

Whistling Past the Graveyard Study Guide

Whistling Past the Graveyard by Susan Crandall

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Plot Summary

“Whistling Past the Graveyard” is an historical novel by Susan Crandall which follows the July 1963 journey of 9-year-old Starla Claudelle as she attempts to find her mother in Nashville with the help of Eula, a black woman who is traveling with a white baby named James. When the novel begins, Starla lives in Cayuga Springs, Mississippi, with her grandmother. Her father works on an oil rig out in the Gulf, while her mother has gone to Nashville to become a famous singer. This does not sit well with Grandma. Grandma is very strict, and will ground or smack Starla for the smallest errors. Starla, however, is doing everything she can to stay on her best behavior so she can see the fireworks on July Fourth. When she sees Jimmy Sellers picking on Priscilla Panichelli, she punches Jimmy in the face and breaks his nose.

Grounded from seeing the fireworks, Starla sneaks out anyways. She is caught by Jimmy’s mother, who attempts to force Starla into her car to bring her to Grandma. Starla pushes Mrs. Sellers and runs. Mrs. Sellers declares that Starla will certainly go to reform school, causing Stella to decide to run away from home to find her mother in Nashville. Outside of town, Starla is picked up by a black woman named Eula, traveling home with a white baby named James. Eula explains she found James on the church steps, so she is taking James in. Eula offers Starla dinner, and says her husband, Wallace, can help get Starla to Nashville.

Wallace, a physically abusive alcoholic, is terrified and enraged that Eula has brought home a white girl and a white baby without permission from their parents. Wallace attempts to strangle Starla, but Eula kills Wallace by hitting him over the head with a cast iron skillet. Eula is heartbroken, and seeks to make it up to Starla. Starla requests that Eula bring her to Nashville. Eula agrees. She, Starla, and Baby James set out the next morning. Not long into the trip, an angry and racist white drive rear-ends Eula’s truck, causing them to go into a ditch. A friendly white farmer comes along and helps pull the truck out of the ditch. He tells them to be careful because racial tensions are high with the civil rights movement in full swing.

Starla, Eula, and Baby James are forced to spend the night in their truck when it breaks down not long after. Starla comes down with a fever. None of the local farmers—all black—want to help a white girl. In the nearby town, a black woman named Miss Cyrena readily takes in Starla, Eula, and baby James. She cares for them for two weeks while Starla recovers and Eula earns money by baking goods for local eateries and residents. When local racists zero in on Eula, Cyrena puts Starla, Eula, and James on a bus bound for Nashville. Starla is horrified that the bus is segregated, and that most of the places the bus stops at are either segregated, or refuse to serve blacks at all.

In Nashville, Starla’s mother, Lulu, is enraged to see Starla. She tells Starla everyone has been looking for her for two weeks, and that she has caused a lot of trouble. She smacks Starla across the face and calls Starla’s father to come pick Starla up. It turns out her mother is remarried, is an alcoholic, and is not a good person. Starla’s father drives up right away, and readily agrees to bring Eula and James back. Starla,



heartbroken over her mother's reaction and grateful that her father was happy to see her, confesses the truth of everything to him.

Back home, it is revealed that James is the illegitimate son of the older sister of Starla's best friend, and that charges won't be filed against Eula for killing Wallace since it was done in self-defense. The local sheriff explains that it is one less black man to deal with, and that he won't have to drag a white family through court by not pressing charges. Starla's father explains the sick irony that they should be thankful for once that the life of a black man is considered less than a white man's because it has saved Eula. Baby James will be put up for adoption. Starla's father takes a local job and rents an apartment for him and Starla in elderly Mrs. White's large old house. Mrs. White hires Eula to work for her, and gets very close with her, Starla, and Starla's father. Eula comes to consider them all family. As the novel ends, they have Thanksgiving dinner with Cyrena.



Chapters 1 – 7

Summary

Chapter 1 – It is July, 1963 in Cayuga Springs, Mississippi. Starla Jane Claudelle's grandmother, Mamie, is very strict. She is quick to hit. Starla's father always reminds Starla to choose her words carefully and to be a lady. He spends most of his time working on an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico. Starla's mother, Lucina ("Lulu"), has gone to Nashville to become a famous singer. On July 3, Starla vows to be as good as possible so she won't get grounded and have to miss fireworks the next day.

Over breakfast, Mamie insists on calling Starla by her middle name, because "Starla" sounds like something out of a trailer park. Starla does her best to bite her tongue and says that her father loves her name. This causes Grandma to complain about Lulu, saying that Starla's father let his wife have everything she wanted to as well. Starla says that in her last birthday card, her mother now wants Starla to call her Lulu instead of "Mom" so people will think they are sisters. This annoys Grandma to no end. Starla misses her mother and her father, and wishes she had a dog like Lassie to keep her company. She goes to spend time in her tree fort when she hears Priscilla "Prissy Pants" Panichelli and Jimmy Stellers down below. Jimmy has caused Priscilla to fall down while skating, which angers Starla. She punches him in the face and calls him "shitbird." She then hears her grandmother calling for her.

Chapter 2 – Starla is grounded for a week and is unable to go to the Fourth Festival. She sees Jimmy ride by outside with a giant bandage on his nose. He flips her off. Starla then sneaks out, puts on a baseball cap, and blends in with the kids standing in front of Adler's Drugstore during the parade. After the parade, Starla's best friend Patti Lynn Todd finds her. The two girls decide to hang out, but then Jimmy's mom, Mrs. Sellers, finds her. She decides to bring her to her grandmother but Starla won't go. Mrs. Sellers says Starla's grandmother is right, that Starla is cheap trash just like Lulu. Starla contends her mom will be famous, and that Jimmy is a "mean son of a bitch". Starla shoves Mrs. Sellers, then runs. Mrs. Sellers yells that Starla will certainly be heading for reform school.

Starla decides to go to Nashville, thinking Lulu will protect her. Starla has no idea how to get there. Starla knows her mother is not popular in town, that everyone gossips about her. Some distance from town, a pickup truck driven by a thin black woman named Eula pulls over to give Starla some water. Eula is traveling with a white baby named James. Starla explains she is going to see her mother. Eula agrees to take on Starla partway to Nashville, and asks her to hold James.

Chapter 3 – Eula reveals she grew up taking care of her siblings, and that her father could never hold down a job for long. Eula has been a maid for several families, and has been out delivering pies all day. She sees how well James has accepted Starla holding him, and compliments Starla on the way she handles children. Eula decides to



bring Starla home for supper. Her husband, Wallace, is both angered and terrified that Eula has taken a white baby boy and a white girl without permission.

Chapter 4 – Starla wonders if James has been stolen, and if she too is now being stolen. While Starla and Eula set about feeding James, Eula reveals that God has given her plenty of children, but has taken them all away, usually before being born. After dinner, Starla hears Wallace talking to himself unhappily about how Eula has done it now. Eula explains to Starla that nobody wanted James and that she took him from a white church. She also says it is best Starla does not know where James came from. She insists God has a plan and that nobody can question it.

Chapter 5 – Starla recalls a time when her grandmother secretly tried to throw away a demo record that Lulu sent to the house. Starla recalls how the record had a song called “Baby Mine,” and how it was the most beautiful song she had ever heard. In the present time, Wallace tells Eula that everything is on her for what she has done. Wallace grabs Starla by the arm, who tries to act superior as a white girl, telling him to let her go and she won’t ever come back. Wallace ignores her and begins dragging her toward the woods.

Chapter 6 – The sound of hunting dogs stops Wallace. He forces Eula, Starla, and Baby James into a bedroom and tells them to keep quiet. Eula tells Starla that it is probably Shorty coming by while hunting with his dogs as he does occasionally. Shorty has only one arm, the other having been pulled off while being dragged behind a car. Starla realizes that Eula is broken inside, and is lonely. She tells Eula everything is going to be okay, and that they need to get away from Wallace. Eula insists she will never leave Wallace, that Wallace just worries about her and drinks too much. Further, Eula thinks that Lulu isn’t taking care of Starla the way a good mother should. Eula insists she can, and that the Lord takes care of His own. Starla agrees that He does.

Chapter 7 – Starla considers what she will tell everyone when she gets back home that won’t get Eula in trouble. That night, Starla must break a window to get out of the house, and she prays to Jesus that she is able to do so without waking up Wallace. She then heads out into the country with Baby James and his basket in her arms. Down the road, it begins to rain.

Analysis

“Whistling Past the Graveyard” is an historical novel by Susan Crandall which follows the July 1963 journey of 9-year-old Starla Claudelle as she attempts to find her mother in Nashville with the help of Eula, a black woman who is traveling with a white baby named James. From the start, the theme of Family can be seen in how Mamie has taken in Starla while Porter is away working on an oil rig. The arrangement is in keeping with the love and loyalty between family, but Mamie is very strict and quick to punish Starla for even minor infractions. Starla recoils against Mamie’s strictness, especially because Mamie has such a disapproving opinion of Lulu. Starla considers her mother



something akin to God, so any negative words toward Lulu are taken deeply personally by Starla. She won't hear anything bad said about her mother if she can help it.

However, the reader suspects there is more to the story than meets the eye. That Lulu doesn't even visit is suspicious, and Mamie's assertion that her son let his wife do whatever she wanted led to Lulu running off to Nashville and never coming back. As will be noted later by Porter, and as the reader correctly discerns now, Mamie—in her own strict but not necessarily cruel way—is trying to keep Starla from rebelling and running off like Mamie. In large part this is because Grandma Mamie loves Starla, but also because she knows how much Starla's father loves her as well. The reader will also note Eula's consideration of the fact that not all mothers are good at being mothers.

Eula is also looking for family. Having come from a shattered home, Eula hoped to begin a family with Wallace, but all of her babies were taken away for one reason or another, most through miscarriages. It is among the reasons why she picked up Baby James from the church, because no one wanted him. Starla recognizes that Eula is broken apart inside, and recognizes that Wallace is an abusive alcoholic, even if Eula can't see it. Eula went from one broken home to another. However, the thing that sustains her is faith. Here, the reader will note that faith becomes a very strong theme in the novel, as Eula trusts in God's will implicitly. She genuinely knows in her heart that it is God's will that she, Starla, and James have all crossed paths.

Starla's decision to run away in the first place is also momentous because it signifies the beginning of a journey for her, and the introduction of the theme of Journey in the novel. The journey that Starla has begun is not merely one of travel or of destination, but of coming of age and character growth as well. The things that Starla sees and experiences will alter her life in tremendous ways. The reader should pay attention to each of these experiences because they will dramatically impact Starla's decisions by the end of the novel.

Starla's first such experiences deal with racism. Racism itself becomes an important theme as the novel progresses. Starla has lived her life without much consideration of the things going on around her. Part of this is due to the fact that she is 9 years old, and part of it is due to the fact that she hasn't had a reason to pay attention. The reader will note that Wallace is beside himself with fear and anger that his wife would bring home two white children without permission. As black people, Wallace and Eula could very well face deadly consequences. In the South, the lives of blacks are considered less than the lives of whites on top of everything else blacks have to deal with, such as segregation and inequality under application of the law. Starla, vaguely aware of racial attitudes that prevail, attempts to assert herself as a white girl, but without success. Knowing her own life is in danger, Starla knows she and Baby James must escape.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe that Starla's grandmother is so strict with her? Do you believe this justifies how strict Grandma is? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Starla decide to run away? Where does she intend to go? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Eula believe that it is God's will that Starla and James have come into her life? How does Starla feel about Eula's thoughts of faith? Why?

Vocabulary

restriction, sassy, whooper-jawed, obliged, squalls, caterwauling, ailing



Chapters 8 – 14

Summary

Chapter 8 – Starla is terrified about being out in the country in the middle of the night. She thinks about how her father told her to “whistle past the graveyard,” her father’s expression for doing something to keep her mind off her worst fears. Starla can’t whistle, so she whistles in her own mind. She thinks about how Christmas will be in Nashville, but James starts crying. Starla apologizes to him over and over because she doesn’t have any food. Suddenly, Wallace and Eula arrive in the truck. Eula tries to fight Wallace as he grabs Starla and James. He moves to strangle Starla, but stops. He begins shaking, saying he just can’t do it. He tells her he will, though, if she and James ever run away again.

Chapter 9 – Starla realizes she is now trapped. Eula tells her everything is going to be okay, that Wallace sometimes gets lost, and that they will all be a family now. Starla tells her they are not a family. Wallace tries to strangle Starla once more, but Eula stops him by killing him with a cast iron skillet to his head. Eula knows she must turn herself into the authorities, but Starla says she can’t. Eula agrees to take Starla to Nashville before she tells the police about Wallace.

Chapter 10 – After dragging Wallace’s body to the springhouse, Starla, Eula, and Baby James get on the road. Among the things Eula packs is her Bible. Starla prays that Jesus won’t want a good woman like Eula to get in trouble. A mean white man driving a car behind them begins hitting the back of the truck. This enrages Starla. The man forces Eula to drive into a ditch and hit her head. She suffers some bleeding, but is alright. Starla and James are both also alright. Eula begins laughing when Starla tries to push the truck out of the ditch. Starla can’t understand why. Eula says that some things just are the way they are, and that it is better to laugh than lose one’s mind.

Chapter 11 – Starla wants justice against the mean man, but Eula explains that white men can pretty much do anything they want get away with it, even to white children. Starla wonders about who James’s mother might be. Eula imagines his mother is scared, but that she probably has too many mouths to feed already. Eula reveals she has a brother named Charles, but like their father, he is also good for nothing. A pick-up truck driven by another white man stops. He asks if everyone is alright. Starla gives the story that she and James are being driven to Nashville by their maid to live with their aunt, their mother having died a week ago. She reveals that they were run off the road by a man who hates colored people. The man helps pull the truck from the ditch. He tells them it appears to be without damage, but to go to a garage soon. He also tells them to avoid places where blacks shouldn’t be because things are so touchy right now. He tells them to get to Nashville as soon as possible. He questions the marks on Starla’s neck, but Starla writes them off as the product of roughhousing with friends.



Chapter 12 – Over the Copiah County line, Eula brings the truck to Quigley’s, an old beat-up service station because the steering seems off. The boy running Quigley’s says he’ll need ten dollars for a new tie rod, and that the clutch sounds bad as well. Eula does not have ten dollars. She wants to push on and trust in God to get them to Nashville. They begin driving once more. Starla worries that the truck will break down, and the law will find Wallace and come after them. Eula begins sobbing and pulls over. Starla tells her everything will be alright. She says her mother will fix everything when they get to Nashville.

Chapter 13 – As darkness falls, Eula begins driving once more. She asks why Starla wants to go to Nashville. Starla pretends her grandmother has died, and that she was merely visiting for the funeral. She says her parents couldn’t make it, which is why she is heading back to Nashville alone. Eventually, the truck breaks down a mile outside a new town. They decide to spend the night in the bed of the truck. It reminds Eula of camping outside as a child, and causes her to cry. Starla holds her hand.

Chapter 14 – That night, Starla catches a fever. They try the local farm for some aspirin, but the black residents refuse to have anything to do with Eula since Starla is white. Starla wonders how such people can call themselves Christian. She insists on going back and demanding aspirin. Eula says Starla can’t allow other people’s bad behavior to excuse theirs. Likewise, they should never do anything that would make Jesus ashamed. They have no luck in town until an elderly woman brings them into her home. Starla falls asleep almost immediately.

Analysis

As the novel continues, Eula contends that she, Starla, James, and Wallace will now be a family. Starla declares they are not a family, an important statement that will serve as an irony later on (as the theme of irony becomes apparent through the course of the novel). For the first time in her life, Starla feels real fear due to Wallace’s desire to strangle and kill her. The reader will note that such fearful thoughts do two things for Starla. First, they force her to contextualize life at home with Mamie—rough, perhaps, but certainly nowhere near as violent or terrifying as life with Wallace; and second, they cause her to remember her father’s saying about whistling past the graveyard, from where the novel takes its title. To be courageous even in the face of fear is an important thing, and here, Starla begins to grow between her attempt and escape and her realization that she is currently trapped.

Eula is determined to live on as a family, despite Starla’s insistence that they are not family. The reader will here recall Eula’s statement that being a mother doesn’t necessarily mean one will be a good mother. The irony here is that someone who has not physically been a mother may end up being the best mother possible. This is certainly the case with Eula. She comes to see Starla and James are her own children, put into her care by God. She leaps to defend Starla when Wallace moves to strangle her, killing him with a cast-iron skillet. Eula feels horrible afterwards, but has no second-thoughts or hesitations during the confrontation.



Here, the reader will note both irony and a counterpoint to Racism, one of the main themes of the novel. At a time when racial tensions are high, Eula looks at Starla and James not as “white” children, but just as actual children in need of a mother. It doesn’t matter to Eula that she is black and the children in her care are white. What matters is that she has children in her care who need her. This is sharply contrasted with the racism they encounter on the road, when they are driven into a ditch by a racist white man who considers only the color of Eula’s skin. This in turn is contrasted by the non-racist white farmer who pulls Eula’s truck from the ditch and warns them all to be careful going forward. Given prevailing norms, there is great irony when the white farmer is willing to help Eula pull a truck from a ditch, but local black farmers refuse to give Eula an aspirin because she has a white child with her. Here, the reader will note that racism affects blacks and whites alike.

These are harsh experiences for Starla, but necessary as she continues her journey. She experiences the racism whites have for blacks when Eula’s truck is run off the road, and she experiences direct racism when the local black farmers refuse to help her because she is white. It is a small, brief taste of the hatred that blacks have been dealing with since their arrival in the country, but it is enough to move her heart and mind. She looks at the local black farmers and white driver not as black and white anymore, but as individuals. She wonders how such individuals can call themselves Christian. Starla proposes revenge, but Eula argues that they must never do anything to make Jesus ashamed. Through her faith, Eula takes the high road and sets an incredible example for Starla, just like a mother should.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways does Eula demonstrate motherly qualities and tendencies in this section of the novel? How does this influence Starla?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you believe the white farmer is willing to help pull Eula’s truck from the ditch when local black farmers refuse to even give Starla some aspirin? What does this say about tension in the area? Why?

Discussion Question 3

What instances of racism can be seen in this section of the novel? How and why do these events challenge Starla?

Vocabulary

damnation, catdaddy, pickaninny, provoking, no-account, impediment



Chapters 15 – 21

Summary

Chapter 15 – Starla is ill for a week. The elderly woman who has sheltered them, Miss Cyrena, is a teacher, has no family, and explains that Eula has gotten a job. Cyrena explains that Starla and James are lucky to have a maid like Eula willing to bring them to Nashville with all the trouble going on. Starla tells Cyrena their mother is sick, which is why Eula is doing it herself. Cyrena goes on to say that she sent a neighbor to retrieve Starla and James's things from the truck, but that only Eula's suitcase could be found. Cyrena believes the other two were stolen, and says they'll find some clothes from the charity box that will see her and James through to Nashville. She also reveals that Eula herself has been tending to Starla nonstop. Cyrena reveals that Eula is not yet home, so she is going to look for Eula while Mrs. Washington from next door comes to keep watch over Starla. Cyrena tells Starla to leave the lights off.

Chapter 16 – Later that night, Starla overhears Cyrena and Mrs. Washington conversing about the Klan stepping up violence. Mrs. Washington thinks that outsiders, including the NAACP, only make things worse. As she leaves, Cyrena makes tea for Starla. She learns that white supremacists have threatened Eula and that Eula hid so she wasn't followed to avoid getting Cyrena, Starla, or James in trouble. She explains she was gardening for Miss Clark when some drunk men—the Jenkins brothers—came by, only to be chased off by Miss Clark with a shotgun. Later, the Jenkins tried to abduct and rape her, but Eula got away. She explains the truck was red and white with a Confederate flag painted onto the hood. Cyrena notes the Jenkins are trash but will seek revenge. She tells Eula to bake from the kitchen for money instead of gardening, and that Cyrena herself will deliver the products and pick up supplies. Starla then makes herself known, telling Eula to do as Cyrena suggests. Eula agrees. Starla apologizes for having caused so much trouble, but Eula says she's been waiting to take care of children her whole life. She says that Starla is a blessing, not a burden.

Chapter 17 – Eula, Starla, and Cyrena get to baking. Eula's baked goods sell quick and are in high demand. Eula compliments Starla on her skills in baking, leading Starla to wonder what other gifts she has bottled up inside. Eula explains that people don't know what gifts they have inside of them until the Lord says it's time. Cyrena reluctantly allows Starla to come out to do deliveries. She explains the part of town they are in is called the Bottoms, which often floods. It is mostly black. Cyrena explains the black people live where they have been told to live. That is one of the things the NAACP is fighting to change, Cyrena reveals. She says that everyone wants change for the better but that people like Mrs. Washington don't always agree on how to get change accomplished. When they arrive at Slattery's Diner, Cyrena warns Starla to stay in the car, and to talk to no one through the window. When Cyrena goes inside, Starla goes to look at the candy in the nearby drugstore. A truck hits a small black and white dog and doesn't even stop. Starla chases the truck and yells, but Cyrena stops her. She tells her the truck belongs to Jobie Jenkins. Starla apologizes for causing trouble. Cyrena



compliments her on having a big heart. Starla then notices the carnival is in town, but is saddened because she doesn't have money to go.

Chapter 18 – Eula, Cyrena, and Starla continue baking on Friday. Eula imagines they will have enough money in a week and-a-half to pay back Cyrena, fix the truck, and get on to Nashville. Cyrena decides she will take Starla to the carnival that night as a treat. She explains she'll stay close but won't be seen with Starla to avoid raising suspicions. Playing games, Starla wins a teddy bear she names Teddy. Starla befriends a blonde boy named Troy, and the two begin going on rides together. Starla does not want to ride the Bullet, however, but Troy tricks her into riding. She screams unhappily, and many people laugh. Angered, Starla storms off. She finds the Jenkins' truck, and puts out one of the headlights with a rock. She then goes to put out the other headlight, and someone grabs her arm.

Chapter 19 – Cyrena who grabs Starla's arm and stops her from breaking the second headlight. She tells her two wrongs do not make a right. Troy then suddenly appears, asking if "that nigra" is bothering her. Starla and Cyrena take off when they hear the Jenkins boys blaming Troy for the broken light. Starla decides to go back, thinking she can't let Troy take the blame. She tells the three Jenkins brothers that someone else broke the light. A deputy suddenly arrives who tells the Jenkins to get on their way and tells Troy to get back to the carnival. As they all depart, the deputy says he wants to meet Starla's parents, since he has gotten a report of a runaway redheaded girl. Starla gives her name as Nancy Drew. She shoves the deputy and takes off running. Troy picks her up on his bicycle. She admits she is a runaway girl. When Cyrena sees Starla arrive with Troy at the car, she tells Starla nothing is alright anymore.

Chapter 20 – Starla gives Cyrena a half-truth version of what led herself, Eula, and James to town and what happened with the deputy. Cyrena knows there is more to the story than what Starla says. Starla says her grandmother has died, so she is heading to Nashville. The truth about finding Baby James on the church steps, and the killing of Wallace are included. Cyrena says she had a hunch that Eula was an abused woman. Eula reveals that at 14 she fell in love with a 16-year-old white boy and got pregnant by him. They kept their romance a secret until the boy's mother found out, and sent him away to military school. He never knew about the baby. After the baby was born, Eula's father beat her for being with a white boy. Eula's brother, Charles, took the baby under the pretense of sending the babe up north. Afterwards, her father and Charles got very abusive with her, something that Wallace managed to stop. Eula doesn't want to talk about the past anymore after this. She, Cyrena, and Starla figure what is best is for Starla, Eula, and James to get to Nashville. Cyrena dyes Starla's hair black. Suddenly, they realize the porch has been firebombed. Neighbors, Eula, Starla, and Cyrena rush to put out the blaze. Miss Washington is among those who have helped and says that Cyrena won't be satisfied until she is burned down.

Chapter 21 – Cyrena drops Eula, Starla, and James off at the Jackson bus station. She pins a paper to Starla's shirt with the name Sarah Langsdon, destination Nashville/Lulu Langsdon, and her own number as the emergency number. Starla's cover story is that her grandmother dropped her off at the station and that she'll be traveling alone. Eula



will sit away from Starla so as not to draw attention. Eula reminds Starla not to push their luck, especially because public transportation can be dangerous for blacks. It causes Starla to realize that some people will harass and pick on blacks just because they are black. She also hates to see how all places have separate facilities for whites and blacks to use, and how some places don't serve blacks at all.

Analysis

The elderly black woman who shelters Starla, Eula, and Baby James is, like Eula, colorblind. Cyrena might look at Starla and James and see that they are white, but there, the distinction ends. To Cyrena, skin color is only skin color. It doesn't define a person, even with racial tensions at a boiling point. Cyrena could care less about the color of the skin of Starla and James but does care about who they are as human beings. She readily takes the three of them in to care for them and help them recover.

Meanwhile, her neighbors, either because they are afraid or harbor racial tendencies themselves, have refused to help Starla and James. Indeed, some of the neighbors like Mrs. Washington believe Cyrena is going too far with her civil rights activism and work with the NAACP. When Cyrena's house is firebombed, her neighbors are less relieved for her safety than they are angry with her for what has happened. They would rather have the status quo of fear and getting along than to fight for their rights and live as equals.

It is ironic that those who would most benefit from Cyrena's bravery are some of her greatest opponents. Starla learns that classifying entire groups of people as racist is racist in and of itself. People must be taken one at a time, as human individuals. Cyrena and Eula are beautiful examples of people who look at others as human individuals before anything else. As time goes on, Starla is beginning to look at people less and less for the color of their skin and more and more for the quality of who they are as human beings.

Racial tensions in the town are high. The Jenkins brothers are blatantly racist, driving around in a truck with a Confederate flag painted onto the hood. While some may consider the Confederate flag a symbol of heritage, for the Jenkins it is a symbol of hate and racism. Their choosing to target Eula and to firebomb Cyrena's house, are both pieces of evidence attesting to the grave and deadly extents of racism. This provides greater awakening to Starla. The bus trip only furthers her experience of racism, as everything from the bus to rest facilities are segregated. Starla is especially horrified that some places will not even serve blacks.

Still, Eula keeps her dignity and holds her head up high. She becomes an excellent mother figure to Starla through these experiences. Her faith in God and her devotion to Starla and James help guide her through the worst parts of the bus trip. She is an exemplary person and role model for Starla and demonstrates tremendous courage and conviction. It is a blessing that Starla should encounter someone like Eula in her journey, for it helps Starla learn and understand how to handle even the darkest



situations. Increasingly, Starla comes to consider Eula family. This will be incredibly important in the coming days.

Likewise, Eula's own past—a broken home and a broken family—have helped to make her the strong and compassionate person she is today. Tragically, her love affair with a white boy years before was especially frowned upon by her own father and brother, both cruel and racist people. It is ironic that those meant to be closest to Eula, to care for her in any circumstance, should be the ones she needs to flee from.

Discussion Question 1

Why do some of Cyrena's neighbors disapprove of her work with the NAACP and civil rights activism? Are her neighbors right to feel this way? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

When other black locals refuse to take Starla, Eula, and Baby James in, Cyrena does. Why?

Discussion Question 3

What examples of irony can be seen in this chapter of the novel, especially those that relate to race? Choose three examples and explain them in context of the story and the characters who experience these ironies.

Vocabulary

Parched, calliope, pissant, fabricate, perturbed



Chapters 22 – 28

Summary

Chapter 22 – Starla hates how things are for black people in the South. She reflects on how her own grandmother believes that outside agitators are to blame for all the trouble. The bus crosses into Tennessee. In Nashville, Starla tries looking up her mother in the phone book, but can't find her name listed under Langsdon or Claudelle. Starla figures it doesn't matter, telling Eula they'll find her mother at the Grand Ole Opry. Learning that Lulu is not performing there that night, Eula, Starla, and James go to Mount Zion Baptist Church.

Chapter 23 – Mount Zion Baptist Church is headed up by the Reverend Pastor Maynard P. Freeman. The church is locked for the night, and Starla and Eula share an apple. A gang of black men beat up another man on the street and come upon Eula and Starla when James starts crying. They decide to rape Eula. Eula tells Starla to take James and wait on the other side of the church. The pastor suddenly arrives, and the gang rushes off. The pastor helps the beat-up young man and then sets up cots and blankets for Starla and Eula. Eula thanks God for how things have turned out right. Starla thinks the Lord could do better, but then realizes that Eula considers that worst could have happened without Him. She compliments Eula on how strong she has been.

Chapter 24 – Pastor Freeman's congregation welcomes Eula, Starla, and James warmly and with open arms. They don't seem to care that Starla and James are white. One of the musicians at church suggests that Eula and Starla try checking Tootsie's Orchid Lounge on Broadway to see if Lulu is performing there. The bartender knows Lulu Claudelle, but says Lulu doesn't have any children. Starla says she does. The bartender goes and gets Lulu, who looks nothing like Starla remembers. She has big blonde hair instead of red hair. She is very angry, demanding to know where Starla has been for two weeks.

Chapter 25 – Starla can't believe her mother has changed her appearance and is so mean. Lulu says everyone has been worried sick about her and that her father had to come off the rig for two weeks. She smacks Starla across the face. Starla refuses to go anywhere without Eula, saying Eula saved her. This forces Lulu to bring Starla, Eula, and James inside so she can call her husband. Starla says she wants to live with Lulu. Lulu says this is impossible. She reveals she is now remarried. She says Starla can't just run off and make her life what she wants it to be. Starla contends that Lulu has done just that. Lulu smacks Starla a second time. Lulu then calls Porter, telling him to come up to get Starla or Starla will be sent home on a bus.

Chapter 26 – Lulu brings Starla, Eula, and James to her home to await Porter. She forbids Eula from using the bathtub. Starla begins to remember the way things were with her mother years before, where her mother was just as mean and angry. She realizes that Mamie had not been telling lies about Lulu at all. Eula comforts Starla,



saying that sometimes mothers just aren't cut out to be mothers, and that Starla is still a good person. Starla worries what will become of Eula, and hopes her father can help. She thinks that perhaps Eula should even leave on her own to save herself. Eula refuses, saying that because they have come this far together, they will see things through. Eula holds Starla who tries to keep back tears. Eula says she feels sorry for Lulu, because Lulu will never know what she's missing by not knowing Starla.

Chapter 27 – Porter arrives in the middle of the night. He and Starla are thrilled to see one another. He thanks God over and over for Starla's safety. Lulu tells them to shut up. Porter is enraged that Lulu couldn't stay away from alcohol for just one night to care for their daughter. Porter readily agrees to bring Eula and James along, even helping to carry Eula's things. He buys them all breakfast. During this time, Starla tells him the entire truth about what happened. Starla's dad is stunned.

Chapter 28 – Porter promises to do all he can to help out Eula, noting that one of his friends is a deputy. He reveals that no one has reported a missing baby. He apologizes for not telling Starla about the divorce and reassures her that Lulu does love her even if it doesn't seem it. Starla worries for Eula, but her father assures her everything will work out alright. Starla encourages Eula to go live with Cyrena to avoid any possible trouble with the law but Eula refuses. At home, Mamie is both grateful to see Starla, and angered for all the trouble caused.

Analysis

As the novel continues, the theme of Family reemerges strong and central to the plot. Eula, Starla, and James are now traveling as a family. Starla has come to consider Eula family. She does her best to look out for Eula whenever she can, always making sure Eula is included or cared for. When Eula is apprehended by a gang of black thugs, Starla rushes to Eula's defense without thinking. Only the fact that Starla is white saves her from being raped and beaten. Still, Starla considers Eula family and is willing to risk her own safety for Eula's. Only the pastor's miraculous timing prevents any harm from befalling Eula.

Starla, Eula, and James track down Lulu, an experience that illustrates elements of the novel's theme of Family. Starla is overjoyed in anticipation of seeing her mother, a heroine she has idolized from afar for years. However, reality shatters Starla's ideas of family and her mother. Starla doesn't even recognize her mother physically. This inability to recognize her mother physically is a symbolic reflection of just how far apart the two are and how little of a mother Lulu actually is. Children recognize their mothers. Starla's inability to recognize Lulu underscores Eula's earlier point that being a mother doesn't equate to being motherly. Likewise, Lulu's vicious slapping of Starla is an act of cruelty and causes Starla to realize that, despite Mamie's strictness, she was nothing like Lulu. This also causes Starla to realize that her grandmother was right all along. Lulu is a selfish drunk who has no business being a mother.



However, not all is sad for Starla. Her father drives through the night to get her. He does not yell at her, slap her, or do anything mean toward her, but lovingly embraces her. Starla feels at home and safe in his arms. Porter, like Eula and Cyrena, looks at people as people. This is why, in addition for all that Eula has done for him, he readily has Eula and James come back home with them in his own car. There is great symbolic importance in Porter carrying Eula's suitcase for her. It is a question of simple respect and humanity, the recognition that Eula is not a servant or an inferior black woman, but a human being who saved his daughter. It is the absolute absence of racism, a sign of goodness, and a demonstration that Porter is also an ideal Christian role model for his daughter.

The absolute absence of racism and the beauty and positive influence of faith can also be seen at Mount Zion Baptist Church. Here the reader sees aspects of the novel's theme of Faith. No one pays any attention to Starla and James being the only whites in an all-black congregation. To them, to fellow children of God have joined them for a Sunday service, they are happy to have Starla and James with them. Here, Starla has found true Christians who care nothing for the way someone looks, but who care deeply for who someone is. In the eyes of God, all are equal. Focusing on God allows people to see past the differences that separate them. In Mount Zion Baptist Church, this is certainly true.

Discussion Question 1

Why do Starla, Eula, and James go to Mount Zion Baptist Church? How are they received by the congregation? Why? What does this say about the Christian faith?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Porter not only readily agree to bring Eula and James home, but to carry Eula's suitcase as well? What does this say about Porter?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Starla unable to recognize her own mother? What does this say about Lulu?

Vocabulary

agitators, connoisseur, miscreants, hackles, exaggerating, contrary



Chapters 29 - 33

Summary

Chapter 29 – Eula and James spend the night at Mamie's. Porter gives up his room for them and sleeps on the couch. Starla overhears her father asking Eula for advice on parenting. Eula says that now that Porter knows things need to change, he has to do something about it. Starla later asks Eula if it is possible she can turn into Lulu, like her grandmother has said in the past. Eula assures her this is not true, that Starla is just a child and can do what she wants with the rest of her life. She doesn't have to end up like Lulu. Eula explains that she was blind to the truth of who Wallace really was because he offered her an escape from her family.

Chapter 30 – Sheriff Reese arrives the next day where he meets with Porter. Porter explains everything. Reese then speaks with Starla and Eula. They recount what happened as well. Eula explains she saw Baby James left on the church steps by a black maid with a light limp who is recognized as Gracie. Gracie works for Patti Lynn's family. Reese says Eula can stay with Porter and Starla until everything is sorted out. He will be forced to call Child Welfare to collect the baby, as he is bound by the law to do.

Chapter 31 – Porter tells Eula she is a guest in his house and may do and help herself to whatever she likes. Patti Lynn comes over to visit, bringing newspapers with stories about Starla's disappearance. Porter reveals he has rented their old apartment at the Whites', and has gotten a new job in Cayuga Springs. They will not have to live at Mamie's house anymore. Eula is invited to stay with them until the Sheriff has things in hand.

Chapter 32 – Mamie learns the next day that Baby James belongs to Patti Lynn's sister, Cathy, a chubby girl who no one could tell was pregnant. The baby is going to be put up for adoption. Starla wonders if her father feels she should have been adopted. Porter tells her he is the best thing that has ever happened to him and would never have even considered adoption. Starla and her father move into their new apartment. He begins work as a grease monkey the next day. The very elderly Mrs. White gives Starla and her father some beautiful old dishes, silverware, and other odds and ends for the apartment. Mrs. White tells Starla she is welcome downstairs anytime she wants. After visiting Patty Lynn, Starla reveals to Eula that Cathy has been sent away to live with relatives in Ohio. Starla feels as if everything that has happened is her fault. Eula tells her that God's plan doesn't give people free passes, that people make choices, and are accountable for those choices. God's job, she explains, isn't to make life perfect, but to help people grow and be better.

Chapter 33 – On Sunday, Porter drives Eula to her church, then brings Starla to their church. Starla overhears her father talking to Sheriff Reese after the service. Reese sees no reason for charges to be pressed, that Wallace's death means one less black



man to have to deal with. Starla is happy that Eula is free, but unhappy with Reese's statement as to why. Porter later reminds his daughter to be thankful in this instance that the life of a black man counts less than the life of a white man. At home, Porter invites Eula to stay with them as long as she wants. Eula agrees to stay on, saying they are family. Mrs. White takes on Eula as a maid in exchange for room and board after Mrs. White falls on the back steps. The relationship between Mamie and Starla slowly begins to heal when Mamie brings by some of Starla's things. The news carries word of civil rights legislation in process. Mrs. White hosts Thanksgiving dinner that year, inviting Cyrena to come and visit. She brings a gift of a redheaded troll doll for Starla from Troy. Everyone eats together in Mrs. White's dining room off the good china.

Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, the themes of Racism and Ironies persist in a positive way. Sheriff Reese considers that the death of Wallace is one of self-defense. There is no need to press charges, else he will have to drag the white Todd family into court. Likewise, he says, Wallace being dead means one less black man to worry about. This is a twisted and sad irony that racism now protects Eula from having to be charged and go to court. Nevertheless, Eula experiences no such racism from Porter or from Mrs. White. Indeed, Mrs. White is a stellar example of the absence of racism, having no problem with Eula first living in the apartment, and then later moving into the house, proper, to be a live-in assistant.

Likewise, the reader should note that when Mrs. White hosts Thanksgiving dinner, whites and blacks dine together at the same table and eat off of the good china. It is not only the absence of racism, but the gathering together of human beings under sight of God to give thanks for the blessings in their lives. They have all come to see one another as family, just as Eula once said earlier in the novel. In Eula, Cyrena, and Mrs. White, Starla has stellar female role models. Through Eula, Starla has an amazing mother figure. Starla counts her father among her blessings, knowing that he is the best possible father, and a good man in and of himself. She feels loved and as though she belongs when her father explains that she is the best thing in his life.

Starla, however, worries that she will end up like her mother. She recognizes that, although Mamie may not have been kind, Mamie did have her best interests at heart by being so strict and trying to tame Starla's rebelliousness. Mamie does not want Starla to end up like Lulu, though she fears this will happen. Eula tells Starla that nothing is certain except God's plan, and that Starla has it in her own power not to be like her mother. With her father and Eula as role models, Starla stands no chance of ending up like Lulu. Here, Starla's journey truly comes to an end. Having experienced the truth of racism and those who live without it, she has rejected such hatred and embraced the Christian, humane lifestyle of her father and Eula. Having experienced the truth about her mother, Starla vows never to become like her. Starla's journey thus hasn't been one of escaping in Nashville, but coming home to a true home, and coming home as a stronger, better person.



Discussion Question 1

Why is there irony in Sheriff Reese's decision not to press charges against Eula for the killing of Wallace? How does Starla feel about this? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Starla worry that she will end up like Lulu? Do you believe she will? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Starla has very positive role models in her father, Eula, Cyrena, and Mrs. White. Explain how each of these people has influenced or affected Starla in some way.

Vocabulary

scolded, eavesdropping, dignified, peculiar, sober, bounty



Characters

Starla

Starla Jane Claudelle is a redheaded white girl of 9 who serves as the principal protagonist and narrator of the novel “Whistling Past the Graveyard” by Susan Crandall. Starla is the daughter of Porter and Lulu and is the granddaughter of Mamie.

Disinterested and childish, Starla dislikes her grandmother’s strict ways and ultimately runs away from home to avoid them. She is determined to find her mother, who left for Nashville to make it as a singer years before. Starla considers her mother to be a shining example of motherhood, and a wonderful human being despite everyone else telling her otherwise. Starla catches a ride from Eula and Baby James, only to end up nearly strangled by Wallace. Eula agrees to bring Starla to Nashville. Along the way, Starla experiences racism firsthand, directed at Eula by whites and directed at herself by blacks. It angers Starla, but brings her closer to Eula. Indeed, she comes to admire the way Eula holds her head up high even in the worst circumstances.

When Starla falls ill, she, Eula, and James are taken in by Miss Cyrena, who ultimately puts them on a bus to Nashville. The ride is traumatic for Starla, who sees how much Eula suffers from racial attitudes and policies. In Nashville, when Eula is about to be raped by a black gang, Starla risks her own safety by trying to intervene. Fortunately, the attack is broken up by a pastor before anything can actually happen. Starla later tracks down her mother, who is angry to see her. She slaps Starla across the face twice, and demands Porter come pick her up. Porter drives through the night to find Starla, and brings her, Eula, and James home. Starla realizes what a blessing her father is, and is thankful to God to have him and Eula in her life. She comes to consider Eula family, and never wants to be without her. Starla comes to reject racism, and to take an active interest in the wellbeing of others, no matter their skin color.

[The reader will note that for the purposes of this section of the study guide each character's race will be identified. This is done because racism is an important theme in the book, and knowing the character's race will help the reader understand how this character acts with other characters within the context of the racial tensions within the 1960s.]

Eula

Eula Littleton is a thin African American woman who lives in the woods near Cayuga Springs. She is the wife of Wallace, an abusive alcoholic, and comes from a background of abuse suffered at the hands of her father and brother. While a teenager, Eula had a baby by a white boy. The baby was sent up north while Eula was savagely beaten by her father and brother for daring to love a white boy. Wallace offered her an escape, but plunged her back into abuse. Eula tried to have many more babies, but all died either in infancy or were miscarried. When Eula sees that Baby James has been abandoned on



the church steps in town, she decides to take him in. Eula sees no distinction between black and white. Human beings are human beings to her. Her faith in God reinforces this belief, and leads to her taking on Starla as well.

She comes to consider Starla and James family. When Wallace tries to kill Starla, Eula leaps into action, killing Wallace with a cast-iron skillet. She becomes a guide, protector, and moral compass for Starla, agreeing to take her to Nashville to find Lulu. She helps soothe Starla's nerves when Lulu turns out to be a horrible person. Eula feels blessed and unendingly grateful when Porter shows up to bring Starla home, agreeing to bring Eula and James back as well. Eula recognizes that Porter is a good man with zero racism, and agrees to stay with them for the time being. She is thrilled to learn that no charges will be filed against her for killing Wallace, and later accepts work as a live-in assistant for Mrs. White.

Porter

Porter Claudelle is the white father of Starla, the son of Mamie, and the ex-husband of Lulu. Porter is a deeply Christian, deeply gentle and strong man who works on an oil rig to support his mother and daughter. When he learns that Starla has run away, he rushes home to find her. When he learns she is in Nashville, he drives through the night to get her. He unhesitatingly brings Eula and James home as well, grateful to Eula for saving and protecting Starla. He makes sure Starla realizes that she is the best thing in his life, and has Eula live with them until Eula takes on work for Mrs. White. Porter ultimately takes a local job as a grease monkey to live with Starla.

Cyrena

Cyrena is a sweet, elderly teacher and black woman who lives in a town near Jackson, Mississippi. Cyrena is a deeply Christian woman who is involved in civil rights activism and the NAACP. She considers people to be people no matter what color they are, and so she shelters Starla, Eula, and James when they have nowhere else to go. Knowing they are in danger, Cyrena sends them to Nashville by bus. At the end of the novel, she gladly attends Thanksgiving dinner at Mrs. White's house.

Lulu

Lucinda "Lulu" Claudelle is the white mother of Starla, and the ex-wife of Porter. Lulu lives in Nashville where she is remarried and a drunk and cruel and selfish woman who would rather spend time around bars than her daughter after a failed music career. When Starla shows up at her place of work, she is enraged and annoyed to have been bothered with Starla. She smacks Starla twice across the face, and threatens to put her on a bus back home if Porter does not come and get Starla. Lulu is never seen or heard from again after Porter picks Starla, Eula, and Babay James up.



Grandma Mamie

Grandma “Mamie” Claudelle is the white mother of Porter, and the grandmother of Starla. She has taken Starla in so Porter can work on the Gulf on an oil rig. Mamie is a strict woman who is quick to punish and hit, though never meanly. She worries that Starla will grow up like Lulu, which is why she is especially hard on Starla. This causes a rift, however, between Mamie and Starla, leading to Starla running away. When Starla returns home, Mamie is both overjoyed and angry. As the novel ends, the rift between them is slowly healing.

Wallace

Wallace is the black husband of Eula. He is a large, angry, physically abusive alcoholic who is irate and terrified when Eula comes home with Starla and James. He believes the only way out of the situation is to kill Starla and James and bury them in the woods. When Wallace tries to strangle Starla, he is himself killed by Eula.

Baby James

Baby James is a white baby boy left on the church steps by Gracie, maid and friend of Cathy Todd, older sister of Starla’s best friend. Having given birth out of wedlock, Cathy has James delivered to the church where he is found and cared for by Eula. At the end of the novel, James is put up for adoption.

Mrs. White

Mrs. White is a sweet, elderly white woman who rents an apartment out of her house to Starla, Porter, and Eula. Mrs. White is a gentle old soul who makes no distinction between black and white. Deeply Christian, she hosts Thanksgiving dinner and invites Eula and Cyrena to eat together at her table off the good china. Mrs. White recognizes Eula and Cyrena as fellow human beings. She also becomes something of a grandmotherly figure to Starla. She comes to consider Starla, Porter, and Eula to be her family by the end of the novel.

Sheriff Reese

Sheriff Reese heads up the local law enforcement in and around Cayuga Springs and for all of the county. Reese is a straightforward, good, but flawed man. He believes in doing his job as well as possible despite racial tensions, and despite his own racist tendencies. He often does the right thing for the wrong reasons. For example, he refuses to press charges against Eula for the murder of Wallace not only because it was justifiable, but because it would mean bringing James and the white Todd family into the

situation. Further, Reese believes Wallace being dead is one less black man to worry about. As a result, he lets the entire case drop.

Symbols and Symbolism

Eula's truck

Eula drives an old truck, rust-red in color, with a giant Robin's egg blue patch on the hood. She is driving the truck home with Baby James when she first sees Starla by the side of the road. She gives Starla ride back to her place for supper. Eula later drives the truck to bring Starla and Baby James to Nashville. On the way, the truck is driven off the road by a racist, leading to the truck ultimately breaking down. The truck becomes a place for Starla, Eula, and Baby James to sleep overnight, leading to Starla catching a fever. The truck is ultimately brought in but never used again as Starla, Eula, and Baby James travel to Nashville by bus.

The Jenkins' truck

The Jenkins brothers' truck is a massive vehicle with a giant Confederate flag painted on the hood. The truck is the physical manifestation of the hatred and racism of the Jenkins towards blacks. They enjoy using their truck to cruise around and beat up black people. Starla ultimately takes a rock to one of the headlights.

Eula's Bible

Eula's Bible is her most prized possession besides Starla and James. Eula's Bible contains the Word of God, and is her source of hope, strength, and wisdom. When she agrees to bring Starla to Nashville, the Bible is the first thing she packs and decides to bring. Eula's faith influences many of her actions and reinforces the theme of Faith in this novel.

Eula's suitcase

Eula's suitcase contains the few possessions that Eula decides to bring along to Nashville. When Porter arrives to pick up Starla, he readily brings Eula and James as well. On the way out, he picks up and carries Eula's suitcase for her. There is great symbolic importance in Porter carrying Eula's suitcase for her. It is a representation of simple respect and humanity, and the recognition that Eula is not a servant or an inferior black woman, but a human being who happened to have saved his daughter. The carrying of the suitcase is the absolute absence of racism, a sign of goodness, and a demonstration that Porter is also an ideal Christian role model for his daughter.



Molotov cocktail

A Molotov cocktail is thrown by the Jenkins brothers at Cyrena's house. The cocktail explodes on the porch, catching much of the wood fire. Neighbors, as well as Starla and Eula, rush to successfully put out the blaze. The cocktail is symbolic of just how dangerous and deadly things are at the moment between blacks and whites in 1960s America and how much whites like the Jenkins want to keep the status quo.

Baked goods

Baked goods are prepared by Eula and Starla in Cyrena's kitchen. They are sold to local diners, eatiers, and other places of business as well as residents. The money earned from the sales will be used to pay back Cyrena and to pay for truck repairs so that Starla and Eula may continue on their way to Nashville.

Identity card

An identity card is written out by Cyrena and pinned to Starla's shirt. The identity card is a visual way for bus drivers and station workers to let Starla pass through unobstructed. The card contains an assumed name (Sarah Langsdon), the destination (Nashville/Lulu Langsdon), and Cyrena's own number as the emergency number. Starla's cover story is that her grandmother dropped her off at the station, and that she'll be traveling alone. The paper will provide proof of this. The idea of an identity card fits in with one of the book's messages, that of exploring one's identity, especially coming of age and especially within such a prejudiced time in American history.

Buses

Buses are a primary form of transportation in the novel. Starla, Eula, and Baby James take a bus from Jackson, Mississippi, to Nashville, Tennessee. The bus ride gives Starla a better glimpse of the world around her, especially the racism present in it. The bus itself is segregated, with blacks being forced to sit at the back of the bus. Bus stops are also segregated. Some places along the way even refuse service to blacks. The bus trip proves to be both difficult and an awakening to Starla, who soundly comes down against racism by the time Nashville is reached.

Good china

Good china is used for Thanksgiving dinner at Mrs. White's house. Mrs. White invites Starla, Eula, Porter, and Cyrena to dinner and has them all eat at the table with her. This breaks the customs of the time for whites and blacks to dine together. It also breaks the custom at the time that whites and blacks should not eat off of the same dinnerware.



That Mrs. White uses her good china for white and black alike reveals how deeply compassionate and respectful she is, and how she views blacks as equals to whites.

Demo record

Lulu sends Starla a demo record from Nashville which Mamie tries to throw out without Starla knowing. Starla listens to the record and believes her mother is famous. It helps to fuel the dreams Starla has about going to live with her mother in Nashville. It helps to create an erroneous vision in Starla's mind of what her mother and her mother's life must be like.



Settings

Cayuga Springs

Cayuga Springs is a small, old town in Mississippi. It is where Starla lives with her grandmother. It is a very traditional Southern town, predominantly white, and with an area where blacks live. Many other blacks live outside of town as well. Cayuga Springs, though beset by racism, is a quiet and relatively peaceful place to live. The law is enforced by Sheriff Reese, who is a good but deeply flawed man that does his best to uphold the law impartially despite his racist tendencies. Evidence of this comes from the lack of violence between whites and blacks in the community, though violence is routine in other communities across the state. Porter later comes back to live in Cayuga Springs to be with Starla. Eula herself moves into Mrs. White's house to act as a live-in assistant.

Jackson

Jackson is a city in Mississippi near the town where Cyrena lives. Cyrena brings Starla, Eula, and James to Jackson to put them on a bus bound for Nashville. Jackson is a very racist city, heavily segregated and hostile toward blacks. Buses going to and from Jackson are segregated, and facilities and other places of business in Jackson are also segregated. Jackson serves as proof in Starla's mind that racism is wrong and must be done away with.

Nashville

Nashville is a city in Tennessee famous for its country music scene and is the heart of country music culture. It is where Lulu has gone to become famous, and where Starla goes to find Lulu. Nashville is a highly segregated city, with white sections and black sections, with segregated businesses, and white-only businesses. Porter must drive to Nashville through the night in order to find Starla, Eula, and James, and to bring them home. Nashville is also home to the Mount Zion Baptist Church, an all-black congregation that warmly welcomes and cares for Starla and James in their deepest moments of trouble. The church serves as a symbol of defiance to racist attitudes among blacks and whites alike.

Wallace's homestead

Wallace's homestead is located a few miles outside of Cayuga Springs in the woodlands. Owned and built by Wallace himself, the homestead features a main house, a springhouse, and ragged farmland. The homestead is where Wallace and Eula live, and where Eula later brings Starla and James. Wallace's homestead is where Wallace

ultimately tries to kill Starla, but is killed by Eula in turn. His body is dragged into the springhouse before Starla, Eula, and James set off for Nashville.

Mrs. White's house

Mrs. White's house is located in Cayuga Springs, Mississippi. It is a large, beautiful old house, the top floor of which has been converted into an apartment where Starla and her father move. Downstairs, Eula moves into a guestroom to take care of Mrs. White and to tend to the house and grounds. Mrs. White's house becomes a refuge against racism in the area, and becomes host to Thanksgiving dinner at the end of the novel.



Themes and Motifs

Journey

Journey is an important theme in the novel “Whistling Past the Graveyard” by Susan Crandall. In novels, journeys are far more than merely travel or physical destination, but are about what is learned and experienced along the way. This often leads to a character coming of age, growing in moral quality, or coming to a new stance on events, situations, or beliefs. In the novel, the journey undertaken is by Starla.

When the novel begins, Starla is a typical 9-year-old white girl living in the American South. She is very much a child who believes she is suffering unduly at the hands of a strict grandmother. She has little interest or care for events going on around her, and has even naturally absorbed some of the racial tendencies of her family, friends, and neighbors. This is apparent when Starla attempts to exert her influence as a white over Wallace after being taken home by Eula. However, Starla’s decision to run away from home will prove to have tremendous consequences for her and who she is as a person.

Starla experiences racism and cruelty firsthand through every step of her journey. Furthermore, Starla's journey towards becoming less naive and more knowledgeable about racial tensions, prejudice, and racism takes place over the course of the novel. Wallace’s attempt at strangling her makes her realize that she truly didn’t have things too bad with her grandmother. Eula’s decision to kill Wallace to save Starla demonstrates love and compassion on a scale that Starla has never known from her own mother before. Being in Eula’s truck when Eula is driven off the road for being black causes Starla to experience racism against blacks by whites. Eula later experiences racism firsthand when no black people will help a sick white girl. The segregated towns, cities, and buses of the South also come to convince Starla that racism, no matter where it comes from, is wrong. Likewise, Starla takes comfort in how non-racist her father, Eula, Cyrena, and Mrs. White are. All deeply Christian, they could care less what a person looks like, but rather care about the content of one’s character. Starla aspires to be like them, having amazing role models in each of them.

Starla also comes to reevaluate family in the novel. She has idolized her mother all along until she crashes into reality in Nashville. Lulu is angered rather than relieved to see Starla and slaps her twice across the face. It is her father who drives straight through the night to save Starla, and to bring her, Eula, and James home. Starla realizes how much she has missed out on with her father by choosing to focus on her mother. She also begins to repair her relationship with her grandmother by the end of the novel, realizing that her grandmother, though she did not display it well, loves her, and does not want her to end up like Lulu. Starla learns from Eula that she must keep faith in God, and that she does not have to end up like Lulu, that it is in her own power to choose to live her life the way she wants. This makes Starla commit to never being like Lulu. As the novel ends, Starla has become a far better person. She has come to value family deeply, has come to viscerally oppose racism, and has grown in her faith.



Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “Whistling Past the Graveyard” by Susan Crandall. Family, thematically, involves the love, compassion, loyalty, encouragement, and support of and between individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who act in accord with the traditional family unit. Family proves to be tremendously influential and invaluable to Starla as she comes of age through her journey in the novel. Family also proves to be incredibly important to Porter, Eula, and Mrs. White as well.

When the novel begins, Starla lives with her grandmother while her father is away at work in the Gulf on an oil rig and her mother has gone to Nashville to become a famous singer. Starla has not seen her mother in years, but sees her father every few weeks. Starla dislikes her grandmother for how strict she is, but later learns this is to prevent Starla from ending up like Lulu. Nevertheless, Starla idolizes her mother, considering her akin to God. When Starla tires of living with her grandmother and fears reform school, she runs off to live with her mother. She envisions Lulu will welcome her with open arms and will give her a better life.

The opposite is true. Lulu is a selfish drunk who couldn't care less about Starla. Indeed, rather than welcoming Starla, she slaps Starla twice across the face. It is Starla's father who saves the day, driving through the night to bring Starla, Eula, and James home. Porter tells Starla she is the best thing in his life. It helps Starla to realize how much she is missing out on with her father and that her father is truly the parent she wished Lulu could have been. Porter decides to strengthen his relationship with his daughter by taking a job right in town and moving home. Porter provides Starla with the love, security, and comfort she realizes she has always wanted and has had all along. She even comes to begin repairing her friendship with Mamie by the end of the novel.

Family is something that Eula, on the other hand, has never had. Eula comes from a broken home. Her mother died when Eula was young. Her brother and father were physically abusive. Eula's first baby, had at 14 by a white boy, was taken away by her brother. Eula's marriage to Wallace proves disastrous, with all of her children dying in infancy or miscarrying, and with Wallace being an abusive drunk. Eula knows in her heart that it is God's will that she finds Starla and James, and believes they are now family.

Caring for Starla and James gives Eula a sense of purpose and happiness. She kills Wallace to protect Starla and James from Wallace, and moves Heaven and Earth to get Starla to Nashville. Starla ultimately comes to consider Eula family, and a mother figure. It is Eula who notes that being a mother doesn't mean one is cut out for being motherly. Likewise, one who is not actually a mother may be the best mother of all, as is the case with Eula. By the end of the novel, Mrs. White comes to consider Starla, Porter, and Eula members of her family, and hosts Thanksgiving for them. Family gives Mrs. White a new part to her life, and something to look forward to into her old age.



Faith

Faith is an important theme in the novel “Whistling Past the Graveyard” by Susan Crandall. Faith in the novel takes the form of Christianity, belief in God, and belief in Jesus Christ. Faith includes trust in God and in God’s plan, goodness, and providence. Faith is an immensely positive, beautiful, and sustaining thing in the novel, especially when it comes to Eula.

Eula’s faith is the defining aspect of her life. Her belief in God, in Jesus Christ, and her life as a Christian make her a strong and resilient person. As she explains to Starla, it doesn’t matter how cruel others may be, what matters is that they do nothing which would shame Jesus. By turning the other cheek and taking the high road, they do not add to a circle of racism, cruelty, and violence. In so doing, they make the world better and honor Christ’s sacrifice for all of humankind.

Likewise, Eula believes that God has a plan that keeps the worst away from people, even though they may suffer in the meantime. She believes that things always turn out right according to God, and this helps her to weather the storm of her abusive father, brother, and later, Wallace. When Eula finds Baby James on the church steps in Cayuga Springs, she knows in her heart that it is God’s will she found him. When Eula finds Starla outside of town, she knows in her heart that God’s will is once again at work. Eula’s faith in God and her Christianity teach her that it doesn’t matter what someone looks like because all people are children of God.

Eula is therefore colorblind when it comes to race. She has no concerns about caring for white children even though she is black. Starla later finds it difficult to believe that any Christian could be racist, white or black. Eula provides an example therein of what a true Christian should be. Proter, Cyrena, and Mrs. White also provide examples of true Christians who act and serve others without thinking about things like skin color. In the end, these things are seen as irrelevant in the eyes of God. Such is the case with the all-black congregation at Nashville’s Mount Zion Baptist Church that welcomes Starla and James with open arms.

Racism

Racism is an important theme in the novel “Whistling Past the Graveyard” by Susan Crandall. Racism is the hatred, mistreatment, or mental hatred of another based on that individual’s skin color and race. Racism, and racial attitudes, appear in many ways in the novel, and all of them are equally as vile as the next.

The novel occurs in the Deep South in July of 1963, right as the civil rights movement is getting into full swing and racial tensions are at an all-time high. As it stands, nearly all places in the South are segregated, from buses to facilities to businesses. Whites and blacks are divided into sections in buses, given separate rest facilities, and must live in different parts of towns. The civil rights movement has challenged this status quo, leading to increased violence and racism. Cyrena is a member of the NAACP and is



active in the movement to bring about equality. She believes the only way that change will be made will be to confront it head-on. Meanwhile, others like the white Mamie and the black Mrs. Washington contend that outside agitators like the NAACP are only making things worse, and setting race relations back.

Starla comes to believe that racism is evil, must be confronted, and must be done away with. Starla experiences racism directly and indirectly in the novel. She is in Eula's truck when Eula is driven off the road by an angry racist white man. She rides the same segregated bus as Eula to Nashville. She hears the story of how the Jenkins brothers try to beat up and rape Eula. Starla's own mother won't even allow Eula to take a bath at her apartment. Starla herself is refused aspirin and help by dozens of blacks because she is white, therein learning that racism can happen among any people towards any others.

However, racism is challenged not only by movements and organizations, but by individuals one at a time. Eula takes in and protects Starla and James without a second's hesitation, even though they are white and she is black. The kindly white farmer helps Eula get her truck out of the ditch even though she is black and was just driven off the road by a white man. Porter drives Eula and James home with Starla without a second's hesitation even though Eula is black, and they are white. Mrs. White invites Eula and Cyrena to eat Thanksgiving dinner with her off the good china, even though she is white and they are black. To these people who are deeply Christian in nature, nothing else matters except that they are all human beings worthy of respect, and that they are all children of God. Ironically, Sheriff Reese refuses to pursue a legal case against Eula because the dead man in the situation is black, the one sick time racism works in Eula's favor.

Irony

Irony is an important theme in the novel "Whistling Past the Graveyard" by Susan Crandall. In part, irony exists when the exact opposite of what is believed, intended, or considered normal occurs. The novel is full of numerous examples of irony.

Starla's idolization of her mother early in the novel ultimately proves to be ironic in that the parent she was originally looking for—warm, gentle, caring, and compassionate—she finds in her father. Starla's desire to achieve a better life with her mother by running away to Nashville only occurs when she returns home with her father to Cayuga Springs. As Eula explains and later demonstrates, sometimes mothers are the worst possible mothers (such as Lulu) while others, who may never biologically be mothers end up being the best (such as Eula). Eula's early assertion that she and Starla are family is denied by Starla, only to be reiterated by Starla later on.

Racism in the novel also provides great ironies. Stereotypically, racism is believed to come only from whites. In the novel, Starla experiences racism while sick when black residents refuse to help her. Cyrena's efforts to bring about equality are largely opposed by her fellow black neighbors. Her efforts meet some of the strongest opposition from

the very people she is trying to help because they would rather have peace through the status quo.

One of the greatest moments of irony in the novel occurs during Sheriff Reese's investigation into Wallace's death. Rather than racism working against Eula, it works in her favor. Reese does not want to drag whites into court unnecessarily, especially stemming from the death of a black man. He therefore will not press charges against Eula out of racist tendencies rather than press charges because of them. In his mind, Wallace is one less black man to have to deal with.

Styles

Point of View

Susan Crandall tells her novel “Whistling Past the Graveyard” in the first-person reflective narrative mode from the point of view of main character and principal protagonist, Starla Claudelle. The novel is being told by Starla years after it has occurred, so the writing assumes a reflective nature, as though Starla is looking back at things that have already happened. The novel is told in the first-person because the events Starla is relating to the reader are her own. The first-person narrative mode allows the reader a glimpse into Starla’s thoughts and feelings, often unspoken, which give the novel and the characterization of Starla greater depth. It also helps the reader to understand things directly as Starla herself has experienced them.

Language and Meaning

Susan Crandall tells her novel “Whistling Past the Graveyard” in language that is childlike, simple, and straightforward. This is done for at least two reasons. First, the story is being told from the point of view of Starla in the first person, as though Starla were looking back on things years after they happened. How far back is not known, but the straightforwardness of the language presumes that Starla is still relatively young when telling the events of the novel. Secondly, because the events of the novel are being experienced by a 9-year-old child, it is only natural that the language used be reflective of that age and level of education. The straightforward language speaks of youth, which in turn adds a sense of realism and believability to the plot.

Structure

Susan Crandall divides her novel “Whistling Past the Graveyard” into 33 chronological, linear, and numbered chapters from 1 to 33. This simple and straightforward approach allows the reader to focus primarily on the plot of the novel as it unfolds. The structure is also reflective of the simple and straightforward language used to reflect Starla’s age during the events transcribed, helping to give the plot itself a sense of realism and believability as though the chapters were the reflective thoughts of Starla. Each chapter deals with a certain sequence of events in the overall novel therein. For example, Chapter 27 deals with Porter coming to pick up Starla, Eula, and James, and demonstrating that he is the parent Starla has been longing for.



Quotes

Hey, I didn't even want to be a lady.
-- Starla (Chapter 2 paragraph 2)

Importance: When the novel begins, Starla expresses her rebelliousness and unwillingness to listen to her grandmother. Starla is very much a child and merely wants to run around and have fun. She rebels against her grandmother's strict ways, and can't see that her grandmother doesn't want her to turn out like Lulu. Starla will only realize this later on.

Trouble was, I didn't know how to get to Nashville, or even what direction I was headed exactly.
-- Starla (Chapter 2 paragraph 58)

Importance: When Starla decides to run away from home, she has no idea which way to go. This quote is loaded with important symbolism. The directions Starla is seeking to Nashville also reflect the directions she is seeking in life. She has the choice to end up like her mother, or to end up like a better person. Starla's current state of being lost is indeed reflective of being lost as a child and who she will be in the future.

But as it turned out, leaving Cayuga Spings was an emergency, and all I had was some sticky penny candy in my shorts pockets.
-- Starla (Chapter 3 paragraph 36)

Importance: Starla has long been plotting to run away to her mother in Nashville. She has elaborate schemes for how it would happen, and how smoothly it would occur. In the present, fearing her grandmother's grounding and the risk of reform school, Starla bolts from town without a second's hesitation. Now that she has time to think about what she has done, she realizes she is in a difficult spot without money or someone to help her.

Whistling past the graveyard. That's what Daddy called it when you did something to keep your mind off your worstest fear.
-- Starla (Chapter 8 paragraph 1)

Importance: Here, the reader learns where the novel takes its name. It is from a colloquialism Starla's father uses to describe how to deal with fear. Starla, alone with Baby James in the middle of the country at night, is terrified. Her thoughts begin with her father, and move on to her family and loved ones. That Starla should think of her father first is telling, though unrecognized by Starla at the time, that her father is the parent she truly needs, not her mother.

I hoped baby Jesus would understand; he couldn't want a woman as good as Eula to get punished for protecting a baby and a little girl.
-- Starla (Chapter 10 paragraph 7)



Importance: Starla worries dearly for Eula after Eula kills Wallace to protect Starla and Baby James. Starla will do all she can to protect Eula from the law. She recognizes Eula not as a black woman anymore, but as a good person worthy of love and protection. Starla turns to her faith in Christ and to her own courage to make this possible. Already, Starla is beginning to change from who she was at the beginning of the novel, and all for the better.

You can't use other folks' bad behavior to excuse your own. When we got a choice, we keep Jesus in our hearts and don't do nothin' that would make him ashamed.

-- Eula (Chapter 14 paragraph 67)

Importance: Here, Eula displays her genuine Christian nature by turning the other cheek to those who have wronged her and Starla. By turning the other cheek and taking the high road, they do not add to the circle of racism, cruelty, and violence that currently exists in the South. In so doing, they make the world better and honor Christ's sacrifice for all humankind. They are responsible for their own actions, and will be held to account one day for those actions.

Now you listen to me. I spent my whole life wantin' to take care of children. You a blessing, not a burden.

-- Eula (Chapter 16 paragraph 123)

Importance: Starla begins to feel like all of the trouble that Eula has endured on her behalf isn't worth it, and is all her fault. Eula, like any good mother, immediately and categorically dismisses this. Eula insists that she has never been happier taking care of anyone, and that Starla and James are blessings (as all children should be seen) rather than burdens.

Maybe that's the way Eula looked at the Lord... like he'd saved her from worse.

-- Starla (Chapter 23 paragraph 106)

Importance: Starla attempts to understand Eula's faith. Things have gone horribly for Eula, but Eula keeps her faith and carries on. Eula explains that God has a plan. Starla comes to realize that sometimes, God's plan means saving people from worse suffering than what they have to experience. God's plan doesn't mean perfection and happiness for all on Earth, but requires individual choices and attitudes.

You can't live here, Starla.

-- Lulu (Chapter 25 paragraph 68)

Importance: Lulu crushes all of Starla's dreams when she tells Starla she cannot come live in Nashville. Lulu doesn't want Starla, and smacks Starla twice across the face. Starla is stunned and brokenhearted. Only the arrival of Starla's father—warm, caring, and loving—manages to right all that has gone wrong with Lulu for Starla.



I hated her.

-- Starla (Chapter 26 paragraph 1)

Importance: All along, Starla has idolized her mother to the point that her mother is akin to God. Starla's few brief moments with her mother shatter all of her dreams and invented memories, causing her to reflect on reality and the way things truly are. Once desperate to get to her mother, Starla can't get away fast enough. Her idolization turns to hate.

You and me come this far, we finish this together.

-- Eula (Chapter 26 paragraph 49)

Importance: Starla tries to get Eula to run away so she won't be arrested for the killing of Wallace or the taking of Baby James. Eula will hear none of it. Not only is she a morally upright and good human being, but she has come to love Starla like a daughter. She tells Starla that they have come too far to let things go awry now. They will finish things together, just like how they started things together. It is an immense display of familial love and loyalty.

You're my girl. I'd be lost without you.

-- Porter (Chapter 32 paragraph 61)

Importance: Starla ultimately comes to realize the parent she has been looking for all along isn't her mother, but her father. Porter lovingly and gently explains to her that he would be lost without her, that she is the best thing that he has in her life. It makes Starla feel loved, welcome, and at home. This also comes at the same time that Porter explains he has quit his job in the Gulf for a local job in town. He will be home for good, and Starla will have the new start she has always wanted.