

Yolonda's Genius Study Guide

Yolonda's Genius by Carol Fenner

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Plot Summary

"Yolanda's Genius" is the story of eleven-year-old Yolanda's fierce determination to prove that her younger brother, Andrew, is a musical genius.

"Yolanda's Genius" opens with the Blues family - Momma, Yolanda, and Andrew - eating breakfast in the slums of Chicago. Because of the drugs present in the neighborhood, and the fact that seven-year-old Andrew has come home with a pocket full of cocaine, Momma decides to move her family to Grand River, Michigan, a white neighborhood where she hopes there is less crime and more opportunity for her children. Yolanda and Andrew's father, a police officer, died when Yolanda was only four-years-old. The only thing he left behind was his Marine Band harmonica, which he passed on to Andrew. Yolanda is extremely uncomfortable in her new school, and often imagines herself back in Chicago, skipping rope, flirting with her crush, Tyrone.

In Grand River, Yolanda doesn't have any friends and she's often teased about her size. The only kid who tries to befriend Yolanda is a strange little girl with whirling eyes named Shirley, whom Yolanda nicknames "Whirly Shirley". Yolanda has many apprehensions about befriending Shirley, such as the fact that she's white, but Yolanda also embraces the opportunity to reinvent herself. She tells Shirley that she is a world class double-dutch roper. Shirley is impressed with all Yolanda's stories and begs Yolanda to teach her how to jump rope. Aside from avoiding Shirley's persistent requests to become best friends, Yolanda's time is also spent protecting her brother, Andrew, from the few drug pushers in the park.

The climax of the novel happens when the drug pushers attack Andrew for playing his harmonica too close to their grounds. They fear that his beautiful music will turn kids away from drugs and then they'll be out of business. They beat Andrew up and smash his daddy's harmonica. Andrew is not the same after the attack, and Yolanda realizes that her brother is nothing without his music. She is sure he is a genius, but she must convince the rest of the family that he is, too. Breaking all her mother's rules, Yolanda manages to purchase a matching Marine Band harmonica for her brother, and to convince the shop owner that Andrew is a musical prodigy. But convincing a shop owner isn't enough for Yolanda. She knows that if she really wants to protect Andrew she must ensure he is placed in a school for the gifted, away from the dangers of the streets. While visiting her Aunt Tiny in Chicago, Yolanda devises a plan to sneak Andrew onstage during a Blues concert in the park. When the real musicians hear Andrew's talent, they take him onstage and the rest of the world finally meets Yolanda's genius.



Chapters 1 & 2

Chapters 1 & 2 Summary

The novel opens with Yolanda thinking about the two terrible things that have happened recently. First, a kid came into school with a gun and shot his fellow students and teacher. One kid, Willie Meredith is now dead. The second terrible thing is Momma finding a tiny bag of cocaine in seven-year-old Andrew's pocket. He got the drugs from some pushers at the playground who said it would help his Momma, who is always tired. Andrew didn't know the bag contained drugs. After these two terrible things, Momma decides to move her family away from Chicago to a much safer neighborhood in Grand River, Michigan.

In Michigan, Yolanda feels sad almost all the time. She doesn't have any friends in this new city and she misses the familiar smells, sounds, and tastes of her Chicago. The only thing that gives Yolanda any comfort is hearing Andrew play his instruments. In the mornings, Andrew always wakes the family up by playing either his harmonica or his flute. Momma always makes breakfast for her children before dashing off to work, and it's no different here in Michigan. Yolanda wakes to the smell of bacon frying and pancakes baking. She sneaks a squirt of her mother's expensive cologne and thinks about her old crush, Tyrone, who is in jail now in Chicago.

On the bus, Yolanda is picked on by the rest of the kids because of her size. They make fun of her by calling her a whale. In retaliation, Yolanda presses her full weight onto the main bully's food while explaining why whales are the most beautiful, elegant animals on the planet. Yolanda has a huge vocabulary and uses that to make the rest of the kids feel stupid. In this way, she earns a bit of respect. One girl, Shirley Piper, is so impressed that from then on she saves a seat for Yolanda on the bus each morning. Yolanda is hesitant to become friends with Shirley, mostly because she's a white girl with strange whirling eyes, but she cannot resist a good audience, and Shirley is amazed by everything Yolanda says and does.

Chapters 1 & 2 Analysis

This section opens the novel with the main conflict of the story: protecting the children. Straight away, the reader sees the violence of growing up in an inner-city neighborhood. There are gangs, school shootings, and drug pushers in the playground. These events are so commonplace in Yolanda's life that they don't seem to faze her. She even continues to fantasize about Tyrone, the school shooter, finding him dangerous and passionate. This section also highlights Yolanda's feelings of displacement as she moves from Chicago to Michigan. This displacement encapsulates the tensions of racism and prejudice that are central to Yolanda's character. Although Yolanda is not overtly racist - insisting that one race is superior to the other - she is clearly prejudice and believes certain races should behave certain ways. For example, Yolanda feels it



might be inappropriate to befriend Shirley Piper because she is white and Yolanda is black. Similarly, she doesn't believe Shirley could ever learn how to double-dutch, which Yolanda considers a hobby solely for black girls.

Finally, this section highlights Andrew's unique musical ear. He can listen to any sound in the world and recreate it using either his flute or his harmonica. He recreates the sound of the bacon frying at breakfast, and "listens" to the sound of the pancakes on the griddle. Only Yolanda, it seems, recognizes that there is something special about Andrew's talent, perhaps because Momma is always running off to work and cannot eat breakfast with her children. Yolanda is very book smart and clever. These characteristics will come in handy when she needs to protect Andrew's music later in the novel.



Chapters 3 & 4

Chapters 3 & 4 Summary

Chapter 3 opens with Andrew in the classroom with Miss Gilluly, his teacher, who scolds him for having his harmonica out during lesson time. Miss Gilluly is trying to teach Andrew how to read, but he has no interest in the characters in the book's illustrations. There are two white kids in the illustrations, and they don't look anything like Andrew so why should he care what they are doing? Next, Miss Gilluly gives Andrew a picture of a dog and asks him what he sees in the photo. It is so obvious Andrew is confused, thinking he must be looking for something hidden within the picture of the dog. Meanwhile, in Yolanda's classroom, the situation is the complete opposite. Yolanda has chosen a seat that will give her teacher prime view of her when she has her hand up, and Yolanda always has her hand up. She almost always has an accompanying comment to go along with her correct answer, just to show her teacher that she's not skimping on her reading. Of course, Yolanda is teased for her intelligence and is often called "Teacher's Pet (Elephant)". The only person impressed by Yolanda's plethora of information is Shirley Piper, who wonders if Yolanda is a genius.

After school, Andrew likes to visit Asphalt Hill where the skaters practice. Andrew likes to hear the various sounds of the wheels on cement, and the cries of the boys who take a hill too daringly. Asphalt Hill is also where the drug pushers hang out, and Andrew does what he can to avoid them. He wonders why anyone would want to do drugs since he's seen that it makes one's eyes unfocused, and heard that it makes one's skin itch. While Andrew's waiting at the park, playing music on his harmonica to accompany the sounds he hears, Yolanda races to the giant public library. Once inside, she makes a beeline for the giant dictionary and flips through to the word "genius". Since Shirley called her a genius, Yolanda wants to make sure she knows the exact definition before admitting that she is or isn't one. The definition startles her: "True genius rearranges old material in a way never seen before" (Page 37). Almost immediately, Yolanda realizes that she is not the genius in the family, Andrew is. Yolanda has a flashback of when their father first gave Andrew his harmonica, and how Andrew had instinctively known how to play it, even though he was a baby.

Chapters 3 & 4 Analysis

This section establishes one of the main conflicts of the novel: whether or not Andrew is a genius. All her life, Yolanda has been told by her family that she is genius of the family. She is an excellent reader with an advanced vocabulary and she is not afraid to share what she knows, particularly in the classroom. While this eagerness for information earns Yolanda some unflattering nicknames, she doesn't change who she is: an academic. She refuses to change who she is for anyone, including her cruel schoolmates. Andrew, on the other hand, is in a special education classroom because he still can't read and is barely verbal. Almost all of Andrew's communication takes



place through his music. Through Andrew's thoughts as the point-of-view character, the reader learns that Andrew is not stupid, he simply thinks about the world in a different way. He doesn't relate to the white children in the picture, for example, so he doesn't understand why he should care what they're doing. Clearly it will take a dedicated teacher to find the right subject to reach out Andrew and teach him to read.

At the library, Yolanda is concerned with one thing: the definition of the word "genius". The definition surprises her because she realizes that Andrew is the genius in the family, not her. Yolanda simply memorizes lots of facts and has the ability to repeat them on command, but Andrew is able to rearrange the sounds he hears each day in a new way, a new form of communication and music. Yolanda's mission is set from this moment on - she must protect Andrew's musical genius. Meanwhile, Andrew's genius is beginning to create problems at Asphalt Hill. Andrew lures a small boy, Karl, away from the drug pushers with his beautiful music. He even plays notes that sound like someone is calling Karl's name. Although they let it slide this time, the drug pushers will not always be so lenient of Andrew playing near their turf. In time, Yolanda's protection will be necessary to ensuring that Andrew's musical ability remains intact.



Chapters 5 & 6

Chapters 5 & 6 Summary

Once again, Shirley saves a seat on the bus for Yolanda, who is suspicious of what Shirley might want in return for her kind actions. Even though Yolanda doesn't think she likes, or trusts, Shirley, she needs someone to talk to about Andrew's genius. Shirley is the perfect audience and hangs on each of Yolanda's words. She is amazed by Yolanda's intelligence and her ability to recognize Andrew's genius - it takes one to know one. After this conversation, Shirley lets it slip that she's hoping Yolanda will teach her how to double-dutch. Yolanda freezes, she knows her lie about being a world class jump roper has come back to haunt her. Instead, she convinces Shirley to let her teach her how to bake the perfect cake. Yolanda is not allowed to eat cake at home, but her mother is always pestering her to make friends and she knows this is the perfect opportunity to make one of her favorites. She spends the rest of the day fantasizing about the different types of cakes she might teach Shirley how to make. Meanwhile, Miss Gilluly has given up trying to teach Andrew how to read in the resource room and has called in backup. When Andrew arrives, he is surprised to see a light-skinned black man, Vic Watts, there to teach him. Vic Watts has a debilitating stutter, but that hasn't stopped him from acting as a speech therapist. When he sees Andrew's harmonica, he asks the boy to play "Old MacDonald" and is amazed by his beautiful chords. He shows Andrew the sheet music for "Old MacDonald". He promises to teach Andrew how to read this music, but Andrew isn't yet convinced that he needs it.

Later, at Asphalt Hill, Andrew continues to play his harmonica for the practicing skaters. One skater, Stoney Buxton, is particularly impressed with Andrew's talent and claims that he skates better when the kid plays. The other skaters aren't as convinced, and immediately notice the tension between the drug pushers and the harmonica player. The pushers feel like Andrew is interfering with their business - they haven't forgotten the way Karl left their side for Andrew's - and have nicknamed Andrew "The Pied Piper". Back at home, Yolanda has started her baking lesson with Shirley. She has decided on baking a chocolate fudge cake with walnuts. She painstakingly takes Shirley through the steps of baking - preheating the oven, sifting the flour, properly cracking the eggs - much to Shirley's delight and amazement. Even though Shirley drops eggshell into the batter, the two girls have a lovely afternoon together talking about their families and the boys they have crushes on. When Shirley insists that Andrew loves Yolanda as much as Tyrone or any other boy could, Yolanda realizes with a start that she's forgotten to pick Andrew up from the park.

Chapters 5 & 6 Analysis

This section sets up the primary moment of tension in the novel: Andrew's attack in the park. This section builds up the tension as it becomes clear that the drug pushers view Andrew as a threat to their business because of the way he lures children away from



the drugs with his music. Unfortunately, Andrew is too naïve and trusting to see that he is in serious danger, and none of the skaters are brave enough to stand-up to the dangerous pushers. Yolanda's friendship with Shirley begins to blossom as Yolanda realizes the joys of an entertained audience. Right now, the friendship is relatively one-sided. Yolanda's needs for an entertained audience and to feel superior over others, is met by Shirley's excitement over everything Yolanda says. Yolanda exploits her new friendship to test out her knowledge of geniuses, and to sneak treats, like chocolate fudge cake, that she wouldn't normally be allowed to eat. Yolanda knows that Shirley will ask something of her in return for the friendship - learning how to double-dutch - and Yolanda will have to admit that she's lied to her new friend. This friendship is not without consequences, as Yolanda is so engrossed with her cake that she forgets to pick Andrew up from the park. It is clear by the end of this section that something terrible will happen to Andrew in the park.

This section also introduces Vic Watts, the new speech therapist who hopes to teach Andrew how to read, and to speak his thoughts. Vic Watts is the polar opposite of Miss Gilluly, who became frustrated with Andrew's inability to communicate, and didn't attempt to reach him as an individual. Clearly Vic Watts is interested in Andrew's musical ability and will use this passion to reach Andrew in other ways. He is the first character, aside from Yolanda, who recognizes that Andrew is talented.



Chapters 7 & 8

Chapters 7 & 8 Summary

Chapter 7 returns to Andrew sitting at the park while Yolanda is at home giving Shirley a baking lesson. Andrew is watching the skaters and accompanying their sounds with his harmonica when Romulus Foster and his goons approach him. Romulus asks Andrew to play him something, so he plays notes that remind him of the three bullies: high shrill notes that seem to scream "Fall down. Go away. Take a bath. Go away" (Page 63). The bullies jump on Andrew and snatch the harmonica out of his hand, letting it drop to the cement. Then Chimp jumps, landing his full weight on the harmonica, smashing it in front of Andrew's helpless gaze. Meanwhile, Yolanda rushes out of the house shouting the final baking instructions to Shirley - telling her to watch the cake and test it when she thinks it's done: if the cake tester comes out wet, it still needs to keep cooking. As she runs to the park, Yolanda tries to convince herself that this neighborhood is safe; nothing could happen to Andrew. She runs faster than she ever has before and doesn't slow down until she sees Andrew, safe and sound, at the park. Andrew seems strange, his eyes seem bigger than normal and he looks incredibly sad, but Yolanda is too exhausted and frustrated to ask why.

When they get back to the house, Yolanda is horrified to see that the chocolate fudge cake is flat as a cookie and Shirley's eyes are brimming with tears. She had opened the oven door every five minutes to check on the cake, but it never got any bigger. The cake tastes great though, which cheers Yolanda's spirits. Andrew doesn't want any cake and goes straight to the bedroom. Without his harmonica, the house doesn't seem the same. He still hears all the sounds but he doesn't feel connected with them anymore. He climbs into bed and dreams about burying his harmonica in the backyard, underneath the flower garden.

In the middle of the night, Yolanda wakes suddenly remembering that she forgot to give Andrew a bath. He has been acting strangely all day, so she slips out of bed to check on him. She is horrified to find that his bed is empty, in the middle of the night. She rushes around the house checking all his favorite places: at the piano, next to the picture window, but he isn't there. Finally, she hears him coming through the front door. When she sees his face, she recognizes immediately that something is terribly wrong. She carries him upstairs and puts him in a bubble bath, but he is still listless and unresponsive. In the morning, Yolanda wakes to her mother shouting at Andrew. She's holding the broken harmonica in her dirt-smudged hands. She found it buried beneath her tulips. Because Andrew still isn't speaking, she thinks he buried the harmonica because he was ashamed. She figures it's just as well that the mouth harp is broken because the school had been complaining that it distracted Andrew from his studies.

The next morning, Yolanda cannot understand why a musical genius would smash his own harmonica. She wonders, briefly, if Andrew is having a fit of madness like Van Gogh, another genius, once had. She tries to convince her mother that Andrew is not



the same without his harmonica and that they should replace it, but Momma isn't convinced. Then Yolanda uses her strongest artillery and blurts out that Andrew is a genius. Momma is clearly exasperated and states that Andrew is a normal child. She just hopes he can make it through school and become a cop, like his daddy, someday. Yolanda is shocked by this image: she is more her daddy's child than Andrew is. She knows she must protect his future by ensuring he get a new harmonica, with or without Momma's help. First, Yolanda raids Andrew's piggy bank. He doesn't ever spend his allowance; he just likes to hear the sound of the quarters clinking into the porcelain pig. Then, completely disobeying her mother, Yolanda climbs onto the big city bus toward the mall. She shops around various stores trying to find a replacement harmonica, but they're all plastic kid's toys. Finally, she makes her way to Sellar's musical instrument store and finds that they sell the exact same Marine Band harmonica. The only problem is that the harmonica costs almost \$19.00 and Yolanda only has \$8.00. Determined, she convinces the shop owner to take \$5.00 off the price if, once he hears Andrew play, he believes Andrew to be a musical genius. He takes Yolanda's money as a deposit and she promises to bring Andrew, and the remaining \$6.00, around later in the week. When she gets home, Andrew finally tells Yolanda the truth: he didn't break his harmonica, the drug pushers at the park did.

Chapters 7 & 8 Analysis

In this section, Andrew's character begins to change now that he doesn't have his harmonica. He has fewer ways to communicate with the outside world than ever before, and both Yolanda and Vic Watts cannot understand the sudden change in the boy. It is interesting to note that Momma does not notice a change in her son, and the reader is left wondering if Momma prioritizes work over her children. It is clear that she loves her son, but she doesn't have the time to monitor his mood. Much of the care giving role falls on Yolanda's shoulders. This is simply stated as fact in the novel and isn't otherwise addressed. Some readers may find Yolanda dislikeable for forgetting her brother in the park on the day of his attack, but it is important to remember that Yolanda is only eleven-years-old and is clearly given far too much responsibility over her younger brother.

When Yolanda realizes that her brother is not the same without his harmonica, she knows she must replace it - to protect his future in music, and perhaps to make up for her guilty conscience after leaving Andrew unattended in the park. Again, it is interesting to note that Yolanda does not tell her mother the truth about Andrew's harmonica. Andrew feels more comfortable sharing the truth with Yolanda than his mother, and Yolanda doesn't find it necessary to warn her mother that Andrew is being bullied.



Chapters 9 & 10

Chapters 9 & 10 Summary

Yolanda's fury about the bullies smashing Andrew's harmonica boils over the next day when she sees them crowded around Asphalt Hill watching the skaters. Yolanda marches over and yanks Romulus Foster off his feet so he slams into the ground. She manages to fight off all three bullies at once while delivering the message that "You don't mess with my brother, or you're messing with me" (Page 96). She even threatens the drug pushers with her (fake) relationship with Cool Breeze, the Chicago drug pusher that contributed to her family's move to Michigan. As she walks back to where Andrew is waiting for her in the shadows, Stoney Buxton calls out how amazing he thinks Yolanda is. Yolanda is stricken. Stoney Buxton is a very attractive, talented skater. Maybe this is her reward for being so brave? After her fight, Yolanda loads Andrew onto the public bus and the pair of them head back to Stellars so Andrew can play for the shop owner, proving that he is a genius. When he gets there, Andrew is still so excited about Yolanda's victory over the bullies that he doesn't feel his normal stage fright. He plays the sounds angry sounds of Yolanda's fury during the fight. The shop owner is blown away by Andrew's talent and happily gives him the harmonica for the promised discount price.

When the kids get back home, Momma is in a flurry getting the house ready for Aunt Tiny's visit. She is so excited about the visitor that she doesn't even notice Andrew's new harmonica, which is fine enough for Yolanda who is in no hurry to explain herself. Finally, days later, Momma wonders where the new harmonica came from and Yolanda calmly explains that a shop owner gave them a deal because Andrew's a genius. Momma still isn't convinced of Andrew's talent, but admits to missing Andrew's sweet melodies drifting through the house. Even though Andrew has the new instrument, however, he rarely plays it, leaving Yolanda to fear that it's too late: Andrew's ruined. She decides that the only person who may understand Andrew's plight is Aunt Tiny, an emphatic music lover. From the moment the family picks Aunt Tiny up from the airport, they party in celebration. Yolanda plays the piano for the first time in months, they feast on their favorite foods, and after dinner they turn up the music and dance in the living room. Andrew sits quietly absorbing all the sounds around him. He is most struck by the noises of Yolanda dancing. He realizes then that he needs more instruments to play the music in his head. Just a harmonica will no longer do.

Chapters 9 & 10 Analysis

This section does much to set up the action that will take place in the second half of the novel. Yolanda uses her toughness of character and large build to take her revenge on the drug pushers. The reader never worries whether or not Yolanda will beat the boys - her physique has been highlighted so many times in the novel, but it hasn't truly affected the plot until now.



Yolanda's friendship with Shirley Piper continues to grow. After the fight, Yolanda pours her heart out to Shirley over Cokes in the kitchen, and Shirley fulfills the role of "best friend" to Yolanda, praising her actions and never judging her. When Shirley comes over, however, she comes with the clothesline she's cut down from her backyard hoping Yolanda will teach her Double-Dutch today. Again, Yolanda is forced to make excuses, saying that the clothesline simply won't do. They need a regulation jump rope. Andrew also continues to grow in this section as he realizes that a harmonica on its own cannot tell the true story of memory. He needs a band - drums, keys, and brass, all playing together. He is maturing as a musician, recognizing that art needs more than just a melody.

Finally, this section introduced Momma's sister-in-law, Aunt Tiny. Like Yolanda, Aunt Tiny is extremely overweight, but unlike Yolanda, she is completely comfortable in her own skin. She loves her life and her food, and is extremely successful despite her weight. Although she isn't a healthy role model, the message in Aunt Tiny's character is to love yourself no matter what you look like. This message appeals directly to insecure Yolanda and hopefully to young readers like her.



Chapters 11 & 12

Chapters 11 & 12 Summary

Aunt Tiny works as a hairdresser in Chicago, and whenever she comes to visit she always fixes everyone's hair. While she is working on Yolanda's hair, the doorbell rings. It's Shirley, and she's excited to meet Aunt Tiny. To Yolanda's horror, she has a regulation Double-Dutch jump rope in her arms. Fearing that she'll be outed in front of her Aunt Tiny, whom Yolanda adores, she snaps at Shirley telling her that being friends is a big waste of time. She doesn't want anything to do with Shirley anymore. She even blames Shirley for what happened to Andrew in the park. Shirley is clearly devastated but manages to keep her composure. When she walks away, Yolanda feels a mix of desperation to run after her and satisfaction that she'll no longer have to lie. When Aunt Tiny tentatively asks if that was a friend of Yolanda's, Yolanda simply says, "She's a white girl" (Page 126).

After Aunt Tiny finishes Yolanda's hair, she works on Momma's. Yolanda is horrified to see that Aunt Tiny cuts Momma's hair in a very flirty style. She expects Momma to be embarrassed in front of her children, but she loves the new look and insists on going out that night to show it off. When she sees her mother all dressed up, in a dress that shows off her figure and her new flirty hair, again Yolanda is mortified. She doesn't understand why Momma would want to be seen as pretty, and when three men dining opposite the family can't take their eyes off Momma, Yolanda excuses herself and marches over to their table. "She's a mother," she says. "She's a mother and a businesswoman. She hardly ever looks like this" (Page 135).

The next day, Yolanda sits down at the piano to show Aunt Tiny how much she's been practicing. Aunt Tiny is entertained by Yolanda's playing but isn't totally impressed. Yolanda jumps on this moment to explain that she's not the musical genius in the family, Andrew is. Just like Momma, Aunt Tiny laughs at the idea and doesn't believe it could be true. She lets the matter drop and then gets in her limousine for the long drive back to Chicago. Yolanda and the rest of the family promise to visit her soon. The next day in school, Yolanda tries to make-up with Shirley by inviting her over after school. Unfortunately, Shirley can't come because she's grounded for cutting down her mother's new clothesline. She wonders if it would be alright if she came over after her punishment to practice Double-Dutch. The fact that Shirley won't drop it infuriates Yolanda who claims that Shirley is too short and too white to ever learn how to Double-Dutch. She claims that a black girl and white girl wouldn't have the right vibes to turn ropes together. Meanwhile, Andrew is back in his resource room with Vic Watts learning how to read. Vic Watts is using the alphabet to relate to musical instruments: A for Accordion, B for Bongos, etc.



Chapters 11 & 12 Analysis

Perhaps the most important element of this section is the dissolve of Yolanda's relationship with Shirley. The fission first happens when Shirley show up unexpectedly on Yolanda's doorstep. At first Yolanda is pleased to have someone to show off her new hairstyle to, but when she fears that she'll look like a fool in front of Aunt Tiny, she takes out all her insecurities on Shirley. It is interesting to note that Yolanda's excuse for treating Shirley so poorly is that Shirley is "a white girl". It is clear that Yolanda has grown up in an African-American community that seems to look down on white people as lesser-than. Aunt Tiny is very clear in her beliefs that skin color doesn't matter: a friend is a friend. Although Yolanda feels momentarily guilty, her prejudice does not subside and she uses Shirley's race as an excuse again as to why she can't teach her to Double-Dutch, saying whites and blacks will never have good enough rhythm together to make it work. Shirley sees through Yolanda's lame excuses and rightly calls her a bully.

Another interesting character shift takes place when Momma has her hair cut by Aunt Tiny. Aunt Tiny seems to recognize that Momma is lonely and isolated in her new city. Although Yolanda is mortified by her mother's flirtatious new look, mature readers will understand Momma's need to feel sexy and feminine. For the first time, the reader may see Momma as depressed and lonely, characteristics opposite from Yolanda's perspective of her mother being ambitious and put together. Yolanda's aggressive approach of the men eyeing her mother at the restaurant highlights her own insecurities and need to control what is happening in her family.



Chapters 13 & 14

Chapters 13 & 14 Summary

Yolanda and her family pack up for a visit to Chicago. Before she leaves, Yolanda longs to say goodbye to someone, but Shirley isn't speaking to her and Stoney Buxton isn't at Asphalt Hill when Yolanda stops by. Yolanda passes the time during the long car ride by eating malted milk balls and playing with her Momma's hair, which has been unbraided and unbeaded, and is no longer flirtatious. As she drives, Momma asks if Yolanda is happy at her school in Grand River. As it turns out, Aunt Tiny wants to invest in Yolanda's future by sending her to a special school for gifted children. Yolanda is shocked. She doesn't want to leave her school in Grand River even though she thought she hated it. She realizes that she loves her teachers and that she wants to keep Shirley as a friend. Momma wants Yolanda to take the offer so she can become a lawyer or a judge someday. Yolanda shocks her mother by stating that she wants to be a police officer, like her daddy, someday. Yolanda insists that it is Andrew that should go to the special school because she's a genius. As expected, Momma says that Andrew does need a special school, but not because he's so bright. He needs it because he's so far behind. As they drive into Chicago, Yolanda notes how gray and run-down the city looks.

At Aunt Tiny's Yolanda proposes a concert that evening with Yolanda on the piano and Andrew on the harmonica. Later, extremely nervous, Yolanda sets out to prove to her family once and for all that Andrew is a musical genius. Yolanda plays the piano like she's never played before and Andrew swoops up beneath the notes and compliments them perfectly with his agile harmonica playing. Yolanda is breathless with excitement, they sound amazing together - Andrew has never sounded better! When they finish, Yolanda expects her mother and aunt to leap out of their chairs, seeing Andrew for what he really is: a genius! When the song is over, however, Momma and Aunt Tiny sit perfectly still, looking confused. Then Momma says, "Well, that's enough of that kind of experiment, Yolanda Mae. That was terrible noise" (Page 158). Yolanda is devastated.

The next day, Aunt Tiny sends Yolanda to Grant Park to reserve their seats for the jazz concert that night. While she is at the park, Yolanda watches as the musicians unload their instruments and bring everything backstage. Suddenly, she realizes that Momma doesn't know diddly about jazz music. If Andrew is really going to be discovered, it needs to be a professional musician who knows what he's talking about.

Chapters 13 & 14 Analysis

In this section, the disconnect between Momma and her children becomes even clearer. Momma is so shocked when she hears that Yolanda wants to be a police officer that she nearly drives off the road. Momma is not worried that the occupation is too dangerous. In fact, she hoped Andrew would become a police officer one day. The



reader is left wondering why Momma has a double-standard with her expectations for her children's future. Unfortunately, this matter is never resolved in the novel and the reader is left wondering why Momma refuses to believe that Andrew is special and can have a very bright future. When Yolanda continues to insist that Andrew is a genius, Momma gets annoyed insinuating that Andrew is special for all the wrong reasons in school. At the home concert, Momma continues to turn her back on Andrew's talent saying that his music is "terrible noise".



Chapters 15 & 16

Chapters 15 & 16 Summary

Chapter 15 describes the jazz concert in Grant Park in detail. Yolanda is too anxious to sit and listen to the music, so she wanders around looking for a way to get Andrew backstage to meet with the famous musicians so they can hear how talented he is. There doesn't seem to be anyway in as there are security guards at every corner. There's no way they would let two unaccompanied kids walk backstage, and there's no way Momma would go with them. At the end of the concert, Yolanda finally gets the answer she's been waiting for. Before the final act comes on stage, the backstage manager walks onto the stage with a small, blond boy who's crying for his parents. When Yolanda sees that little boy on stage with the eyes of all the musicians and audience members on him, a plan hatches in her brain.

The next day, Yolanda volunteers to reserve their seats at Grand Park again, bright and early. Now that she has a basic plan in place, she needs to ensure it comes together without a hitch. After reserving the seats, Yolanda wanders around the park grounds until she finds two female security guards. Doing her best to seem innocent and engaging, Yolanda asks a million questions about where a lost child might be found, how security knows the child is lost, where the lost child is taken, and if the lost child would ever be brought up on stage. She lies and says that all this information is for her younger brother who has a tendency to wander off in large crowds. That night, Yolanda makes an extra effort to look young and vulnerable. At the concert, she waits nervously for the right moment. When the crowd is worked up and Andrew reaches for his harmonica for the first time, she grabs his arm and dashes him away from the crowd.

Chapters 15 & 16 Analysis

Yolanda will stop at nothing to protect her brother's musical future. During the first concert, she cannot enjoy the music for herself because she's so dedicated to finding a way to get Andrew backstage. The duration of the section depicts Yolanda using every aspect of her colorful personality to con and manipulate the people around her for information. By the end of this section, Yolanda's plan is solidly in motion.



Chapters 17 & 18

Chapters 17 & 18 Summary

This section opens with Yolanda explaining the new "game" to Andrew in which they pretend to be lost. Yolanda finds it difficult to balance Andrew's emotions. Simply walking around, Andrew is too excited and interested. He doesn't look lost or worried, but she is afraid to frighten him for real, fearing that he won't be able to play his harmonica when the time comes. Yolanda drags Andrew back and forth past two security guards multiple times before one finally stops her gossiping and asks if they are lost. Nodding yes, Yolanda surprises everyone, including herself, when she bursts out in tears. They sit, unaccompanied, in police van for nearly twenty minutes before Yolanda grows too impatient to keep waiting. Taking Andrew's hand, she defiantly marches backstage and announces to the security guard, "We're lost children. We're supposed to go backstage" (Page 190). Without hesitation, the woman waves them through and Yolanda cannot believe her luck.

Yolanda's excitement is short lived; however, when she realizes that the backstage is nothing more than stage callers running back and forth. Where is the food buffet? The champagne? The fancy musicians? There is one eccentric looking man wearing a white cowboy hat and a long, sparkly earring, tuning a guitar in the corner. Yolanda is annoyed that this man is white and therefore incapable of recognizing Andrew's talent. Fearing that all is lost, she gives up hope.

When the narration shifts to Andrew, he is immediately drawn to the cowboy and his giant guitar. Without thinking, he pulls out his harmonica and begins to play alongside him. The cowboy is greatly amused and wonders what group Andrew has travelled here with. Yolanda informs him, very rudely, that her brother is a prodigy. He needs a good tutor and that's why they're backstage. To find someone important to listen to Andrew - BB King or Koko Taylor. She smugly states that it "Takes more than a fancy suit to play great blues. Great blues musicians don't need a whole lot of glitter" (Page 195). Instead of being offended, the cowboy laughs and offers to take Andrew onstage with him tonight. Yolanda learns that the cowboy isn't a random roadie; he's the great Davie Rae Shawn.

In the final chapter of the novel, Yolanda watches anxiously from backstage as Andrew makes his big stage appearance. The crowd is wild with excitement and Yolanda knows that somewhere out in the crowd are Momma and Aunt Tiny. She fears what they are thinking right now. When Andrew finished playing his songs, he calmly waves at the frenzied audience that screams for more, and walks off stage. On the drive home, Yolanda drops the bomb that BB King heard the set and wants Momma to call him. He's interested in seeing Andrew through music school to ensure that his prodigy doesn't go to waste. With Andrew's future secure, Yolanda can finally start thinking about her own, and the first thing she wants to do when arriving back home is to apologize to Shirley.



Chapters 17 & 18 Analysis

Again, Yolanda's prejudice comes into play during her plan when she decides to speak to a white female security guard instead of a black one, claiming that "she might not be able to fool a sister" (Page 186). Also, she refuses to take Davie Rae Shawn seriously because he is a white musician and therefore wouldn't understand her brother's talent. Not only does Yolanda disbelieve that Davie Rae could be important, she goes out of her way to be rude to him, insulting his clothes and making crass assertions about his talent. Graciously, Davie Rae Shawn sees Yolanda's crudeness as a talent - she's a fighter protecting her brother and his future. Davie Rae Shawn is the first person in the entire novel to see both Yolanda and Andrew for what they really are: special in their own unique ways. Although it isn't overtly stated, it appears that Yolanda has learned her lesson about racial prejudice through her experiences with Davie Rae, which leads to her own character growth in the decision to apologize to Shirley upon returning home.



Characters

Yolanda

Yolanda is the eleven-year-old protagonist of the novel. She is a very large, African-American girl with an unquenchable appetite. Yolanda is big for her age and very tough. She dreams of being nimble enough to play double-dutch with the rest of the girls her age, so when she moves to Grand River, Michigan, she reinvents herself as a world class jump roper. Aside from her athletic pursuits, much of Yolanda's time is spent watching over her younger brother, Andrew, whom she realizes is a musical genius. Yolanda always thought she was smart, but when she reads the true definition of the word "genius" in the thick library dictionary, she realizes that it is Andrew, not she, that deserves the special attention and schools for the gifted. Unfortunately, no one believes Andrew is a genius because he can't even read. Yolanda's pursuit, then, becomes convincing the family that Andrew is special, a musical prodigy. She routinely breaks her mother's rules, lies, and devises somewhat dangerous plans all in the hopes of exposing Andrew for what he really is. While visiting her Aunt Tiny in Chicago, Yolanda devises a plan to sneak Andrew onstage during a Blues concert in the park. When the real musicians hear Andrew's talent, they take him onstage and the rest of the world finally meets Yolanda's genius.

Andrew

Andrew is Yolanda's seven-year-old brother. At the opening of the novel, Yolanda's family decides to move from Chicago, Illinois to Grand River, Michigan after Andrew comes home from school with a bag of cocaine in his pocket. He doesn't know what the drug is when he takes it from the pusher, but Momma realizes that her children were in grave danger and that it was in their best interest to relocate them. In Grand River, Andrew struggled in school and was sent to the resource center to help him master the skills of reading. Andrew isn't interested in reading, however, the only thing he's interested in is playing his Marine Band harmonica, which is the only relic his father passed on to him before he died in the line of duty. Andrew is so talented that he can listen to any sound in the world and play it on his harmonica: the sound of Yolanda's laughter, the crunch of cars during a traffic jam, a bird sailing through the crisp, clean air. When the drug pushers in the park break Andrew's harmonica for playing it too close to their turf, however, Andrew becomes a broken child, unable to express himself. Yolanda takes it upon herself to replace Andrew's harmonica and ensure that he get the educational support a musical genius deserves. Devising a clever plan, Yolanda manages to get Andrew backstage at a Chicago Blues festival, where he plays for the likes of BB King and Davie Ray Shawn. From that moment on, everyone realizes that Andrew is special, and he is given all the support and love that he needs.



Cool Breeze

Cool Breeze is the drug pusher that lived in Yolanda's neighborhood in Chicago, and gave the cocaine to seven-year-old Andrew at the opening of the novel.

Shirley Piper

Shirley Piper is Yolanda's only friend in Grand River, Michigan. Shirley has eyes that seem to whirl around her head, particularly when she's excited, earning her the nickname "Whirly Shirley". Shirley befriends Yolanda when she is new to the school in the hopes that Yolanda will teach her how to double-dutch. Yolanda is so insecure, however, that she tells Shirley she doesn't want to be friends with her and tells her never to come back.

Aunt Tiny

Aunt Tiny is Yolanda's gorgeously obese Aunt from Chicago. Aunt Tiny works as a hairdresser and seems to know all the handsome men in town. Aunt Tiny is interested in music and wants to ensure that her niece and nephew have every opportunity money can afford them. She gives Yolanda a piano to practice on, and brings Andrew to the Blues concert where he eventually gets his big break.

Stoney Buxton

Stoney Buxton is a skateboarder that practices at the park where the drug pushers hang out. Yolanda has a crush on him, and often imagines herself as Stoney's girlfriend. Stoney believes that he skates better when Andrew is off in the distance, playing his harmonica as accompaniment.

Romulus Foster

Romulus Foster is the bully and drug pusher who hangs out in the park in Grand River. He always wears new, fashionable track suits and has the clean features of an Eagle Scout. But looks are deceiving, and Romulus beats up Andrew and smashes his harmonica when he feels the boy is playing his instrument too close to his turf.

Chimp

Chimp is an oversized African-American kid who looks like a wrestler and acts as the muscle behind Romulus Foster's bullying.

Leaky

Leaky has a pale white, ferret-looking face. He is another sidekick of Romulus Foster.

Karl

Karl is the kid at Asphalt Hill that stops hanging around with drug pushers and starts hanging around Andrew to listen to the beautiful music from Andrew's harmonica. Because Karl has stopped hanging around the drug pushers, they attack Andrew and tell him to stay away from their turf.

Vic Watts

Vic Watts is a speech therapist with a stutter, who teaches Andrew to read with sheet music.



Objects/Places

The Marine Band Harmonica

The Marine Band Harmonica is the one relic Yolanda and Andrew's father left behind after he was killed in the line of duty. Andrew shows extreme talent on the "mouth harp" and is even classified as a prodigy.

Double-Dutch

Double-Dutch is a form of jump roping in which two girls spin the ropes simultaneously while a third girl skips between them. Yolanda wishes she was a world class jump roper, and promises to teach Shirley how to double-dutch even though she is far too large.

Willard School

Willard School is the school both Yolanda and Andrew attend once they move to Grand River, Michigan.

Asphalt Hill

Asphalt Hill is the area of the park where the skateboarders, like Stoney Buxton, practice. This is where Andrew most likes to go to practice his harmonica.

Stellar's

Stellar's is the musical instrument store where Yolanda convinces the shop keeper that Andrew is a musical genius. This information ensures that she can purchase a new harmonica for a discount rate.

Chocolate Fudge Cake

Chocolate Fudge Cake is what Yolanda teaches Shirley to bake when she doesn't want to admit that she can't teach Shirley how to double-dutch. When Yolanda is giving her baking lesson, she forgets to pick Andrew up from the park, and he is attacked by the drug pushers who smash his harmonica.



Grant Park

Grant Park is the park in Chicago where the Blues festivals are held each night, and where Andrew gets his first big break on stage.

The Clothesline

The clothesline is what Shirley cuts down from her backyard hoping to use the rope as a Double-Dutch jumprope.

Flute

The flute is Andrew's second instrument, which he plays when his music cannot be expressed through his harmonica. He typically plays the flute in the morning, playing a traditional "Morning song".

Quarters

Quarters are the way Andrew's allowance is paid because he likes to hear the sound of the coins clinking into the porcelain piggy banks. Yolanda also uses a stack of quarters to pay for Andrew's replacement harmonica at Sellar's.



Themes

Genius

The first theme of this novel is the definition of genius. In the opening section of the novel, Shirley Piper calls Yolanda a genius. Before Yolanda can agree or disagree with her, she wants to be sure that she understands the exact definition of the word. At the library, she pages through the dictionary and reads the various definitions for the word, but none really strike her as truthful, until she reads John Hersey's definition: "True genius rearranges old material in a way never seen before" (Page 37). Although Yolanda is undeniably intelligent, all she does is retain information and recite it upon command. She recognizes that she is not the real genius in the family, her younger brother Andrew is. Andrew has the unique ability to listen to the various sounds in the world and recreate them with his harmonica, or other instruments. Andrew doesn't simply create sound effects, he creates music. Everyone around Yolanda is hesitant to believe that Andrew could be a genius because he's seven-years-old and still can't read. On top of this, Andrew rarely speaks and some teachers even believe he is mute. Still, Yolanda is determined that Andrew gets the recognition he deserves. Along the way, Momma in particular refuses to believe that there is anything special about Andrew. She doesn't understand his music - it just sounds like noise to her - proving that prodigy, or genius, is a perceptive definition. By the end of the novel, there is no denying, for any of the characters, that Andrew has received a lot of positive attention for his talent, but term "genius" is never used to define him.

Protection

At the opening of the novel, Momma makes the difficult decision to move her family away from Chicago to a safer neighborhood in Grand River. After a school shooting and an encounter with drugs, Momma knows that she must protect her children from the harshness of the world, so despite their objections, Momma packs up the car and drives the family away, hoping for better opportunities and safer streets in Michigan. This opening act of protection sets the stage for the rest of the novel, in which Yolanda strives to carry out her mother's wishes to protect seven-year-old Andrew. Yolanda is large for her age, so protection Andrew physically is rarely a problem. Yolanda's courage and defense of shy Andrew earns her respect on the playground, and a few enemies along the way. But protecting Andrew's body is not Yolanda's primary concern. Her main goal in life is to protect Andrew's talent. Yolanda recognizes that Andrew is incredibly gifted and that he may even be a genius. After the bullying drug pushers smash Andrew's harmonica, Yolanda goes to all lengths to replace the instrument, knowing that Andrew is nothing without his music. Without his harmonica, Andrew's talent may wither. But Yolanda doesn't just want to protect Andrew's talent; her long term goal is to protect his future. Because Yolanda is so intelligent, she receives the bulk of attention in her family and her Aunt Tiny even arranges for Yolanda to attend a school for the gifted, ensuring her successful future in academia. No such lengths have



been made for Andrew, so Yolanda sets out to protect his future by ensuring that the rest of the family understand how talented Andrew is, hoping that his musical future won't go to waste.

Prejudice

An undeniable theme in this novel is that of prejudice. Yolanda and Andrew are African-American children who grew up in the Chicago slums and are suddenly replanted in a nearly all-White neighborhood in suburban Michigan. It is clear that Yolanda grew up in a community that looked down on white people as "lesser than" and this struggle for equality informs a large part of Yolanda's character. Yolanda typically uses prejudice against whites to justify her behaviors. She treats Shirley very poorly, for example, even going so far as to lie to her and bully her, but she is able to justify this behavior by saying Shirley is "just a white girl", meaning that she does not deserve to be treated fairly. Yolanda refuses to call Shirley a friend because she is white, even though none of the black kids at her school seem to want to make friends with Yolanda and Shirley is her only option. Additionally, Yolanda leaps to various conclusions about white people in their jobs, such as her assertion that white police officers are easier to fool than black police officers.

Yolanda's final bout with racial prejudice occurs with Davie Rae Shawn, whom she doesn't take serious because he is a white musician and therefore wouldn't understand her brother's talent. Not only does Yolanda disbelieve that Davie Rae could be important, she goes out of her way to be rude to him, insulting his clothes and making crass assertions about his talent. Graciously, Davie Rae Shawn sees Yolanda's crudeness as a talent - she's a fighter protecting her brother and his future. Davie Rae Shawn is the first person in the entire novel to see both Yolanda and Andrew for what they really are: special in their own unique ways. Although it isn't overtly stated, it appears that Yolanda has learned her lesson about racial prejudice through her experiences with Davie Rae, which leads to her own character growth in the decision to apologize to Shirley upon returning home. The only person to combat Yolanda's racial intolerance is Aunt Tiny, who sends the message that one shouldn't be judged by the color of their skin, but by their character. It is this message that Yolanda finally takes to heart, and is the message Carol Fenner hopes to leave the audience with at the conclusion of the story.

Style

Point of View

This novel is told in third person limited omniscience from the perspectives of Yolanda and Andrew. This point-of-view is very important to the novel as the reader gains insight into both Yolanda and Andrew's thoughts and desires, which are important for the reader to understand their character development and emotional growth. Having complete access to Yolanda's innermost thoughts is vitally important for making her a sympathetic character. On the outside, Yolanda is rough and tough, but on the inside she is actually very insecure and tender. Without access into Yolanda's emotions, the reader would never see this side of her personality. Similarly, it is important for the readers to understand Yolanda's thoughts during her conniving plans. Without such information, the reader would likely be lost throughout the novel, wondering what Yolanda is doing and why.

Perhaps even more important, however, is the reader's access into Andrew's thoughts. Andrew is rarely verbal and he processes much of what he sees through his "genius" musical brain. Carol Jenner does her best to explain the way Andrew's mind filters sound into music by using metaphors during his paragraphs as the point-of-view character. In this way, the reader sees Andrew as a genius alongside Yolanda and never has to judge her perception of her brother's skill. The narration of the novel is reliable, and the reader never feels misled. Because the main characters of the novel are African-American children who grew up in a rough Chicago neighborhood, much of the narration is told with street slang that may be confusing for conservative readers.

Setting

"Yolanda's Genius" is set in two cities - Chicago, Illinois and Grand River, Michigan. At the opening of the novel, the Blues family lives in the slums of Chicago, described as dangerous and full of crime, particularly drugs, while Grand River is a mostly white neighborhood with better schools and safer streets. Yolanda remembers Chicago fondly, however, and hates her white bread neighborhood in Michigan. In Grand River, there is fresh air, peace and quiet, and lots of trees. Momma has a flower garden and doesn't even have to chain the barbeque grill to the house at night, like she would in Chicago. In Chicago, Yolanda remembers the busy streets, the gorgeous shops on Lake Michigan Drive, and the giant hotels "rimming the shoreline" (Page 130). When she actually returns to Chicago for a visit, though, Yolanda sees how rundown the city looks: "Ugly buildings that looked as if they had been unpasted from one another lined the thruway. Paper trash was plastered against the cement abutments and gathered with old leaves in the corners" (Page 154). Regardless of its appearance, however, Chicago is home to the Blues, and it provides a perfect backdrop for Yolanda's plans to thrust Andrew in the musical limelight.



Language and Meaning

As the novel is written for young readers, the language tends to be very conversational and easy to follow. The sentences are constructed in a way that is not only easy to follow, and are written in a conversational tone. This conversational tone helps to characterize Yolanda and Andrew as individuals, as well as in their community, particularly when the street slang language clashes with the language of the outside world in Grand River. Occasionally, there are passages utilizing street slang, and musical words and phrases which may be a hindrance to some readers. Most readers should be able to deduce what these vocabulary words mean contextually, and this language, in fact, adds a depth to the novel that allows the reader a glimpse into a world that is made believable through the language used by not only the characters but by the narrator as well. Most of the novel is told in exposition so there is not a lot of dialogue to distinguish secondary characters, particularly the various skateboarders and bullies and school - although the reader does learn a lot about Yolanda and Andrew. The narration quickly jumps between these two characters' thoughts, so it is important that the narration remained streamlined and to the point.

Structure

This novel is comprised of eighteen chapters ranging in length from six to seventeen pages. The chapters tend to be short and full of action, which propels the reader through the novel. The plot of the novel is fairly simple - Yolanda must protect her brother, Andrew, at all costs. First, she must protect his physically from the drug pushers and bullies in the school yard. Then she must protect his musical genius and replace the Marine Band harmonica that was broken by the bullies. Finally, she must protect his future by ensuring that the world sees him as a musical prodigy instead of a developmentally stunted, special-needs student. The only real subplot that veers from this path of protection is Yolanda's struggle to make friends and cover-up her lies about knowing how to double-dutch. Even though the majority of the conflict takes place in the characters' thoughts and emotions, the pace of the novel is quick as Fenner finds other ways of incorporating action into the story, even without the use of excessive dialogue. The novel is quite easy to read and the plot is engrossing once the reader is immersed in the story being painted in its pages. The story line is linear with no flashbacks or long sections of back-story to contend with, with the one italicized exception on page 39, when Yolanda remembers her brother receiving the harmonica from their father. The novel is quite easy to read and entertaining in its entirety.



Quotes

"When the recess bell had rung, the partners had laughed and slapped gently at each other with pleasure, then wound up the ropes. They had gone back into the school building with their arms slung across each other's shoulders. For a while, Yolanda liked to remember that. She liked to pretend that those girls had been her friends" (Page 20-21).

"True genius rearranges old material in a way never seen before" (Page 37).

"A broken cry scratched at his throat and it seemed to him that it came from the little heap of battered wood and metal where it lay on the asphalt" (Page 65).

"Andrew never thought the harmonica was a toy. It was part of him like his hands and his mouth, like his ears. It let him tell things. It was his power, like muscles" (Page 76).

"Andrew wet the wood with his tongue, wept into the wooden holes; a crying spilled out of the Marine Band harmonica. Then jagged streaks of angry sound bled into the room" (Page 103).

"His playing happened easily, the way it used to, but then he heard it. Heard it. The sound from his harmonica didn't go forward, spinning out of him, letting him send out another curl of sound in the old way. It stopped at an invisible wall and cut back at him like splintered ice. He chocked on the sound, swallowing its coldness back into himself" (Page 119).

"I expect it's the same the other way round - if you've lived it, you got to play it. Andrew's waiting on his new sound, I expect" (Page 138).

"I don't know whether they were playing new stuff - or just messin' around. Part of it made sense, kind of. You know, sometimes you can't tell, with this new stuff, if it's any good or not" (Page 158).

"The sync part is important - the rhythm. You have to practice a lot if you want your hearts to beat together in perfect harmony" (Page 191).

"He placed his fingers, his mouth against the pipe and, like a proper beginning, he blew his waking-up song. But different. Such sadness in it. Sweet and clean and sad the sound sailed out over the crowd, out over Lake Michigan to join the boats rocking at their moorings" (Page 201-202).

Topics for Discussion

Why do you think Carol Fenner chose to include so many references to drugs in this novel? Do you think this novel gives an accurate depiction of the dangers of drugs in childhood? Why or why not? Support your answers with examples from the text.

What was the difference in dangers between Chicago and Grand River? Which setting do you think was more suitable for Yolanda and her family? Do you think Momma made a good choice in moving the family away from Chicago? Why or why not?

In what ways does racism affect the narrative of the novel? What decisions does Yolanda make throughout the novel based on her perceptions of the way different races should act? Where do you think she learned these prejudices? Do you think they are an accurate representation of the prejudices in the real world? Why or why not?

Describe both Yolanda and Andrew's relationship with their deceased father. In what ways is their father still present in their lives? In what way do each of the children attempt to reconnect with him, and please him, even though he is dead?

Compare / contrast the parenting styles of both Momma and Aunt Tiny. In what ways do these two women work together to ensure the best futures for Yolanda and Andrew? Which woman do you think has a greater impact on the children's lives? How can you tell?

Why is Yolanda's size important to her character development? Create a list of the different ways Carol Fenner describes Yolanda's size. Do you think these characteristics add to or detract from Yolanda's character? Would she be as believable if she were a skinny student, for example? Why or why not?

Discuss Yolanda's final plan to thrust Andrew into the Blues spotlight. Did you find her plan conceivable, or did it seem far-fetched? Does this fit with the overall narrative of the novel? Why or why not? How do you feel about Carol Fenner including real-life Blues musicians in a fictional novel? What does this add to the narrative? What does it take away?