuss things the following day, when she notes she will likely have to move. In track, Holling continues to succeed with Mrs. Baker's continued coaching.

Holling is helping Meryl Lee with their history assignment when Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated. The two sit with the Kowalski family in silence, holding hands as they watch the news. That night, Mr. Hoodhood keeps questioning how such a thing can happen, and Holling's sister refuses to come down for dinner. Mr. Hoodhood stays home from work to watch the funeral.

That night, Holling reminds his father that the next day is Opening Day for baseball, and that he promised to take Holling to the game. When his father hesitates, Holling even writes the note to his coach to get him out of practice, which his father signs as Holling reminds him to pick him up at noon. When noon arrives, however, Mr. Hoodhood doesn't arrive. Holling is devastated and humiliated, but Mrs. Baker comes to his rescue and offers to take him to the game. Holling is thrilled, and arrives in time for the third inning, and even Mrs. Baker seems to have fun with Holling, Danny, Donny, and their fathers. Following the game, Pepitone and Clarke holler up and ask the boys to come onto the field. They also recognize Mrs. Baker as an Olympiad. Mrs. Baker asks to speak to the stadium manager after she hears they are looking for an architect, and Holling is driven home by Danny's parents. Spring break arrives, and Danny, Mai Thi, Meryl Lee, and Holling see one another often, and Holling's sister begins to spend time with her new boyfriend.

Following spring break, Danny and Holling are both entered into the Cross Country meet. When Holling mentions it at dinner, he and his sister argue good naturedly about it until she mentions she can't get to college fast enough. Mr. Hoodhood informs her she won't be going to college because he doesn't feel she needs to and because he wants her to be safe. She remains quiet, but Holling knows she is angry.

No one from his family attends his meet on Saturday, but Mrs. Baker, Danny's parents, and Meryl Lee and her father all arrive to cheer the boys on. Danny is up first, and takes the lead, but when the boys come out from a wooded area, Danny is lagging far behind, and his knees are bloodied. He comes in close to last. When it is Holling's turn, Danny's father comes over, and tells him Danny has sent a message, to "beat the pied ninnies". Danny's father himself tells Holling to run them into the ground. Holling begins the race, but knows if he passes the eighth graders, they will pummel him. As they reach the





wooded area, however, Holling sees Mrs. Baker by the roadside, by herself. She shouts out to Holling to pass the boys, and Holling pulls ahead to win the race. His friends go wild, and Holling is kissed by Meryl Lee.

## April Analysis

"April" shows the beginning of the end in terms of Holling's sister's relationship with her father, and shows again the lack of parental responsibility and lack of care for others Mr. Hoodhood experiences. Holling's sister has a clear desire to attend college, but her father's comments not only suggest he will not assist her with school, but also that she doesn't need it. His comments are dismissive, and hurtful, and while Holling notices, his father doesn't seem to care. This, combined with the appearance of her new boyfriend, foreshadows her eventual escape from the home later. Even Mr. Hoodhood's comments about Meryl Lee's father are insensitive, as he knows his son has feelings for Meryl Lee. Again, however, Mr. Hoodhood refuses to see beyond his own small world, something Holling is beginning to disagree with. Holling's new awareness of the world also shows when Martin Luther King Jr is killed, as he and Meryl Lee, along with many others, including Mr. Hoodhood are affected by the assassination. Mr. Hoodhood's decision to stay home and watch the funeral shows that even he, who is affected by little, is aware that the world is changing.

Opening day, however, shows Mr. Hoodhood revert right back to his uncaring self. Even though he agrees to take Holling to the game, he fails to appear. Holling is not only hurt, but he is humiliated, as everyone knew he was supposed to go. The fact that his father's meeting trumps something so important to his son shows that Mr. Hoodhood really has not changed. Again, though, it is Mrs. Baker who comes to Holling's aid, showing her again to be caring, as well as resourceful. Her continued coaching of Holling in this chapter when combined with her willingness to take him to opening day remind readers that she, who is constantly afraid of losing her husband, is able to think outside of her world, and continue to help others in spite of her own suffering. Mrs. Baker's decision to speak to the stadium manager also foreshadows the knowledge later in the novel that Meryl Lee's father is awarded the bid, allowing him to keep his business.

The Hoodhood family's selfishness shows again on the Saturday of Holling's track meet, as none of them are present. Again, however, it is Mrs. Baker, Danny and his parents, and Meryl Lee and her father who do appear to cheer on the boys, showing Meryl Lee and Mrs. Baker as strong friends. However, when Danny is injured, the author makes it clear the injuries are caused not from falling, but from the eighth grade boys who despise being beaten by a seventh grader. Danny's bloodied knees are a strong motivator for Holling, but he knows the consequences for passing the older boys will be great. Mrs. Baker, too, senses the problem, and comes to his rescue. By her appearance in the woods, the other boys cannot hurt Holling without being seen, and this gives him the advantage to win, both out of respect for Danny, and out of respect to Mrs. Baker, who has spent much time helping him. The final moment of the chapter implies Meryl Lee has kissed Holling, although the author does not implicitly state this. Holling's move to a new level in relationships is another sign that he is maturing.



# May

## May Summary

In "May", Camillo Junior High begins their Atomic Bomb Awareness Month by going through atomic bomb drills. As they complete their first drill, Holling notes it is a bit eerie. Outside of school, the eighth grade runners are still angry about Holling's win, and have begun to haze him mercilessly. At home, Mr. Hoodhood is furious when he finds out Meryl Lee's father has been given the contract to redo Yankee Stadium. He and Holling's sister argue again about her going to college, and she begins eating dinner in her room, refusing to come down. Mr. Hoodhood, however, does find solace, as he drives home a new car.

One evening, Holling's sister runs away, leaving a note that she and her boyfriend are heading to California, as she needed to find herself. Mr. Hoodhood is furious. Holling simply wonders what his sister will find and if she will be okay. At school, Holling is reading Hamlet and finds it much slower than other plays. When he tells Meryl Lee he skipped reading parts of it, she chastises him, and when he informs Mrs. Baker, she asks him to reread the play. Danny, meanwhile, is nearing his bar mitzvah, and is extremely nervous. As a result, Holling, Meryl Lee, and Mai Thi all help him learn the Hebrew lines he has to recite.

One Wednesday afternoon the alarms sound, and Holling, by himself with Mrs. Baker, crawls under the desk. The two talk, and Holling points out he doesn't want to become his father quite yet. Mrs. Baker reminds him there are similarities between him and his father, such as their architectural abilities, but Holling admits he is fearful he won't be able to choose his own destiny.

Mrs. Baker, annoyed by the drill, goes to the coat closet and purposefully spills the apple cider that has been sitting on a shelf for five months. As a result of the smell, she is allowed to take Holling on a field trip to visit local architectural areas. They visit a Quaker meetinghouse, where the Underground Railroad passed, the first jail, Hick's Park, and an Episcopal School where British soldiers were housed. They also visit the first abolitionist school, where Holling admits he is beginning to understand the historical value of the town. Finally, the two end up in Saint Adelbert's, where Holling asks Mrs. Baker if she is responsible for Meryl Lee's father receiving the Yankee Stadium job. Holling also asks if, were there to be an atomic bomb, all the sites they have seen would be destroyed. When Mrs. Baker notes they would be, Holling asks if there is anything they can do. Mrs. Baker notes that people can learn all they can, to be wise, and they can pray. Holling then lights a candle in the church and prays for Mr. Baker, Danny, his sister, and for the town.

When Holling returns home, he realizes just how much he misses his sister. She calls that night tells Holling she is alone in Minneapolis and needs help. The following day, Holling cashes in a savings bond so he can wire his sister money. When asked by the



Western Union agent, Holling realizes he isn't sure which station to send it to, but quickly answers that he wants it sent to the station on Heather Avenue. On Saturday, Holling informs his parents that his sister will be arriving at the station in New York and will need a ride, but Mr. Hoodhood refuses. Holling threatens to drive himself, but realizes he cannot drive. Just at that moment, Meryl Lee calls, and her father agrees to take Holling to the station. When Holling demands money from his mother, she agrees. At the station later, Holling and his sister, whom he calls Heather, embrace. They talk and bond together during the afternoon and eventually arrive home. Mr. Hoodhood only asks if she found herself, and Holling replies that, instead, she found him.

On the last Wednesday of the month, Mrs. Baker and Holling are still working on Hamlet when a war telegram arrives. With the first phrase, "Sweet eyes", Mrs. Baker begins to cry joyfully. As Mrs. Baker leaves the room for water, Holling reads the telegram, and notes that even Shakespeare cannot write anything so wonderful, as Mr. Baker tells his wife he is coming home.

## May Analysis

"May" is another stepping stone towards Holling's final stand against his father and in his overall growth in the novel. The atomic bomb drills serve to remind readers of the time the novel is written and remind of the added stress the individuals in the book are faced with each day. In addition to this stress, Holling is forced to worry about the hazing from his track team, as well as the pressure from home, as his father learns about the Yankee Stadium contract for Meryl Lee's father. Even further, the arguing between Holling's sister and his father have increased, and she has even stopped coming down for dinner. His father, unconcerned, merely purchases a new car, again showing his complete lack of awareness of concern for the world around him.

Holling's sister's departure from home to "find herself" is not surprising, and has been foreshadowed throughout the novel, but it is clear that the situation bothers everyone. Holling begins to realize how much he misses his sister, while his father is merely angry again. His words show he refuses to see himself as he truly is, and that he refuses to take any blame in her decision. The surprising reaction is that of Mrs. Hoodhood. Only briefly seen in the novel, Mrs. Hoodhood's small actions against Mr. Hoodhood, such as her refusal to make lima beans and her decision to no longer go for drives, shows her inner pain. She is angry at Mr. Hoodhood for driving her daughter away, and while she cannot express that verbally, she does so through her nonverbal communication. The house becomes quiet, and it is very clear that the Hoodhood's are not a happy family.

Holling's discussion with Mrs. Baker about his relationship with his father is revealing, as well. Holling admit he doesn't want to be his father, and that he wants to be able to choose his own destiny, as opposed to having it handed to him. Holling wants, like the Shakespeare characters, to choose his life and to choose how he behaves. Mrs. Baker's decision to take Holling on a field trip ties into this idea, although it is subtle. She takes him around town to show Holling that there is more to a building than its mere architecture, just as there is more to a person than their physical appearance or their



parents. Holling begins to understand that within the walls of the places there visit, there is history and hope and difficult decisions, just as there is within him. Their visit to the church introduces Holling not only to the idea of the Catholic faith, but to the idea that prayer can give hope, and hope can change the world. It is clear here, as well, that Mrs. Baker is at least partially responsible for Meryl Lee's father received the bid on the stadium, again showing her ability to help others.

Holling's reunion with his sister, and the events leading to it, are equally highly revealing. Holling's immediate decision to help his sister shows not only his new depth of character, but also his courage, since he doesn't tell his parents, skips school, and figures out how to get his sister home without assistance. Holling has become resourceful, and in this case, he is using this ability to help another person, something he wouldn't have done in the beginning of the novel. His decision to send money to the station on Heather Avenue is explained later in the chapter, when readers finally learn his sister's name is Heather. Mr. Hoodhood's refusal to go get Heather at the station shows again he is incapable of admitting fault, or doing things for others. Mrs. Hoodhood's reaction, however, is surprising. It has been clear she misses Heather and wants her home. But when given the opportunity to help, she refuses, knowing Mr. Hoodhood would be furious. Her decision to refuse help eventually serves to break apart her marriage, but in this chapter, it serves only to force Holling to again find his own way. Meryl Lee again comes to his rescue, and it is Holling who retrieves his sister, with monetary help from his mother.

Holling's afternoon with Heather is revealing. First, the fact that Holling calls her by name shows she is now much more than merely a sibling, but she has become a person to Holling. He tells Heather he will always be there, showing his new love and solidarity with his sister, who seems to now see him in a new light. Both children have matured over the course of the story, and both now have a love for one another, in spite of their parents' clearly failing marriage. Holling's comment at dinner, that Heather found him, is true, in that their situation caused the siblings to find one another.

The final component of the chapter foreshadows the arrival of Mr. Baker at the end of the novel. The clear joy Mrs. Baker feels is in stark contrast to the deep sorrow of Mrs. Bigio earlier in the novel, displaying the profoundly different ways the war affected individuals. Again, Holling's comparison of reality to Shakespeare shows he is now able to see parallels between fiction and real life, indicating his new maturity.

# June

## June Summary

In "June", the class goes on their yearly camping trip. Mrs. Baker hates camping, but goes out of respect for her husband, who will soon be home. As Holling reads "Much Ado About Nothing", he notes that in real life, people don't fall out of love instantly, but rather gradually, and that happiness doesn't always happen. When Bobby Kennedy is shot, Holling knows Shakespeare's world isn't reality. He and Heather walk to Saint Adelbert's to light candles, but Kennedy dies the following morning. Holling and Heather hold one another and cry.

The following Thursday, the students are taken to the Catskill mountains for their camping trip. Holling is given a pack containing all the utensils, and the students hike up the mountain for hours before arriving at their campsite. When lunch time comes, however, Holling realizes the pack was open, and he has lost all the utensils. After smashing open chili cans with rocks, the students manage a meal, but Holling is sent to do the dishes, with help from Meryl Lee. Unfortunately, dinner is a bit more tricky, as the hamburger patties are difficult to flip without a spatula, but the students manage. At night, the students are warned about local snakes, and Mai Thi, Danny, Meryl Lee, Holling, and Mrs. Baker decide to stay up all night. Shortly after midnight, however, torrential rains begin to pour onto them. The rain continues throughout the night, but breaks after breakfast, and the students are free to swim to their heart's content. After a bathroom break, however, the group is plagued by mosquitoes. After an hour of misery, Mrs. Bigio arrives with bug repellent and saves the day. She also has with her the makings for a Vietnamese stew, and she and Mai Thi immediately go to work. After dinner, Mrs. Bigio asks Mai Thi if she would be interested in coming to live with her. Holling remains awake, thinking about Mai Thi and Mrs. Bigio, the war, Danny and his bar mitzvah, Bobby Kennedy, and a host of other topics. At dawn he rises, and goes to the river where he is in awe at the beauty of nature.

A week later, Holling is present when Danny speaks the Hebrew he feared, as he goes through his bar mitzvah. Holling knows the weight Danny is receiving, as he is becoming a man, and he realizes the depth of the words Danny is reciting. Following the ceremony, Holling walks his family to the car, where he and his father argue about what makes a person a man. Holling states that, unlike his father, he doesn't think that merely getting a job and supporting a family makes someone a man. He notes that being a man means choosing your own path. Later, at the bar mitzvah party, Holling speaks to Mrs. Baker about his future, and she notes that a comedy is always about characters who realize they can choose a happy ending. She notes that men like Don Pedro and Holling learn about love and can feel passionate emotions as a result. They bring peace and love to the world, and choose their own destinies.

Eleven days later, Holling and his classmates are at the airport when Mr. Baker arrives, and Holling notes their story has a happy ending.



## June Analysis

In the final chapter, "June", Holling's transformation into a young man comes full circle. In the beginning of the chapter, Holling's comments about falling out of love are clearly referencing his parents, showing that the events of the last year are taking their toll on the marriage. This, combined with the death of Bobby Kennedy, serve to show not only the effect of war and suffering on the world at the time, but also that miracles do not always happen. As Holling points out, the fact that Mr. Baker is coming home combined with the loss of Kennedy show both sides of the world, in that every miracle is tempered with sadness, much as Shakespeare points out in his plays. Holling and Heather's new relationship helps them through their ordeal, showing their new love for one another can transcend sorrow and pain.

The camping trip ties up several loose ends in the novel, as well as showing Holling as a young adult. There is no question Holling is not yet grown, as his accident with the utensils shows. However, the fun that ensues from the loss of those utensils does show that the unexpected can sometimes lead to enjoyable challenges. The trip again shows the strong relationship between Mai Thi, Meryl Lee, Danny, Holling, and Mrs. Baker, and helps to close out the school, year in a way that allows the students to have fun, away from the war and school and families. However, as Holling lays awake in the early dawn, thinking of all those issues, it is clear the students, even when having fun, can never really be free from the stress they live in. Holling is now fully aware of the world around him, and understands what it means to age, to be drafted, to fight for other's rights, and to die for causes one believes in. Holling has learned that he can choose his own path in life, and that he does not have to be his father. The camping trip also helps permanently heal the wounds between Mai Thi and Mrs. Bigio. Her offer to Mai Thi of a permanent home shows not only her compassion, but also her ability to move past her husband's death and see Mai Thi as a person, and not as a representative of the enemy. Their relationship shows the strength of human character, as both cling to one another.

Danny's bar mitzvah serves as the moment both Danny and Holling become young men. Danny transforms through the ritual of his faith into a young adult, with his friends and family beside him. Holling's transformation happens in the parking lot, with only his mother, father, and sister present to see. For the first time in his life, Holling openly argues with his father about what makes a man, and quite firmly explains that he disagrees with Mr. Hoodhood. Holling tells him, albeit not directly, that while he may see himself as a man, he merely goes through the motions of adulthood. Holling seems to be saying that Mr. Hoodhood is not a man, because he never makes a conscious choice about what he wants to do. Rather, he follows a predestined pattern. Holling himself admits he wants more than that, and that in choosing, he can become a man.

While it is clear Mr. Hoodhood is angry about this, his mother and Heather seem to support his decision, and back inside, even Meryl Lee notices there is something different about him. By standing up to his father, Holling has already started the process of adulthood. This is further confirmed by Mrs. Baker, as she tells him his future involves

being knowledgeable, and making his own choices. The use of Shakespeare to explain Holling's fate is appropriate, as it is through Shakespeare that Holling has learned much of the world throughout the novel.

The final scene in the novel, when Mr. Baker arrives, brings the story to a clean, happy close, showing that not all stories have unhappy endings.



# Characters

## Holling Hoodhood

Holling Hoodhood is a seventh grade boy who is learning about life. He attends Camillo Junior High school on Long Island and knows little about the world. As a Presbyterian in a predominately Jewish and Catholic area, Holling understands about being different, but doesn't know yet about discrimination or other worldly topics. Holling is a caring young man, but at the beginning of the novel, he understands only things that occur in his own life and doesn't think to look outside himself. His family is upper class, and his father is passionate about the family business, although he seems to allow that care to overshadow almost all else. He calls his house the "Perfect House" because it is well maintained, and projects the perfection his father imagines.

When Holling begins to learn Shakespeare from his teacher, Mrs. Baker, Holling begins to learn more about tragedy and what happens in the real world. He begins to understand that those around him are deeply affected by the ongoing Vietnam war, and he becomes a witness to discrimination of a young Vietnamese girl, the pain of losing a loved one to war as Mrs. Bigio loses her husband, and the horrific worry that accompanies loving someone who is at war, as Mrs. Baker's husband becomes MIA. He learns politics from his sister, Heather, as she and their father begin to go head to head. Heather, older, is becoming a flower child, who is deeply concerned about the war. On the other hand, her father is a Republican, who thinks little of Bobby Kennedy. The two begin to battle at dinner, and Holling finds himself often listening to them argue.

Holling has spent his life preparing to take over the family business, but over the course of the novel, he begins to see his father as selfish and uncaring. Holling begins to realize that he is not predestined to do things, but that, like Shakespeare characters, he can choose his own destiny in the end. He begins to resourcefully change his ways, as he and his father become more distanced. When his sister, Heather, flees home to find herself, Holling discovers he deeply misses her. It is when she returns home and needs assistance, however, and Holling helps her shows how much he has changed. After a fight with his parents, who refuse to help Heather, Holling himself resourcefully sends her money, finds a ride, and picks her up.

By the end of the novel, Holling has developed into a caring young man. After seeing the death and destruction of war, feeling the love and care for others, and after feeling discrimination and loss, Holling understands that life, like Shakespeare, is both tragedy and comedy. A confrontation at the end of the novel between he and his father show that Holling has come into his own. Holling is a caring, deep feeling individual who has become aware that his life is his to choose.





## Betty Baker

Mrs. Betty Baker is a seventh grade teacher at Camillo Junior High School, where Holling Hoodhood attends. Mrs. Baker is a caring teacher whose husband is fighting in Vietnam. In the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Baker seems to dislike Holling, as he is neither Catholic nor Jewish, and as such, must remain in class while all the rest of her students attend religious training. As a result, Mrs. Baker must find something for Holling to do. At first, Mrs. Baker makes Holling do a variety of different chores, but after a few weeks, she appears to realize Holling can do much more. Believing him to be intelligent, Mrs. Baker begins teaching Holling Shakespeare.

Over the course of the novel, Mrs. Baker proves to be a caring, kind, respectful teacher who aims high for her students and who wants only the best for them. She constantly helps Holling when he finds himself in need, and she proves time and again that she is a teacher like no other. It is Mrs. Baker who brings baseball legends to meet Holling following a deeply painful experience where Holling was snubbed by a hero. It is Mrs. Baker who takes Holling to the hospital following an accident, she who helps him obtain theater tickets for a date, she who buys him cream puffs when the class demands them from him, she who fills in for his father, who forgets to take him to the opening game of the baseball season. Mrs. Baker also helps him excel at track, and in school. In the end, she forms a wonderful bond with Holling that goes beyond Shakespeare and school. She cares for him dearly, and it is clear Holling not only cares for her, but more importantly, respects her as well.

Mrs. Baker is a rare gift to her students. A strong teacher, Mrs. Baker demands much of her students, and in the end rewards them with knowledge and wisdom. She is strict, but also has a soft, caring side, which is rarely seen in the novel within the classroom. However, when she and Holling are alone, or when she is in the company of other adults, it is clear Mrs. Baker is a good friend and a caring person.

## Meryl Lee Kowalski

Meryl Lee Kowalski is a friend of Holling's, and an eventual girlfriend. Meryl Lee has admittedly loved Holling since she was in the third grade. Holling, at the beginning of the novel, thinks little about girls in a romantic way, but does consider Meryl Lee a friend. Meryl Lee clearly likes Holling, as is shown in the way she treats him as well as in how hurt she can be when Holling unwittingly says or does things that hurt her feelings. She is Holling's loudest supporter as he acts in a Shakespeare play, and is his constant help in school.

However, when Holling asks Meryl Lee out for Valentine's Day, their relationship begins to turn. On their date, it is very clear the two care for one another deeply. However, when Holling draws her an image of his father's idea for the new junior high school, she shares it with her father, who is also an architect in charge of coming up with a plan. When he uses the drawing to further his own design, Holling assumes Meryl merely used him to gain access to his father's ideas. In reality, Meryl Lee is completely torn up





about the situation, as she never intended for her father to use the drawing but only showed it to him as she was admiring it.

Once Holling understands, he and Meryl Lee continue their relationship. However, once the community learns of Mr. Kowalski's deception about the school design, his business is threatened and Meryl Lee announces she may have to move when her family relocates. The two, like Romeo and Juliet, are suddenly ill fated, but Mrs. Baker again comes to the rescue. She speaks to the owner of Yankee Stadium, who is looking to renovate, and Mr. Kowalski is hired. When Holling runs a race for track and beats out the other young men, it is implied that he and Meryl Lee share their first kiss, again helping to show the growing maturity of Holling.

## Danny Hupfer

Danny Hupfer is also in the seventh grade and is a friend of Holling's. Danny is a good friend, although there are times he, like other students, is less than nice. It is Danny who threatens Holling when he fails to provide cream puffs, as promised, to the class, but it is also Danny who stands up for Holling when Mickey Mantle refuses to sign his baseball. Danny even goes so far as to give his ball back, showing his support for Holling. As a reward, Mrs. Baker allows Danny to participate in an afternoon of baseball with two Yankee players in an effort to make up for their distress at the hands of Mantle, their hero. Danny is also a caring person for his other friends. When students make fun of Mai Thi for her upbringing in Vietnam, it is Danny who comes to her rescue, punching the boy tormenting her.

When Danny and Holling participate in the school's track team they both aim to succeed but are constantly threatened by the older boys. In their first race, Danny is hurt by the older boys as he tries to pass them. When it is Holling's turn, both Danny and his parents urge him to win, which he does with the help and protection of Mrs. Baker.

Towards the end of the novel, Danny is preparing himself for his bar mitzvah. He is clearly concerned about his ability to recite the lines necessary, and Holling and others come to his aid, helping him practice. At the end of the book, Danny is made a man through his religious ceremony, prompting Holling to find his own destiny in life. Danny shows Holling that the future is theirs and that they can achieve what they wish.

## Mai Thi

Mai Thi is a young woman who recently came to the United States through the Catholic Relief Agency from Vietnam. Mai Thi at first knows just a little English, but soon becomes friends with the other seventh grade members, including Holling. However, when Mrs. Bigio's loved one dies in the Vietnam war, Bigio begins treating Mai Thi badly, although she feels horrible for it. Mai Thi does not defend herself, but instead merely accepts the abuse. Eventually however, when other classmates begin to torment her, Mrs. Bigio comes around, apologized, and begins to make friends with the young girl. By the end of the novel, Bigio invites Mai Thi to live with her. The character of Mai



Thi in the story is a representation of the discrimination occurring around the world at the time the novel is written. However, the coming together of Mai Thi and Mrs. Bigio shows the forgiveness that is possible.

## Edna Bigio

Edna Bigio is the school lunch woman. Mrs. Bigio is a kind woman, and an excellent baker. She cares for the children of the school deeply, but when a loved one is killed in Vietnam, she is plunged into despair. Unfortunately, a young woman in seventh grade, Mai Thi, has just migrated to the States from Vietnam, and Mrs. Bigio takes her anger and despair out on the young woman. She is snippy with the girl during lunch and goes out of her way to make her feel uncomfortable. It is clear Mrs. Bigio feels badly about her treatment of Mai Thi as she nearly cries following her outburst, but the two continue to avoid one another. When Mai Thi is teased about her heritage, however, Bigio swallows her pride and helps Mrs. Baker make a dish native to Vietnam. She also apologizes to Mai Thi. By the end of the book, Mrs. Bigio offers Mai Thi a permanent home with her. Mrs. Bigio and Mai Thi's relationship shows clearly the discrimination and hatred that was common at the time of the novel, but it also serves to tie together the lessons of Shakespeare Holling is learning with reality.

## Mr. Guareschi

Mr. Guareschi is the school principal at the beginning of the novel. Mr. Guareschi is perceived as not a nice person and is described by Danny Hupfer as an up and coming dictator of a small country. However, it is Mr. Guareschi who determines that Holling does not need to repeat math, and therefore it is because of Mr. Guareschi that Holling is able to learn Shakespeare. Mr. Guareschi spends much of the novel chasing the escaped rats in the school and planning for the yearly achievement tests. He shows his care when he and Mrs. Baker take Holling to the emergency room following his saving of his sister, but he is still given "administrative reassignment" following the school board's experience with the escaped rats. Although Mr. Guareschi is not a main character in the novel, he does represent one of the forces Holling faces throughout the novel.

## Heather Hoodhood

Heather Hoodhood is Holling's sister. Heather remains nameless for much of the novel, only being known as the older sister until Holling really begins to relate to her as another human being instead of an annoying member of the family. Heather is at odds with her father, as she is a democratic young woman who believes that the US should pull out of Vietnam. Her father, on the other hand, believes she is too young to know anything and believes even less in the "flower child" movement, of which Heather is becoming a part. Heather stands up to her father often, pointing out his faulty political beliefs and her own right to do as she pleased. When her father attempts to make her work for his



architecture company, she informs him she is already working on the Bobby Kennedy election committee. Holling, in the background, begins to admire his sister, even though her treatment of him is less than kind. Even when Holling saves her from being hit by a bus, she treats him badly. When she leaves home to find herself, however, Holling is able to realize how deeply he misses her as well as how fractured his family truly is.

When Heather calls home looking for help, Holling is finally able to relate to her. He can see his father will do nothing to help bring Heather home and his mother is too afraid of his father's reaction to assist in any major way. As a result, Holling finds himself putting all of his money up so that Heather can buy a bus ticket home. When his father refuses to even go to the station to pick her up, Holling is there again, demanding his mother at least loan him enough money for lunch and the bus home. It is Holling who saves her, and Heather finally sees him as an equal. The two of them continue to develop their relationship over the rest of the novel as Holling and she attend the Catholic church to light a candle for Bobby Kennedy when he is shot, and as Heather is witness to Holling's stand against his father's views of what being a man truly means.

Heather and Holling's relationship in the novel shows a true family relationship. The two fight and argue, but in times of crisis and tragedy, they come together as a family unit and support one another. Only when they do this are they able to see one another as equals and as human beings.

## Mr. Hoodhood

Mr. Hoodhood is Holling's father. A successful architect, Mr. Hoodhood cares deeply for his business, often allowing it to overshadow even his family. He is a strong believer in government, in keeping up appearances, and in doing all things needed to maintain a successful exterior appearance. He assumes his son, Holling, will eventually take over the business, and everything Holling does is set against standards for keeping the business looking good.

When Heather begins to challenge her father, he shows he is less than caring about his daughter's feelings on politics, the war, or on government. Instead of encouraging her to think for herself, Mr. Hoodhood merely ignores her wishes, or directly disagrees with them. He also shows several times in the novel this same lack of encouragement towards Holling. When Holling asks him about his teacher hating him, Mr. Hoodhood's only answer is to behave so she will like him and the company can get the bid for the new school. When Holling plays Ariel in a local play, his parents stay home to watch television instead of watching his show. His father even forgets to pick him up to get a baseball signed by Mickey Mantle, and for the opening game of baseball season. When Holling is in a car accident, his father doesn't even bother to come to the hospital.

By the end of the novel, it becomes clear that Mr. Hoodhood's lack of care for anything but his business is taking a toll on his life. His marriage to his wife is beginning to falter, and his relationship with his children, including Holling, is beginning to become strained. He loses a big contract to a competitor. Holling finally stands up to him about what it



means to be an adult. However, there are also signs that Mr. Hoodhood is changing, as well. When Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy are killed even Mr. Hoodhood shows a sense of disbelief, suggesting that perhaps he will soon be willing to view the world as it is instead of how he wishes it to be.

## **Mrs. Hoodhood**

Mrs. Hoodhood is Holling's mother. Mrs. Hoodhood is much like Mr. Hoodhood in that she cares greatly about what others think. She smokes, but doesn't smoke in front of others. She keeps the house immaculate, keeps the sitting room nearly unusable, and makes sure her family is viewed in a certain way. She loves her children, but she allows her husband to run the household, sometimes to the children's detriment. She does not interject as Heather, Holling, and Mr. Hoodhood have arguments, nor does she overstep Mr. Hoodhood's rules or regulations, regardless of what is right. When Heather calls home for help and Mr. Hoodhood denies her help, Mrs. Hoodhood knows what is right but refuses to step in. By the end of the novel, according to Holling, the marriage between Mrs. and Mr. Hoodhood is beginning to fade, and one is left to wonder if Mrs. Hoodhood will eventually come out of Mr. Hoodhood's shadow.

## **Benjamin Goldman**

Benjamin Goldman is the owner of the local bakery. When Holling comes in to ask for cream puffs to give his class, he bribes Goldman into allowing him the pastries in exchange for Holling playing a part in the local Shakespeare production. Goldman is a good man who seems to genuinely care for not only Holling, but for the arts.

## **Doug Swieteck's Brother**

Doug Swieteck's brother is Holling's nemesis throughout the novel. Doug Swieteck's brother, never named in the novel, is a bully, who seems to have it out from the beginning of the story for Holling. During a soccer game at lunch, Holling accidentally forces Doug Swieteck's brother's head into a pole. Following the accident, Doug Swieteck's brother remains on medical observation for quite some time. When Holling plays Ariel in the local Shakespeare production, it is Doug Swieteck's brother who pastes photos of Holling in yellow tights all over school. To get revenge, Holling throws a snowball at him later, but before Doug Swieteck's brother can respond, Holling is hit by a bus. Following that incident, Holling seems to be free.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Camillo Junior High**

Camillo Junior High is where much of the book takes place and is where Holling Hoodhood goes to school.

### **Temple Beth-El**

Temple Beth-El is the Jewish temple where half the class goes each Wednesday and Sunday for religious services.

### **Saint Adelbert's**

Saint Adelbert's church is a religious institution where half Holling's class goes each Wednesday and Sunday for Catholic religious instruction.

### **Shakespeare's Plays**

Shakespeare's plays are the plays Mrs. Baker teaches to Holling Hoodhood on Wednesday afternoons. They cover *Tempest*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and several other plays.

### **Catholic Relief Agency**

The Catholic Relief Agency is the group that brought Mai Thi from Vietnam to live in the United States. It is assumed in the novel that her parents died in the war.

### **Long Island Shakespeare's Holiday Extravaganza**

The Long Island Shakespeare's Holiday Extravaganza is the production in which Holling plays Ariel, the fairy.

### **Vietnam War**

The Vietnam War is a war the United States is involved in at the time the novel is set. Many of the characters within the novel are deeply affected by the war.



## **Yankee Stadium**

Yankee Stadium is where Holling and his friends watch the opening season game and are treated to a field view of the stadium by players they have met.

## **Woolworth's**

Woolworth's is a department store with a soda counter where Holling takes his date, Meryl Lee, for Valentine's Day.

## **Thit Bo Kho**

Thit Bo Kho is a Vietnamese dish Mrs. Bigio and Mai Thi make together while the group is camping out.



# Themes

## Coming of Age

The primary theme of *The Wednesday Wars* is the coming of age of young Holling Hoodhood. A Presbyterian boy surrounded by a town of Catholics and Jewish people, Holling knows he is different but doesn't understand the larger picture of the world around him. At the beginning of the novel, Holling's primary concerns are behaving in class to further his father's business, dealing with the perceived hatred of a teacher, and combating the older brother of a classmate. His older sister is beginning to rebel at home against the Vietnam war and the discrimination in the United States, but Holling cares only for what happens in his own small world.

When his teacher begins sharing Shakespeare with Holling, however, he begins to realize there is more to the world than meets the eye. Through his readings, and his learned and caring teacher, Holling begins to understand tragedy and is able to tie in his lessons with the world around him. He sees Mrs. Baker not only as a strict teacher, but also as a woman whose husband is fighting in Vietnam. He understands that her refusal to participate in the holiday activities stems from her own sorrow. He understands that Mrs. Bigio, the school lunch person, is cruel to Mai Thi because she is from Vietnam, where Bigio's husband was killed. Holling sees that it is Bigio's pain that causes her and others to lash out at poor Mai Thi, even though the young girl has no part in the war. He feels the pain of discrimination himself as he is denied an autograph by Mickey Mantle simply because of the way he looks, and he learns how it feels to lose heroes.

Holling is also able to begin to understand his sister, Heather. When Heather flees to find herself, Holling knows he misses her, and when she seeks help to return home, Holling knows he has to do something to help her. While his parents, also absorbed only in their own world, are willing to let her struggle to find her own way home, Holling puts forth all his money to help her. He begins to suffer with her as soldiers die in the war, and as the nation crumbles under discrimination and assassinations. He learns to support not only his own beliefs, but his loved ones, regardless of their beliefs.

At the same time, Holling also learns there is a lot of good in the world. Mrs. Baker shows him on countless occasions that she cares for him and seeks to make sure he understands not only tragedy, but also mercy and happiness. It is Mrs. Baker who saves Holling from his classmates when he owes them cream puffs, and it is Mrs. Baker who keeps challenging Holling to do more. It is also she who brings baseball players to the school for Holling and his friends following Mickey Mantle's crushing blow to them, and who encourages him to win the race at school, regardless of consequence. Mrs. Bigio, over time, comes to her senses, and eventually offers to adopt Mai Thi, showing that she too has grown over the novel. His girlfriend, Meryl Lee, proves to be a solid friend, as does Danny Hupfer, his friend who gives up his signed baseball in protest of Mantle's snub of Holling.





The novel shows clearly the move of Holling from self-absorbed child to self-aware young man. Holling learns that, to be a man, one has to learn to stand up for themselves, care about others, and fight for what is right. His final stand against his father shows that he has learned to decide where his own life will lead, and that he is not locked into his destiny.

## Discrimination

Another major theme in "The Wednesday Wars" is discrimination. From the beginning of the story, it is clear Holling is different from his classmates, as he is the only Presbyterian in a class of Catholics and Jewish, and while no one openly points this out, when everyone leaves for religious study and he is left behind to do chores, it is apparent. After a short time, however, Mrs. Baker, a Catholic, appears to have a change of heart, and begins teaching him additional material to stimulate his learning.

Holling begins to see discrimination from other corners, as a classmate, Mai Thi, begins to settle in from Vietnam. Mrs. Bigio, whose husband is killed in the war, makes a horrible comment to Mai as she serves her lunch, and the Catholic orphanage in which Mai lives is vandalized. Holling understands the anger behind the treatment of Mai, but also realizes she has no control over her country's conditions, just as his sister has no control over her country's behaviors in Vietnam. Bigio continues to mistreat Mai in subtle ways, such as not giving her hot chocolate when other children receive it, and yet Holling notices that Mrs. Baker just as subtly counterbalances the actions by taking extra care of Mai. It is only when Bigio sees others mistreat Mai and sees Danny Hupfer stick up for her that she is able to see the horrible way she herself behaved. She makes it up to Mai Thi, apologizes, and eventually offers to allow her to move into her home and live with her.

Discrimination is also seen in the background of the events in the novel. Although not expressly part of the dialog, the discrimination Heather is fighting against is clear in her arguments with her father, where she defends Martin Luther King and her father calls him a Communist. Later, when King is shot, the level of discrimination in the country can be seen through news of the riots and through the reactions of those in the story. But in this, Holling is able to see a change in his father, as he stays home from work to watch as King's body is laid to rest. While subtle, this change from calling King a Communist to feeling sorrow for his death shows his father is being affected by the world around him, just as Holling is being changed.

Holling himself feel the sting of discrimination as well, at the hands of his hero, Mickey Mantle. Although Mantle is signing baseballs, he refuses to sign one for Holling, as he is dressed in a yellow feathery costume for his role in a Shakespeare play. Holling is crushed, as he feels the weight of discrimination on him, as well as the pain of disappointment in his hero. Even in this, however, Holling sees brightness as his friend Danny comes to his support, giving Mantle his ball back in protest of Holling's treatment.





It is clear the novel makes a point of not only showing discrimination, but also showing a rally for those discriminated against. Through the novel, Holling learns that the world isn't fair to everyone, and that in times of war, there are cruelties on both sides, but that in the end, everyone should be judged on their own merit. He understands by the end of the novel that there is no room to judge others, and that acceptance is the key to peace and happiness.

## Effects of War

The Wednesday Wars is set in 1967, and as a result, a primary theme in the novel is that of the Vietnam War and its effect on everyone from young children to adults. In the beginning of the novel, Holling realizes little of the war, other than the fact it exists and many of his teachers' husbands are away, fighting. As he seeks to gain his father's support for his own "war" against his teacher, in fact, he is forced to "wait" while Walter Cronkite discusses the casualties in the war, the widening of the air war, and other related news. It is clear the war weighs heavily on the outside world. As Heather grows more bold, readers hear her discussing the protests against the Vietnam War by students across the nation, and she herself begins to become aligned with those known as flower children, or part of the peace movement. Her father is furious, caring more for how this makes him look than for the political alliances of his daughter.

Eventually, even Holling is forced to realize the war affects those around him. Mrs. Bigio, the lunch lady, loses a loved one in war, while Mrs. Baker, his teacher, discovers her own husband is MIA in Vietnam. Holling can see how the sorrow and worry makes Bigio discriminatory against Vietnamese Mai Thi and makes Mrs. Baker unable to enjoy the holiday season. He is there when Bigio finds out her loved one has died, and he hears the anguishing sounds of a person who loses a loved one. When he threatens to attempt military school, his sister's honest concern for him shows the weight of such rash decisions on families at the time as they realize the likelihood of death is high.

Holling also sees the other side of the war, as Mai Thi is tormented by others. Not only is the home she lives in vandalized, but she is treated badly by teachers and students alike, even though she has nothing to do with the war. She tells Holling at one point in the book, as he plays warrior Ariel, that being a warrior is bad. At the time, Holling wonders what she knows about being a warrior, but by the end of the novel he realizes she has seen and understands the war and the death that fighting in that war brings.

By the end of the novel, when Bobby Kennedy is shot and Martin Luther King is killed, it is clear Holling understands the ramifications of the war on those around him, and on himself. His decision to first support Kennedy, as he might end the war, and then his decision to take his sister to light a candle in the church when Kennedy is shot shows he understands the seriousness of what has happened. As he sits with Meryl Lee, watching the news when King is killed, one is reminded of the beginning of the novel, as he simply waited through the news for a chance to speak. It is clear the war has come to affect Holling.

## Heroes

A final theme in the novel is the role of celebrities, or heroes, in the lives of the characters in the novel. Toward the beginning of the novel, Holling makes it clear he, and nearly everyone else in his seventh grade class, idolizes Mickey Mantle, the baseball player. When it is announced he will come to town to sign autographs, nearly everyone is thrilled. Holling and Danny nearly miss the event, but they do everything in their power to make it on time. Holling even abandons his own self consciousness as he flees across town, begging a ride from a bus driver, wearing yellow tights with feathers. It is clear Holling would do anything for Mantle.

However, when Holling arrives, he is snubbed by Mantle, who flatly refuses to sign his baseball because of Holling's costume. Holling is crushed, and Danny, his friend, who had just had his ball signed, is clearly equally disappointed, and returns his autographed ball. Holling notes to readers that when gods die, they die hard, and they hurt the person they are dying in tremendously. Holling feels horrible and crushed, as his hero is shown to be an unkind and rather unheroic person.

However, this book also has many true heroes. Mrs. Baker, for example, time and time again shows herself to be a true hero as she comes to Holling's rescue several times, and shows Mai Thi compassion as she is treated badly due to her race. The ball players she brings to make up for Mantle, Joe Pepitone and Horace Clark, also prove to be heroes as they treat the boys to favors Mantle would never have done. Mrs. Bigio, although at first portrayed as one who treats Mai Thi badly, becomes a hero in the end as she not only accepts the young Vietnamese woman, but also offers her a home. Even Danny, Holling's friend who gives back his ball, is a hero in his own way, as he steps up and fights for Holling.

Along with the characters in the novel who appear to be heroes, there are real heroes mentioned, as well. Heather, Holling's sister, idolizes Billy Kennedy, as does much of the world. Martin Luther King is also mentioned in the novel as a heroic figure of the time. The tragic loss of these figures and the overwhelming response to their deaths in the book shows their importance to the world at the time of the novel.



# Style

## Point of View

The point of view in *The Wednesday Wars* is first person. This point of view is necessary, in that the novel focuses on the coming of age of the main character, Holling Hoodhood. Holling knows only his own emotions intimately and knows the emotions of others only through their outward expressions and through his own interpretations of those expressions. Understanding the world through Holling's eyes is the main goal of the story, and the impact of Holling's growth over the course of events in the novel is clear because of the first person narrative.

The story is told mostly through thought, dialog, and interactions between characters, although there is also description and Holling's own thoughts to explain what is going on to the reader. This method helps to show not only Holling's changing view of the world, but also to explain, through his interactions with others such as Mr. Baker and Meryl Lee, why his views are changing. Holling spends much of the novel trying to find his place in the world, and those around him help him to realize his path is his own choice. Were it not for Holling's interactions, his view of the world would remain static and he wouldn't grow. It is only by revealing Holling's day-to-day actions, in addition to his thoughts and feelings, that the reader is able to understand what is going on inside the young man. If not privy to Holling's thoughts, the point of the novel would be lost on the reader.

## Setting

Much of *The Wednesday Wars* takes place in Camillo Junior High, where Holling Hoodhood is beginning his seventh grade year. Holling Hoodhood has Mrs. Baker for his teacher, and as the book revolves around his experience with her, much of the novel occurs in her classroom. The school is in a suburb in Long Island, New York, and the scenery in the novel is a vivid depiction of life on Long Island. The author's descriptions of the changing seasons serve as a backdrop to the storyline and even help to set up some of the primary plot lines, such as the scene where Holling saves his sister from the bus sliding on the ice.

In addition, the area outside the school is used, as this is often where Holling has encounters with bullies or his friends. Holling's home is another primary setting in the novel. Holling lives in the middle of town, in a nice, fairly new home that he calls the Perfect House. It is well maintained by his parents, who care deeply about what others think. The novel also makes use of the local businesses as scenes. The local bakery, theater company, churches, Woolworth's, and architectural firms are all important parts of the novel.

One final important setting in the novel is New York itself. Yankee Stadium and the Port Authority bus station are two important places in the novel. Holling and Mrs. Baker



attend an opening season game there, and this is where Holling and his friends are allowed to run the bases, thanks to the friendships they made with two of the Yankee players. Finally, Holling picks up his sister at the bus station after his parents refuse, showing his beginning of maturity.

## Language and Meaning

The novel is written in a language that is extremely informal. As the sentences are those of a seventh grade boy, the sentence construction follows the speech pattern of a teen. The sentences are not grammatically correct, but are easy to understand. This language is useful, in that it helps to show the the world of Holling through his eyes. The story is more believable because it is told in a manner a teenager would tell. The language of the novel does change when others are speaking, which helps to discern between characters. Mrs. Baker, a teacher, speaks more formally and grammatically correct, so it is clear to discern when she is speaking. Similarly, Holling's parents and other adults in the novel tend to speak properly, showing their more advanced language experience.

Holling's character uses a combination of description and dialog to progress the story. The use of a younger style of writing makes both situations more accessible to the target audience of young adults. Were the novel written properly, the characters would sound less believable.

## Structure

The novel is 264 pages in length, and is broken out by chapters, each representing a month between September and June, encompassing the seventh grade school year of Holling Hoodhood. The chapters are short, and mostly consist of dialog, although there are areas of description to pass longer periods of time of more carefully depict surroundings. The plot of the novel is simple, although there are several subtle subplots. The novel is primarily about the coming of age of Holling Hoodhood, a young man just learning about the world. It is 1967, and the Vietnam war is occurring. Holling's teacher, Mrs. Baker, along with many other teachers, is directly affected by the war as her husband is overseas in the military. Holling has classmates who are discriminated against as they are Vietnamese. Holling's sister, Heather, is finding her own political voice, and Holling slowly learns that there are bigger problems in the world than merely his own. With the help of Mrs. Baker, Holling learns through Shakespeare that there is beauty and tragedy in the world and that his place in that world is his to make and is not decided by others.

The pace of the novel is quick, with much time passing in a short space. It is an easy read, as it is intended for a younger audience, but the plot is highly entertaining and deep, containing elements of war, violence, fear, discrimination, selfishness, lost heroes and family problems. The story is linear, without much backstory, and overall is a wonderful novel about growing up.



## Quotes

"There must be some gene that switches on at the birth of the first-born child, and suddenly stuff like that starts to come out of their mouths. It's like they haven't figured out that the language you're using is English, and they should be able to understand what you're saying. Instead, you pull a string on them, and a bad record plays."

"September", p. 7

"Reading Shakespeare. Of all the strategies Mrs. Baker could come up with, this must be the worst. Teachers bring up Shakespeare only to bore students to death. And I was going to be bored to death for eight months. No human being could stand it."

"October", p. 40

"But that's November. It's the kind of month where you're grateful for every single glimpse of the sun, or any sign of blue sky above the clouds, because you're not sure that they're there anymore. and if you can't have sun or blue sky, then you wish it would snow and cover all the gray world with a sparkling white so bright that your eye can't take it in."

"November", p. 50

"No, he can't win. But sometimes I wonder if perhaps Shakespeare might have let something happen that would at least have allowed a happy ending even for a monster - some way for him to grow beyond what Prospero thought of him. There is a part of us that can be so awful...But there's another part of us too - a part that uses defeat to grow."

"November", p. 70

"But just before we got in the door, Mai Thi stopped me with a hand on my chest. She looked at me for a long moment, and then whispered 'Not good to be a warrior.' I looked at her, I guess kind of startled, and she went in to her desk before I could say a thing. But what did she know?"

"December", p. 82

"When gods die, they die hard. It's not like they fade away, or grow old, or fall asleep. They die in fire and pain, and when they come out of you, they leave your guts burned. It hurts more than anything you can talk about. And maybe worst of all is, you're not sure if there will ever be another god to fill their place. Or if you'd ever want another god to fill their place. You don't want fire to go out inside you twice."

"December", p. 93

"She probably didn't see that Mrs. Bigio was pulling her hairnet down lower over her face, because she was almost crying. And probably Mrs. Bigio didn't see that Mai Thi was almost crying too. But I did. I saw them. And I wondered how many gods were dying in both of them right then, and whether any of them could be saved."

"December", p. 96



"She was standing with her hands up to her face, watching the pictures from Vietnam like she was watching for someone she knew. Actually, like she was watching for someone she was worrying about. Someone she loved."

"January", p. 127

"I suddenly wondered if my father was really like Shylock. Not because he loved ducats, but because maybe he had become the person that everyone expected him to become. I wondered if he had ever had a choice, or if he had ever felt trapped. Or if he had ever imagined a different life."

"February", p. 154

"When five hundred mortar shells are coming in every day on top of soldiers huddled in holes with their hands over their ears, even a flower child who wanted nothing but world peace could only watch and hope."

"March", p. 157

"When you have the chance to run the outfield of Yankee Stadium and you're not exactly sure if you'll ever have another chance you have to take things as they come."

"April", p. 197

"You see houses and buildings every day, and you walk by them on your way to something else, and you hardly see. You hardly notice they're even there, mostly because there's something else going on right in front of your face. But when the town itself becomes the thing that is going on right in front of your face, it all changes, and you're not just looking at a house but at what's happened in that house before you were born."

"May", p. 223

"Maybe the first time that you know you really care about something is when you think about it not being there, and you know - you really know - that the emptiness is as much inside you as outside you."

"May", p. 226

"Because you don't have to be Shakespeare to know that's not the way it happens in the real world. In the real world, people fall out of love, little by little, not all at once. They stop looking at each other. They stop talking. They stop serving lima beans...and there is a lot of quiet in the house. And late at night, the sounds of sadness creep underneath the bedroom doors and along the dark halls."

"June", p. 240

"I think he became a man who brought peace and wisdom to his world, because he knew about war and folly. I think that he loved greatly, because he had seen what lost love is. And I think he came to know, too, that he was loved greatly...but I thought you didn't want me to tell you your future."

"June", p. 263



## Topics for Discussion

Holling describes his house as the "Perfect House". What does he mean by this? How does this characterize his family's outward portrayal of their lives? What, in reality, are some not-so-perfect aspects of Holling's mother and father? About their family in general?

Explain the circumstances surrounding the initial relationship between Mrs. Bigio and Mai Thi. What causes Mrs. Bigio to mistreat Mai Thi? how does Mai Thi react? How does she continue to show her disdain for the young woman? What causes Mrs. Bigio to change her behavior? How does she then show her new side to Mai Thi? What is their relationship at the end of the novel?

Explain how Mrs. Baker uses Shakespeare to help Holling understand more about the world. What does Shakespeare teach Holling? What is tragedy? What is a comedy? What does Mrs. Baker mean when she says "There is a part of us that can be so awful. And Shakespeare shows it to us in Caliban. But there's another part of us, too—a part that uses defeat to grow." (p. 70)? What defeats does Holling face, and how do they help him to grow in the book?

Compare and contrast Holling's relationship with his sister at the beginning of the book and at the end of the book. Why does their relationship change? What happens to Heather to change her view of Holling, and what does Holling begin to realize about Heather? How does their relationship change Holling's relationship with his father and mother?

One of the most poignant moments in the novel is when Holling experiences the loss of a "god", or loses respect for someone he admires, and he notes that "When gods die, they die hard" (p. 93). What did Holling experience that made him lose faith in a hero? Did he experience this loss of admiration for others in the book? Who? How does this contribute to his coming of age?

The Vietnam War plays a dramatic role in the novel as it influences the lives of many characters. Explain how the Vietnam War has affected Mrs. Baker, Mrs. Bigio, Mai Thi, Heather, Holling's father, and Holling himself by the end of the novel.

Holling's relationship with his father is, at the beginning of the novel, one of respect and duty, as Holling is seen as the son who will inherit the family business. How does this relationship change throughout the novel? What are Holling's father's primary priorities? Where does his family fit into his priorities? How is this shown in the novel? How does Holling finally stand up to this father, and why? What does this say about Holling?

Discrimination is a major theme throughout the novel, both in terms of what Holling and his classmates experience, and in terms of what is happening in the United States when the novel is taking place. How does Holling experience discrimination himself in terms of his religion? His appearance when he visits Mickey Mantle? How does Mai Thi





experience discrimination? What is the United States going through, in terms of discrimination?

Mrs. Baker begins the story by having Holling Hoodhood do menial chores. She even seems not to want to teach him on Wednesday afternoon. However, she begins teaching him Shakespeare and seems to begin to enjoy him, both as a student and as an intelligent young man. Why do you think Mrs. Baker began teaching Holling Shakespeare? What was her goal? Why did her opinion of Holling change throughout the novel?