

The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KIM MICHELE RICHARDSON

Kim Michele Richardson was born in northern Kentucky in 1957. In 1960, when she was three years old, her mother was declared an unfit parent. The state of Kentucky took Richardson and her three older sisters from their home, placing them in the Saint Thomas Saint Vincent Orphan Asylum, which was run by the Catholic Church. Richardson and her sisters spent seven years in the orphanage, during which time they suffered emotional, physical, and sexual abuse at the hands of the nuns and priests who ran the institution. When Richardson was 10, she and her sisters returned to their mother's care. In 2004, she and one of her sisters were involved in a class-action lawsuit brought on behalf of former orphanage residents who were abused. This experience prompted her to write and publish her first book, a memoir called *The Unbreakable Child*, in 2009. Richardson then turned to historical fiction with a local focus on Kentucky stories.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek is set in the eastern Kentucky mountains during the final years of the Great Depression. The Depression was a severe, worldwide economic crisis that began in 1929. It caused a sharp drop in employment rates, wealth, and stability for many people. In the United States, the economy began to slowly improve starting in 1933, thanks in part to the New Deal program, which was created under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The New Deal combined a series of financial reforms and regulations designed to address monetary policy with a public works program designed create jobs. Its many agencies, including the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps, provided jobs for artists, writers, librarians, construction workers, firefighters, and foresters, among others. Despite the New Deal programs, the United States economy didn't recover its pre-depression size until 1939. 1930s Kentucky was also the site of the "Harlan County Wars," which were fought between coal mine operators and unionized miners in southeastern Kentucky. Coal was discovered in Kentucky in the late 18th century, and by the early 20th, coal had become one of the state's primary commodities. Coal companies would establish mines, often in remote areas, then build up camps or towns around them and financially exploit their workforce. Miners also faced dangerous working conditions, from explosions and tunnel collapses to lung diseases from inhaling coal dust. Unionized coal miners in Harlan County trying to

fight for better working conditions and pay ended up in a decade's worth of hostilities with the powerful local coal companies. Finally, the novel's protagonist, Cussy Mary Carter, is the last of the "Blue Carters," a family with a rare blood disorder that tinges the skin blue. Her story fictionalizes aspects of the historical "Blue Fugate" family of Kentucky. In 1820, Martin Fugate and Elizabeth Smith, who both unwittingly carried the recessive gene for methemoglobinemia (a condition that means a person's blood carries less oxygen and their skin accordingly has a blue color), married and settled in Hazard, Kentucky. Four of their seven children had blue skin. In their small community, intermarriages meant that the recessive gene become widespread and blue-skinned Fugate descendants continued to be born through the 1970s. The medical tests and discoveries made by Doc in the novel are drawn from a study of the Blue Fugates conducted by a hematologist in the 1960s.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek is a book about the power of books in a harsh world. Of the many titles it specifically mentions, two are particularly important. The first is J. M. Barrie's *Peter and Wendy*, which tells the story of Peter Pan, a boy who escaped growing up by fleeing to Never-Never Land. Peter represents the boundlessness and potential of childhood, and his story is especially poignant in a place and time where not all children do manage to grow up. The second is Pearl S. Buck's [The Good Earth](#), which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1931. Set in early 20th century China, [The Good Earth](#) tells the story of a rural farmer and his family's triumphs and tragedies. Wang Lung and his wife, O-Lan, provide a mirror for Kentucky homesteaders like Cussy Mary Carter and Jackson Lovett in their deep connection with the land, but also their struggle and poverty. Other novels by author Kim Michele Richardson touch on similar themes to *The Book Woman*, especially bigotry, hardship, and motherlessness. *The Liar's Bench*, which follows the story of a Black Kentucky teenager who discovers her mother dead on her 17th birthday, deals with themes of bigotry and isolation. And *GodPretty in the Tobacco Field* engages with poverty and hardship in the lives of Kentucky coal miners and their communities as it follows RubyLyn Bishop, an orphaned girl taken in by her abusive uncle. Finally, both *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek* and Jojo Moyes' *The Giver of Stars* build their stories around the real-life history of the Pack Horse library project and the difficulty of life in rural Kentucky during the Great Depression. Because both books were released within a period of six months, concerns were raised in the literary community about potential plagiarism that were eventually dispelled. Moyes' book focuses

almost exclusively on the economic hardships of the era and the Pack Horse librarians, while *The Book Woman* also folds in the history of the Blue Fugates of Kentucky.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek*
- **When Written:** 2018
- **Where Written:** Kentucky, United States
- **When Published:** 2019
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** Rural, southeastern Kentucky in the late 1930s
- **Climax:** Cussy Mary Carter promises to raise Honey after finding Honey's father dead and her mother dying.
- **Antagonist:** Vester Frazier, Harriet Hardin, and Sheriff Davies Kimbo
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Black and White and Read All Over. Kim Michele Richardson is related to Irvin S. Cobb (1876–1944), a newspaper columnist, humorist, and novelist from Kentucky. When he was writing for the *New York World*, he was the highest paid staff reporter for any newspaper in the United States.

Through the Lens. In addition to being a best-selling author, Kim Michele Richardson is an amateur photographer who has won national recognition for her work.



PLOT SUMMARY

In January of 1936, 19-year-old Cussy Mary Carter's father is trying very hard to find a suitable husband for his daughter. Cussy's mother died of influenza and Pa—a Kentucky coal miner—is sick himself with black lung. Cussy doesn't want to get married; she has a job with the WPA's Pack Horse Library project, delivering **books** to people in remote communities and homesteads in the hinterlands around Troublesome Creek. She's also afraid of the kind of man who would want to marry one of the "Kentucky Blue People." Cussy and several generations of her ancestors have a rare genetic condition that turns their skin blue, and although they are otherwise healthy and normal, they are treated with fear and bigotry. The only reason Cussy has any suitors at all is because Pa has offered 10 acres of land for her dowry. He finally gets a taker, an old man named Charlie Frazier. Charlie mercilessly beats Cussy on their wedding night, then fortunately dies of a heart attack. Cussy, now in possession of Charlie's abused mule, **Junia**, returns to her work as a Pack Horse Librarian.

Cussy brings books to far-flung homesteaders—including Mr. Moffit and his wife, Angeline; Martha Hanna and "Devil John" Smith; Miss Loretta Adams; and Oren Taft—and to the mountain school run by Winnie Parker. And although she faces some bigotry from her patrons—Mr. Moffit doesn't like to look at her blue face—overall, Cussy's patrons like her. Some, especially Angeline, Winnie, and Miss Loretta, consider her a friend and don't care about the color of her skin. And when she meets her newest patron, Jackson Lovett, she quickly earns his respect and regard. The same isn't true of her supervisors, Eula Foster and Harriet Hardin, who treat Cussy and the only Black librarian, Queenie Johnson, as unintelligent, disease-ridden pariahs because they are "colored."

After Cussy returns to her library route, her dead husband's cousin, Pastor Vester Frazier, begins to stalk her. Vester is well-liked by many in the community, but he has a long history of harassing, harming, and killing people who are different (twins, a little person, and the Blues) because he believes they are the result of demonic forces. Vester claims that Cussy is a "blue witch," and that she's responsible for Charlie's death. One day, he attacks Cussy in the woods and tries to rape her, but Junia manages to chase him off just in time. Soon after, he tries to sneak onto the Carter property while Pa is at work, but Junia breaks free from her stall and tramples him to death.

The only people who know about what happened to Vester are Cussy, Pa, and Doc, whom Cussy and Pa called to treat his injuries before he died. Doc uses this opportunity to blackmail Pa and Cussy into participating in medical research, since he has long been curious about the family's blue skin. In exchange for his silence, he wants to take Cussy into Lexington once a month to the hospital, where he performs traumatizing and degrading tests on her. Once he realizes the root cause of her skin coloring, Doc offers her a drug that's capable of turning her skin white, at least temporarily. Cussy jumps at the opportunity to become "normal," and accepts the horrific side effects of the medication for the chance to be accepted in her community.

But when Cussy tries to attend Troublesome Creek's Fourth of July celebration as a "white" woman for the first time in her life, the townsfolk still shun her. Following this embarrassing fiasco, she resolves to live as herself, even if that means she stays Blue and continues to face discrimination and difficulty.

Cussy's friend and patron, 16-year-old Angeline, is pregnant with her first child. Angeline and her husband Mr. Moffit live alone, as neither of them have any kin left in the area. She's excited about having a baby, and she's convinced it will be a girl. She plans to name it Honey. But when Honey is born, the baby is Blue. Mr. Moffit, it seems, is the illegitimate child of one of Cussy's great-uncles; somehow, Angeline must also carry the recessive gene. Horrified by his child, Mr. Moffit hangs himself in the front yard on the day that Honey is born. Cussy finds him there while on her library route, and she rushes inside to find

Angeline dying of a hemorrhage after giving birth. As she lies dying, she begs Cussy to raise Honey for her.

At first, Pa worries that being a single mother will just make Cussy more vulnerable, but he eventually warms to the baby and understands why Cussy—who knows so well the pain and trauma of growing up Blue—wants to care for her. Shortly after Honey's birth, he tells Cussy to expect a new suitor, since Honey needs a father. But Cussy would never have expected that suitor to be Jackson Lovett, who has been in love with her since he first laid eyes on her in the spring. They share a love of books and an understanding of pain and trauma. The night Cussy accepts his proposal is the night that Pa dies in a mine collapse; he dies without knowing that Cussy will be taken care of in the way he wanted her to be.

In October, Jackson and Cussy get married in the Troublesome Creek courthouse. They leave the ceremony and are greeted by a crowd of Cussy's patrons, who have come to wish them well. But then, Jackson is arrested by Sheriff Davies Kimbo for breaking the anti-miscegenation laws that prohibit white people from marrying "colored" people. Although Doc attests that Cussy is a white person with a medical condition, Sheriff ignores him and gives Jackson a vicious beating for his failure to comply. A growing crowd looks on, some supporting Cussy and Jackson, others supporting Harriet and the Sheriff in their bigoted attack.

Four years later, Cussy Mary writes a letter to Queenie Johnson, who has moved to Philadelphia and is going to school to become a proper librarian. Jackson was eventually released from jail and recovered from his injuries. He has been living in Tennessee and visiting Cussy secretly while he sold off his land and they prepared to move to Ohio, where they can live together openly. Honey loves her parents and is learning to read. She is eager to become a book woman herself one day.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Cussy Mary Carter – Cussy Mary Carter is a 19-year-old librarian with the Pack Horse Library project in rural eastern Kentucky; her job is to bring **books** to far-flung patrons in the mountains. She also happens to have noticeably blue skin, thanks to hereditary methemoglobinemia that she inherited from her parents, both of whom were "Blues." Cussy's great-grandfather immigrated to the United States from Cussy, France, after which she is named. She lives with just her Pa (Elijah Carter), since her mother died of influenza several years before the events in the book. She is briefly married to Charlie Frazier, becoming his widow when he dies of a heart attack on their wedding night. From him, she inherits her faithful mule, **Junia**. As a Pack Horse librarian, she works with Eula Foster, Harriet Hardin, Birdie, and Queenie Johnson. Cussy's blue skin

marks her as different in her primarily white community. To Doc, she is a medical curiosity to be studied, while to Pastor Vester Frazier she is a devil to be feared. Others, like Sheriff Davies Kimbo, Mr. Moffit, and Mr. and Mrs. Evans tolerate Cussy, despite their discomfort over her difference. Cussy is caring, intelligent, and (thanks to her mother) very well read. She has a strong independent streak, which can be seen in her desire to keep her library route and to avoid marriage. And, despite the bigotry and isolation she faces in town, Cussy has many friends from her library route, including Angeline Moffit, Winnie Parker, and young Timmy Flynn. She eventually makes her own family with Jackson Lovett and Honey, the little orphaned girl she adopts.

Pa (Elijah Carter) – Pa (Elijah Carter) and his daughter Cussy Mary Carter are the last of the Kentucky "Blue" Carters. Pa is a loving, sensible man, who cares deeply for Cussy and her safety. He does what he can to protect her, such as clearing the briars and overgrowth from the mountain paths she rides on her library route. His love and concern also animate his desire to see her married before he succumbs to an early death in the mines, either by accident or because of his coal-diseased lungs. After Cussy's disastrous but mercifully brief marriage to the sadistic and abusive Charlie Frazier, Pa refuses to entertain any more suitors, even ones as eligible as Jackson Lovett, for a long time. Pa, like Cussy, faces discrimination and bigotry thanks to his skin color; he and his relatives have faced violence in the past. Yet, he cares deeply about his fellow miners, and he helps them where he can (taking extra shifts for a miner whose wife is having a baby, helping with the most dangerous jobs) as well as being their representative in secret and dangerous unionization talks. Thus, he earns the respect of men like fellow miner Howard Moore and even Sheriff Davies Kimbo. He's also proud, despite (or perhaps because of) the traumas and abuses he's endured: he refuses to entertain Cussy's suspicion that his fellow miners have elected him their representative because he's expendable (unlike white miners), and he's unwilling to take work with the WPA because he would have to take an oath of poverty, admitting that he couldn't support himself or his family otherwise. At the end of the novel, Pa dies when a mine collapses.

Jackson Lovett – Jackson Lovett is Troublesome Creek's most eligible bachelor, having recently returned to Kentucky from a stint out west where he helped to build the Hoover Dam. Jackson is thoughtful and well-read; unlike most of Cussy Mary Carter's male patrons, he prefers Pulitzer Prize winners to local color authors. Also unlike most of Cussy's patrons—and most of the people in Troublesome Creek—Jackson doesn't regard her with fear or disgust. He's immediately able to look past her skin color to see her good heart and her keen intelligence. Jackson has also known trauma and tragedy: his mother and brothers died of illness when he was young, and his father died shortly thereafter of alcoholism. Thus, although he is still a fairly young

man, he has serious, somewhat sad eyes and a fierce determination. This can be seen when he makes six attempts to ask Pa for permission to court Cussy Mary. He also cares deeply about justice, and right and wrong. This manifests in his unwillingness to help thieves like Mr. Moffit as well as his steadfast unwillingness to recognize unfair and cruel laws, like the anti-miscegenation statutes under which Sheriff Davies Kimbo arrests him for marrying Cussy Mary. Nevertheless, he is kind and conscientious, supporting Cussy Mary in her decision to adopt and raise Honey, and burying Angeline and Mr. Moffit with care and respect. He is so kind that he's even able to befriend **Junia**, Cussy's ornery and misanthropic mule. But as much as he cares about justice, Jackson doesn't care very much for what other people think of him. He is unabashed in his affection for Cussy Mary.

Angeline Moffit – 16-year-old Angeline Moffit lives with her husband, Mr. Moffit, on a remote homestead on Cussy Mary Carter's library route. She is sweet, kind, and friendly; like Winnie Parker and Miss Loretta Adams, she doesn't care about the color of Cussy Mary's skin even if her husband does. And she always has a generous gift of food for **Junia** the mule, taken from her meager garden. Angeline doesn't have any kin left, and so she is left to fend for herself when Mr. Moffit is shot stealing a chicken and when she gives birth to her daughter, Honey. She's grateful for Cussy Mary's friendship and help, whether it's in teaching her to read or in procuring the medicines necessary to nurse Mr. Moffit back to health. Angeline hemorrhages during Honey's birth and subsequently dies; she asks Cussy Mary to raise her daughter for her.

Mr. Moffit (Willie) – Mr. Willie Moffit is Angeline Moffit's husband and Honey's father. Like his wife, he doesn't have any kin: he was an illegitimate child unrecognized by his father and abandoned by his mother. His life is so hard that he resorts to stealing chickens and is shot for his theft. He tolerates Cussy Mary's presence in his home because she can read articles to him that are still too complicated for Angeline's literacy level (he himself is completely illiterate), but he is visibly uncomfortable because of her skin color. When she tries to help Angeline nurse him after his gunshot wound, he fears that she will somehow contaminate or infect him with her blueness. Yet, it's eventually revealed that Mr. Moffit himself carries the recessive gene for blue skin, as his daughter Honey is born with blue skin. Mr. Moffit hangs himself upon discovering this.

Queenie Johnson – Queenie Johnson is the only Black Pack Horse librarian. Like Cussy Mary, she had to get the job from the regional office, since she faces racism and bigotry from library supervisors Eula Foster and Harriet Hardin. Afraid to be "contaminated" by Queenie's race, Harriet leaves Cussy Mary to train her, and the two outsider women become friends. Queenie dreams of a better life for herself and her three sons, and she ultimately moves to Philadelphia, where she goes to school for a librarian degree.

Harriet Hardin – Harriet Hardin is the assistant supervisor of the Troublesome Creek Pack Horse library project, working under Eula Foster. Although she loves books and reading, she is a cruel, harsh bigot who treats both Cussy Mary and Queenie Johnson poorly. She is a religious zealot who refuses to listen to jazz music because it is "heathen," and she subscribes to the extreme views of Vester Frazier that people who are different are inferior and dangerous, if not outright evil. She's also a hypocrite: although she believes that Cussy's blue skin is an indication of inbreeding, she herself is sweet on her own cousin.

Sheriff Davies Kimbo – Sheriff Davies Kimbo is the lawman of Troublesome Creek. He tolerates Cussy Mary Carter and her Pa, despite his feelings that they are inferior because of their blue skin, because Pa is a good miner and stands up for the rights of the white miners in town. He's also supportive of the Pack Horse library project. He is related by marriage to Vester Frazier, and although the two men have a bad relationship, he still leads the search when Vester goes missing. With Harriet Hardin, Sheriff Kimbo reveals himself to be an inveterate racist and bigot when he arrests Jackson Lovett for breaking the anti-miscegenation laws by marrying Cussy.

Vester Frazier – Vester Frazier is a local pastor the Troublesome Creek area who is related to both Charlie Frazier (Cussy Mary's short-lived husband) and Sheriff Davies Kimbo. His followers include Harriet Hardin. Vester has a reputation in the community for his extreme religious views, particularly that anyone who is different—whether because they have blue skin, or are a little person, or happen to have been born triplets—is bad, demonic, and must be removed from the community. His baptisms of these people are traumatic, if not fatal. After Charlie Frazier's death, Vester stalks Cussy Mary on her route, intending to "save" her by raping and torturing her until the devil releases his hold on her.

Doc – Doc is the well-respected physician of Troublesome Creek. He has long been fascinated with the Carter family; after Cussy Mary Carter's mother died, he showed up at the family home to ask if he could take samples from her corpse. Eventually, he's able to blackmail Cussy Mary into participating in his medical research into her condition, and he discovers that she can be "cured" with a daily dose of a medicine that turns her skin white. Although he works with a Black colleague on Cussy's case (Dr. Randall Mills), stands up for Cussy's whiteness when she and Jackson Lovett are accused of breaking anti-miscegenation laws, and takes care of Jackson after his beating, Doc prefers Cussy white, demonstrating his own inherent racism and bigotry. During the time he's conducting his research and caring for her, he's kind and solicitous, giving her generous gifts of food and other luxuries. But when she stops taking the drug, he loses interest in her.

Winnie Parker – Winnie Parker teaches at the mountain school outside of Troublesome Creek. Her husband left the area to find work in Detroit, and she is waiting to be reunited with him.

She is a friend of Cussy Mary Carter's and has the distinction of being the only person who visited Cussy while she recuperated from her brief, violent marriage to Charlie Frazier. Like Angeline and Miss Loretta Adams, she doesn't seem to be bothered by Cussy's blue skin.

Henry Marshall – Henry Marshall is Winnie Parker's star student at the mountain school. He's hungry for knowledge and books, and he wins the school's spelling bee. He's also generous—he shares his prize with Cussy Mary Carter—and loving towards his large family of siblings. Henry wants to grow up to be a Pack Horse librarian himself, although his family's extreme poverty means that he suffers from extreme malnutrition and pellagra as a result.

Devil John – Devil John Smith is a local moonshiner who lives with his wife, Martha Hannah, and their pack of children in the mountains around Troublesome Creek. Although he complains to Cussy Mary Carter that her books distract his family from their chores and responsibilities, he has a soft spot for reading and can be convinced to continue to accept library materials that are useful. He also seems to be keeping a protective eye on Cussy Mary while she rides along her route, and he stands up for her when she and Jackson Lovett run afoul of the anti-miscegenation laws.

Miss Loretta Adams – Miss Loretta Adams is one of Cussy Mary Carter's library patrons. She's old and nearly blind, although she has a reputation as being one of the best seamstresses in the area. She appreciates Cussy Mary's visits but doesn't want library books; the only thing she wants to hear or read is the Bible. When Cussy Mary adopts Honey, Loretta babysits the child during the week so that Cussy can continue to work her route. Like Angeline Moffit and Winnie Parker, Loretta loves Cussy and doesn't care about the color of her skin.

R.C. Cole – R.C. Cole is a 17-year-old patron on Cussy Mary Carter's Pack Horse library route. R.C. has followed his family into the business of fire-watching and he lives alone in a tower, keeping an eye out for wildfires. He wants to use the library materials to teach himself enough to be promoted to forest ranger someday. He is in love with Ruth Beck, and he fights for the right to marry her when her father initially refuses his proposal.

Oren Taft – Oren Taft is a middle-aged man who lives in an extremely isolated community, called Tobacco Top, miles outside of Troublesome Creek. Despite the hardship of his and his family's existence, he is a kind and happy man, who takes deep pleasure in food and in his community. He fondly refers to Cussy Mary Carter as his "bonny Picasso," after a painting he saw in one of the library magazines that features a blue-skinned woman. When Queenie Johnson leaves for Philadelphia, Cussy Mary suggests that he take on her route. This provides him a job and income, neither of which he has had for years.

Martha Hannah – Martha Hannah Smith is the wife of Devil John, the moonshiner. She has taught her brood of children how to read using the family bible and the reading materials that Cussy Mary Carter brings to them. Her husband complains to Cussy that Martha Hannah and their children are too interested in reading to pay proper attention to their chores and responsibilities.

Mr. and Mrs. Evans – Mr. and Mrs. Evans are patrons on Cussy Mary Carter's Pack Horse library route. Their son has moved to Nebraska where he is raising cattle, and occasionally Cussy Mary helps read his letters to Mrs. Evans, who is not literate. Although the Evanses are uncomfortable with the blue-skinned Cussy Mary, they appreciate her services as a librarian.

Timmy Flynn – Timmy Flynn is only 11 years old, but he's a faithful patron on Cussy Mary Carter's Pack Horse library route. His mother won't tolerate books from the government coming into her home, so Cussy and Timmy come up with a system that allows her to leave the books safely at the end of the family property.

Charlie Frazier – Charlie Frazier is the only person who Pa can find to marry Cussy Mary Carter, since she is a "Blue" and is therefore reviled in their bigoted community. At 62, he's older than Cussy and her father. He's also filthy, foul, and abusive to his mule (whom Cussy later takes and names **Junia**) and to Cussy. He beats her so severely on their wedding night that he suffers a heart attack and dies.

Eula Foster – Eula Foster is the head supervisor of the Pack Horse library project in Troublesome Creek. She joins Harriet Hardin in segregating Cussy Mary Carter and Queenie Johnson from the rest of the (white) librarians, but she is less harsh and judgmental; after Harriet succeeds in getting Jackson Lovett arrested for breaking the anti-miscegenation laws, Eula seems to realize the error of her bigotry. She becomes kinder to Cussy Mary and removes the "no coloreds" sign from the center's bathroom.

Constance Poole – Constance Poole is the head of the Troublesome Creek Sewing Bee club. She's a snappy, stylish woman who likes to stop by the center to gossip with Eula Foster and Harriet Hardin. She dislikes Cussy Mary Carter and ostracizes her from the community Fourth of July celebration, even though Cussy is at the time white-skinned thanks to a medical intervention.

Birdie – At just 18 years old, Birdie is the youngest Pack Horse librarian. Birdie is married, but her husband has gone to a distant city to find factory work. Although technically the librarians are only supposed to be unmarried, some (like Birdie) claim that they've been abandoned by husbands to support their families while they wait for their men to return.

Aletha – Aletha is Doc's Jamaican housekeeper; she is the only other Black person in Troublesome Creek besides Queenie Johnson and her small family. She displays the same amount of

distrust and bigotry as many of the white residents of the town, however, when she refuses to let Cussy Mary Carter into her former mistress's home because of her blue skin. She has a thick accent that Cussy finds nearly unintelligible.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Honey – Honey is Angeline and Mr. Moffit's daughter. Because they both evidently carry the recessive gene for methemoglobinemia, Honey is born a Blue. This, in addition to Angeline's dying request, inspires Cussy Mary Carter to adopt Honey and raise her as her own daughter.

Howard Moore – Howard Moore is a coal miner who worked with Pa, and who seems to have accepted Pa as a friend, despite Pa's blue skin. He is present when Pa dies, and he brings Pa's body home. Subsequently, he gives Cussy Mary Carter away at her wedding in Pa's place.

Dr. Randall Mills – Dr. Randall Mills is the Black doctor at the hospital in Lexington with whom Doc examines and studies Cussy Mary Carter's medical condition.

Comfort Marshall – Comfort Marshall is the mother of Henry Marshall. She lives in extreme poverty in the hills, and her family is slowly dying of starvation.

Ruth Beck – Ruth Beck begins as R.C. Cole girlfriend and then becomes his wife. She is proud of her husband and lives with him in his fire watchtower.

TERMS

Anti-miscegenation Laws – Anti-miscegenation laws reinforced race-based segregation by prohibiting marriage between people of different races. In the US, most states in the United States of America had anti-miscegenation laws in place by the late 1800s, and they remained in force in some states until 1967, when the Supreme Court ruled that anti-miscegenation laws were unconstitutional in their *Loving v. Virginia* ruling. In 1866 Kentucky, the first anti-miscegenation law, which prohibited marriage between a white person and a person who had any Black ancestry within three generations, was passed. In 1932, this was updated to prohibit any interracial marriages at all. It is likely this is the version **Sheriff Davies Kimbo** uses as grounds to arrest **Jackson Lovett** for marrying **Cussy Mary Carter**.

Company Store – In the 19th and 20th centuries, Company Stores were common fixtures in company towns, which were built and owned by mining companies to house the employees necessary to work mines in isolated and rural areas. The Company Store, owned and operated by the mine company, sold staple foods, clothing, and basic household goods. Company Stores could be—and often were—exploitative. The company would pay its workers in “scrip,” or a special form of

cash that could only be redeemed in the Company Store, then charge inflated prices for the goods there. If workers couldn't afford the necessary items, they would be offered credit, and the company could take money from their wages to pay off their bills. In this way, the Company Store served to send most of the workers' pay right back to the company owners, drastically reducing the workers' standards of living and increasing the owners' wealth.

The Great Depression – The Great Depression was a period of worldwide economic crisis that began in 1929 and lasted until the late 1930s and the beginning of World War II. During the Great Depression, employers cut wages and laid off workers, leading to rising unemployment and poverty. After Franklin D. Roosevelt was inaugurated president in 1933, he spearheaded the New Deal, a set of policies and programs meant to prevent further and future economic disasters and to provide immediate relief for American citizens by creating jobs with the Works Progress Administration, or WPA, and other public works programs.

Methemoglobinemia – Methemoglobinemia is a medical condition where a person's blood is unable to carry the normal amount of oxygen throughout the body, resulting in blue-tinged skin, as well as other symptoms including dizziness, headache, and poor muscle coordination. Usually, methemoglobinemia results from a reaction to foods, chemicals, or medications. But, in rare cases, a recessive gene can cause hereditary methemoglobinemia, as is the case for **Cussy Mary Carter** and **Pa** in *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek*. Their story is based on the “Blue Fugates,” a Kentucky family in whom the recessive gene was so prevalent that generations of family members were born and lived their lives with blue-tinged skin.

Pellagra – Pellagra is a disease caused by insufficient levels of niacin (vitamin B3). Its primary cause is insufficient nutrition; it is most commonly a side effect of malnutrition and starvation. It's characterized by an inflamed skin rash, dementia, and diarrhea. Left untreated it can be fatal.

WPA – The Works Progress Administration, or WPA, was an agency of the United States government created as part of the New Deal during the Great Depression. The WPA provided jobs for the unemployed while simultaneously improving public infrastructure; it had a focus on building roads, public schools, libraries, parks, housing, and airports. It also encompassed many humanities and artistic programs, including the Historical Records Survey (which interviewed former enslaved persons) and the Library Services Project, which established 2300 new library buildings and 53 traveling libraries, including the Kentucky Pack Horse library project.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-

coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



KIND, KINDNESS, AND DISCRIMINATION

The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek follows 19-year-old Cussy Mary Carter, a Pack Horse librarian in rural Kentucky in the 1930s. She and

her Pa are the last members of their “kind,” a family with a rare genetic blood disorder that tinges their skin blue. Cussy faces discrimination and abuse for her blue skin. Her place and time are deeply segregated; she and her colleague, Queenie Johnson, are labeled “colored” and treated poorly by some because of it. Their supervisors, Harriet and Eula, have a “no coloreds” sign on the bathroom, avoid physical contact with them, and insult their intelligence. And Cussy faces more discrimination. Only desperate men can be lured to court her, and her short-lived first husband, Charlie Frazier, spends their wedding night beating her and calling her a “blue devil.” Harriet calls her an “inbred” and a “pig.”

When Doc discovers a medicine that will turn Cussy’s skin white, she thinks she will finally be accepted in Troublesome Creek. But when she tries to attend the town’s Fourth of July celebration, she learns that, although her difference is only skin deep, discrimination runs deeper. After all, most people in the community discriminate against Mr. Moffit for being a chicken thief, even though he is white (and he turned to theft out of desperation). But although Cussy may be the last of her kind, her kindness—her ability to treat people with help and sympathy no matter what—shows the way beyond discrimination. People who can see Cussy as a fellow human being—like Angeline, who is just as lonely and isolated as Cussy; Miss Loretta, who is nearly blind but who can feel Cussy’s fine heart; and Jackson Lovett, for whom books have also opened a larger world—appreciate her for who she is, not caring about the color of her skin. Cussy even treats Harriet with kindness, finding a way to relate to the cruel woman through their shared love of **books**. Kindness can’t erase discrimination; when Cussy and Jackson marry, he is promptly arrested by the Sheriff for breaking the anti-miscegenation laws that prohibit marriages between white and “colored” people. Yet, it points the way towards a kinder future world, where people will be judged by their hearts, not the color of their skins.



THE POWER OF BOOKS

Cussy Mary Carter, the Book Woman of *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek*, is a 19-year-old Pack Horse librarian. The Pack Horse library program,

funded and administered by the WPA, brought books to extremely rural and impoverished Kentuckians. In providing a window into the lives of Cussy and her patrons, the novel

celebrates the power of books and reading to improve people’s lives, expand their minds, and help them make sense of the world around them. Not everyone is convinced that the books are a good thing. As Pa reminds Cussy early on, books can’t put the food that most people desperately need on their tables. There is also lingering suspicion about the potentially “dirty” content of some of the books. Yet, most of Cussy’s patrons are indeed hungry for what she brings them. Angeline is proud of her growing reading skills, and R. C. Cole plans to use what he learns in his library loans to work up to a job as a forest ranger. There are a few exceptions: Timmy Flynn’s mother refuses the books and Devil John complains that his wife and children are skipping their chores to read. But when Cussy figures out the correct books to win each over (a helpful collection of recipes, home remedies, and mountain wisdom for Mrs. Flynn; Boy Scout books with hunting and fishing tips for Devil John), they both become dedicated patrons and stalwart friends. And the books help to make sense of the sometimes-difficult lives Cussy and her patrons live. Henry faces his untimely death bravely through the idea of Peter Pan, the boy who never grew up, and Cussy copes with her father’s matchmaking attempts through fairy tales. And books allow their readers to imagine other worlds, from the somewhat familiar experiences of peasant farmers in Pearl S. Buck’s [The Good Earth](#) to the futuristic world of George Orwell’s [Brave New World](#). This is especially important for Cussy’s patrons, who mostly lack the money and time to travel even as far as Lexington. In all these ways, the books are a shining light for people who live in dark times and hard places.



HARDSHIP AND HUMANITY

The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek is set in extremely rural Kentucky during the final years of the Great Depression. The lives of Cussy Mary

Carter and most of the patrons on her Pack Horse library route are characterized by extreme poverty, need, and hardship. The area’s primary employers are the WPA, which requires workers to take a Paupers’ Oath and prove their poverty, and the mine Company, which dehumanizes its labor force, allows dangerous working conditions, and overcharges everyone for goods at the Company Store until it’s exhausted the coal seam and moves on to another town. Most people scratch out a subsistence living from the hard, rugged landscape, growing small gardens and hunting for game, like Angeline and Pa, or foraging for wild plants like Cussy and Comfort Marshall. Poor mountainfolk can’t afford to have Doc tend their wounds, safely deliver their babies, or treat their illnesses. And even those who are relatively well off, like Doc and Jackson Lovett, have been touched by pain and loss: Doc’s wife passed a few years before the events in the book, and Jackson lost his entire family to illness and alcoholism when he was a child. Yet despite the grinding poverty of their hardscrabble lives, the people who live

in and around Troublesome Creek share a strong sense of humanity. They are generous and they try to help each other out. Angeline and Jackson always have a treat for Cussy Mary's mule, **Junia**; Cussy and Queenie Johnson share food when their library routes cross; when one miner dies, the rest chip in to pay for his coffin and make sure that he is buried properly. In this way, the book shows the irrepressible human spirit and celebrates the courage and generosity of the kinds of people who lived—and suffered—through the hard time of the historical period it depicts.



CHANGE AND MODERNIZATION

The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek is set at a time when many things were changing in America.

Cussy Mary and her patrons are aware that they live in a time of technological and scientific revolution. Patrons want *Popular Mechanics* magazines to read about new equipment and farming practices; women are trading their mountain home remedies for the latest cures described in *Woman's Home Companion*. Yet, their lives don't look very modern. Most people in and around Troublesome ride horses or mules and use wagons. No one has electricity or running water in their homes. Cussy and Angeline know what an airplane is, but neither of them can imagine being in one; Cussy can barely bring herself to get into Doc's car. When she sees Lexington for the first time, she's surprised by the noise and smell of all the cars on the road. Some people, like Vester Frazier, want to cling to their old-fashioned and superstitious ways. Although Cussy's blue skin is a genetic condition which can be treated by modern medicine, he persists in his belief that it's a sign of the Devil. Modern progress in the novel is represented by the books, the government project that distributes them, and a shift from superstition and discrimination towards science and acceptance. While many people have doubts about this progress, those who are unwilling to embrace change (or at least the possibility of it) are increasingly sidelined. Vester Frazier is killed; Cussy Mary and Jackson Lovett defy the segregationist opinions of the Sheriff and Harriet; the WPA builds a new school to educate more of the local children. Change will come whether people are ready for it or not, the book points out, and those that are the most open-minded will be the best positioned to benefit from it when it does.



AUTONOMY AND INTERDEPENDENCE

The people who populate the rural Kentucky mountainsides in *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek* must be fiercely independent to eke an

existence from the harsh environment and to survive the hardships of the Great Depression. Autonomy—being in charge of one's life and oneself—is highly valued in this community. Miss Loretta lives alone despite being nearly blind (although

she accepts Cussy Mary's companionship and help once a week); Devil John refuses to send his kids to school; and R. C. Cole takes his life into his hands to fight for the right to marry his girlfriend, Ruth. The people in and around Troublesome Creek shun anything they think compromises their autonomy. Some refuse Cussy's **books**, distrusting anything provided by the federal government; others refuse to work for the WPA because they think that if a person can't make do on their own, they should go without rather than accept charity. Cussy herself frequently refuses the **food** people offer her, and she can make her own gifts of food only under the cover of darkness or with subterfuge.

Yet, autonomy isn't isolation. The community at Tobacco Top demonstrates the importance of relying on others, and when Oren Taft presents Cussy with a gift of ramps (wild onions), it shows how interdependence—the mutual reliance of people in a community—can enrich everyone. In another example, the mine workers band together in a union to fight for their safety and rights. And even the fiercely independent thinker Jackson Lovett has a network of relationships, both business and personal, in the community. Thus, while autonomy, self-determination, and the ability to take care of oneself are highly prized in this world, the book also demonstrates the ways in which even the most independent people still need mutually supportive relationships to thrive.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



BOOKS

In *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek*, books represent the capacity of people to grow and improve. Cussy Mary Carter makes her living bringing books and other reading materials to patrons in the hills and hollows outside of the remote rural town of Troublesome Creek, Kentucky. Cussy's patrons are very poor in terms of worldly goods, but they're often very rich in terms of good characteristics like generosity, kindness, loyalty, and patience. Their hunger for books represents the richness of their inner lives and highlights how books can help people grow and become better versions of themselves. When Cussy convinces reluctant patrons to accept loans (including Devil John Smith and Timmy Flynn's mother), she uncovers their internal capacity for growth and change. Other characters in the novel already realize this power in books. For example, Jackson Lovett and Cussy Mary discuss Pearl S. Buck's book, [The Good Earth](#), at some length. Although the book is set in rural China, Cussy Mary and Jackson recognize the universal struggle for survival in which the book's characters are engaged and see the

similarities between the book and their own lives. Books can also provide solace in times of pain and trauma, as when Cussy Mary sits and reads *Peter and Wendy*—the story of Peter Pan, the boy who never grew up—to her youngest patron, Henry Marshall, as he lies dying of malnutrition. At one point early in the novel, Cussy tries to use a shared love of books and reading to forge a connection with Harriet Hardin, the bigoted and cruel assistant supervisor of the Pack Horse Library project. Harriet refuses Cussy’s kindness, showing the limits of books. They can provide an avenue for the improvement of one’s character, or one’s life—but only if people want to be improved.



FOOD

Whenever food appears in *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek*, it shows the capacity of people to be generous and kind to one other and to create community despite the hardest circumstances. The people who live in and around Troublesome Creek near the end of the Great Depression lead desperate, hardscrabble lives. The largest employer is the coal company, which treats its workers poorly and doesn’t pay well. Some of the mountainfolk are moonshiners, like Devil John, while others try to subsist on what they can grow and hunt themselves, like Angeline and Mr. Moffit. Only a few seem to be doing well for themselves, like Jackson Lovett with his lovely farm and his successful timbering business. Many other people work for the WPA and eke out a meager existence by supplementing their wages with foraged food and home gardens. Nevertheless, many of Cussy Mary Carter’s patrons offer her and her mule, **Junia**, food when she visits their homes. Jackson has apples for woman and beast; Angeline offers Junia stringy carrots; Miss Loretta Adams tries to feed Cussy Mary molasses cake; Oren Taft gives her a bag of wild onions. Most touchingly, Henry Marshall saves the precious Lifesaver candy he won in his school’s spelling bee and gives it to Cussy Mary, even though he himself is dying of starvation. Whenever someone offers food to another person, they are implicitly welcoming that person into their homes and into relationships. Conversely, when the sewing bee ladies refuse Cussy Mary’s homemade Bible Cake and the Fourth of July celebration, they demonstrate their hard-hearted and bigoted refusal to see Cussy as a fellow human being.



JUNIA

Junia the mule has two symbolic functions in *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek*. The relationship between Junia and Cussy Mary Carter shows how autonomous individuals can still be interdependent; and, along with her mistress, Junia is responsible for carrying the hope of books throughout the land. Junia originally belonged to Charlie Frazier; after his death, Cussy Mary claimed the mule, named her, and nursed her back to health, even though Pa was

doubtful that the mule would have much value. In return, Junia protects Cussy from people (mostly men) and the dangers of the trail. When Vester Frazier stalks Cussy in the woods, Junia runs him off, and when he creeps into the Carter property late at night with the intent of raping and murdering Cussy, Junia breaks free from her stall and tramples him. Mules are, by nature, stubborn and independent creatures, and throughout the book, Cussy proves to be stubborn and independent, too. But she and Junia need and rely on each other for safety, companionship, and affection in a world that is often cruel and harsh. Their relationship shows how valuable independence is, but how important it is to have others to rely on in times of need.

Usually, Junia serves as Cussy’s protector, but sometimes the mule seems to stand as a sort of double for her owner. People consider Cussy and Junia worthless because of their external appearance (Cussy because her skin is blue, and Junia because she’s old). The way that people treat Junia predicts whether they are kind or cruel towards Cussy; and both are an integral part of the Pack Horse Library’s project in and around Troublesome Creek. Cussy and Junia are partners in bringing the hope and enlightenment of **books** to the poorest and most remote of Kentuckians, so it’s fitting that Cussy Mary named the mule “Junia,” after the only female apostle. In the Christian Bible, the apostles are the people charged with bringing the “good word” (the message of Christianity) to people. Cussy and Junia are a sort of apostles for literacy and the forces of modernization and progress with the library project.



QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Sourcebooks Landmark edition of *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek* published in 2019.

Chapter 1 Quotes

●● A lot of people were leery of our looks. Though with Pa working the coal, his mostly pale-blue skin didn’t bother folks as much when all miners came out of the hole looking the same. But I didn’t have coal to disguise me in black or white Kentucky. Didn’t have myself an escape until I’d gotten the precious book route. In those old dark-treed pockets, my young patrons would glimpse me riding my packhorse, toting a pannier full of books, and they’d light a smile and call out “Yonder comes Book Woman...Book Woman’s here!” And I’d forget all about my peculiarity, and why I had it, and what it meant for me.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter (speaker), Pa (Elijah Carter)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 8


Explanation and Analysis


Mary Cussy Carter and her Pa live a hardscrabble life in rural eastern Kentucky in the 1930s. Although almost everyone in the area leads a hardscrabble existence due to the difficult mountains, the power of the coal company, and the persistence of the Great Depression, Pa and Cussy face an additional layer of hardship because they both have a genetic condition that turns their skin blue. People in Troublesome Creek are suspicious or fearful of the “Blue” Carters based on nothing more than the color of their skin. Nevertheless, as this passage demonstrates, neither Pa nor Cussy are totally isolated: Pa’s fellow coal miners him because he works just as hard as they do and faces the same dangers. And Cussy’s Pack Horse Library project patrons love her. They’re so hungry for books they don’t care about her skin color, showing the power books have to forge connections between people. Finally, this passage clearly shows the delight and pride Cussy takes in her job, not just because she’s an avid reader and believer in the power of books herself, but also because it grants her a degree of autonomy and freedom that she greatly desires and which the book shows isn’t available to most other women in the area.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☝☝ The brisk morning nipped at my face, and I buried my chin deeper into Pa’s oilskin coat and nudged the mule ahead to the home of our first library patron. We crossed over into the fog-soaked creek before sunrise, the dark waters biting at the beast’s ankles, a willingness to hurry pricking Junia’s long ears forward. Late April winds tangled into the sharp, leafy teeth of sourwoods, teasing, combing her short gray mane. Beyond the creek, hills unfolded, and tender green buds of heart-shaped beetleweed and running ivy pushed up from rotted forest graves and ancient knobby roots, climbed through the cider-brown patches of winter leaves, spilling forth from fertile earth.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter (speaker), Pa (Elijah Carter), Charlie Frazier

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Cussy Mary was briefly married to a man who beat her mercilessly and then thankfully died in short order. After she recovers from her injuries, she resumes her library route, and this passage describes her ride through the mountains on her first day back. Notably, she’s riding Junia, a mule whom she inherited from her dead husband. Although Pa thinks the mule is too ornery to be useful, Cussy has given the animal a second chance, mirroring her own second chance at an independent and fulfilling life. Junia is both Cussy’s protector and also Cussy’s mirror, and so Cussy feels that Junia’s attitude reflects her own excitement to see her patrons again.

This passage also dwells in luscious detail on the abundance of beauty in the eastern Kentucky foothills and mountains. The forest is bursting with life and the new growth of spring (again mirroring Junia’s and Cussy’s chance at a new beginning). Despite the hardship and danger of life in these hills, there is also great beauty and great opportunity for new and beautiful things to blossom and grow. Finally, this passage helps readers to imagine the truly incredible distances and difficult terrain that separated the patrons who benefitted from the real-life Pack Horse Library project, most of whom wouldn’t have had many opportunities to borrow books in any other way.


Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ “Sorry Bluet. It got busted some when Willie had hisself a fit and threw it outside. I’m glad you’re back ’cause he lit at me good for not being able to read him his own loan. Said a colored shouldn’t be able to read better than me. Real sorry...” She latched on to my hand and laid the apology with a firm grip. I looked down at us bound together like that, tried to draw back, but Angeline squeezed tighter and whispered, “Hain’t no harm. Our hands don’t care they’re different colors. Feels nice jus’ the same, huh?”

It did. But Mr. Moffit didn’t like folks who weren’t his color. He used to demand that I stay put in the yard.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter , Angeline Moffit (speaker), Mr. Moffit (Willie)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

The first patron on Cussy Mary's Monday morning route is Angeline Moffit, a teenaged housewife whom Cussy is teaching to read. In this passage, Angeline apologizes for the way her husband, Mr. Moffit, damaged one of the library books. Despite the precious value of books in the mountains, Mr. Moffit doesn't seem to treat the family's loans as valuable objects, suggesting that he's incapable of seeing the value in other things, like Cussy Mary herself (whom he despises for being "colored" on account of her Blue skin), or life itself (since his existence is so hard). Nevertheless, even Mr. Moffit does find something of value in the library's loans, and he is so hungry for the news of the outside world that he permits Cussy to come into his home and read to him—even if he would prefer that his wife become literate enough to avoid the necessity of tolerating Cussy's presence.

This passage also contrasts Mr. Moffit's prejudiced and discriminatory attitude—which seems to be a typical reaction toward Cussy—with Angeline's sweet kindness. Through Mr. Moffit's values, this passage firmly establishes Cussy's identity as a so-called "colored" (non-white) person. However, it is by no means the only way people react to her. Angeline, in contrast to her husband, sees Cussy for who she is: a kind, intelligent, and important human being in her own right. She doesn't care about the color of Cussy's skin, and her willingness to touch Cussy shows how foolish other people (who recoil from Cussy's skin as if it's dangerous or contagious) are in their discrimination.



Chapter 5 Quotes

☛☛ Weren't no such spirit, just a man sly-eyeing me. He didn't fool me none with his pasty-white face. Darkly he was, filled to the brim with the blackness inside...

It was preacher man Vester Frazier, my dead husband's cousin ... He'd been coming for me a good while, and more boldly since I'd been left widowed.

He'd done the same to others like me: Michael McKinney, the three-nippled midget who rode his goat cart bare-chested across the hills, a boy with pink eyes and hair the color of a white lamb, the seven-year-old Melungeon girl who had fit that tonic and herbs couldn't quiet...And there were the godless, those who'd never found a church, and a few ungodly others Vester Frazier and his followers thought the devil had given those peculiarities to. The odd markings with no names.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter (speaker), Vester Frazier, Charlie Frazier

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 33-34

Explanation and Analysis


While riding along her library route on her first day back on the job, Pastor Vester Frazier ambushes Cussy Mary in the woods. Vester represents the most bigoted, discriminatory, and violent tendencies in society. He is unwilling or unable to see the humanity in people who look or behave differently from himself, and he believes that he has been appointed by God to choose who is worthy of life or death. Instead of seeing a little girl with epilepsy, Vester believes that the Melungeon child is possessed by a demon. This is a witchcraft allegation in a time where science can explain many of the behaviors or characteristics he believes indicate possession. His prejudices thus recall old, outdated, and superstitious ways of looking at the world. In this way, Vester represents all the mountainfolk who are suspicious of change and modernization. These characters cling to the old ways because they are familiar and tend to give power and privilege to those who already have it.

It's also important to note the way that Cussy characterizes Vester Frazier here: although he has white skin, he is filled with "blackness." White, in this reading, is associated with things that are good and just, while blackness represents evil and badness. Although Cussy is all too familiar with the pain and trauma of discrimination on account of skin color, in these passage, she both participates in and reinforces the racialized hierarchies that were used to repress non-white people during much of the United States' history.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☛☛ Lovett's Ridge was a spectacle, and soon I relaxed a little and soaked it up. Layers of dark-blue mountains stacked in the distance, at every turn their cuts rolling, deepening, then lightening to shades of blue-greens from the day's passing clouds. The air blew fresh and breezy. Scents of apple blossoms lifted from a nearby tree, and honeysuckle clung to a crumbling split-rail fence as swallowtails and fat-legged bees flitted above the old timbers and dipped for nectar.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter (speaker), Jackson Lovett, Vester Frazier

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

After narrowly escaping Vester Frazier's bigoted, cruel, and violent attack, Cussy Mary rides to the top of the mountain where her newest library patron, Jackson Lovett, lives. The contrast between the frightening, dark, and wooded hollow where Vester waited for Cussy and the light, open, beautiful view from the ridge couldn't be stronger. Cussy Mary directly associated Vester with darkness and ignorance; by contrast, the view from Lovett's Ridge suggests that its owner will be enlightened and kind. This passage thus introduces an important character and foreshadows the relationship he will have with Cussy Mary. If Vester Frazier represents Cussy's vulnerability, then Jackson will come to represent safety and refuge for her.



This passage also recalls Cussy's description of the mountains from the beginning of her ride on this day in Chapter 3. Despite the hardships and ignorance that eastern Kentucky holds in its hollows, it also has a great deal of fierce and admirable beauty. The fact that Cussy can see this beauty despite her knowledge of the dangers suggests the power of humanity to overcome hardship. Cussy didn't let Vester scare her from completing her job, demonstrating her own courage and her strong independent streak. When she ventures into the beauty of Lovett's Ridge, she receives the message that she does belong in this world and in this place, even if ignorant fools like Vester think otherwise.


Chapter 7 Quotes

☛☛ Mountainfolk looked forward to this section filled with the latest home remedies from magazine and to the health pamphlets the government sent in. It made me happy that a lot of folks, especially the elders, insisted on sharing their own too.

Someone had written instructions for using a lodestone, advised readers to wear the mineral round their necks to attract money, love, and luck. Beneath that was a note from the old midwife Emma McCain, instructing women to find the small stone from the knee of an old cock and hold it during birth to protect the babe ... Underneath the amulet's instructions, Emma had penned a special reminder written to husbands: *Wear a cock stone to excite and make your wife more agreeable.*

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 51-52

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Cussy Mary describes the scrapbooks she made to share with her patrons. The passage provides a wealth of historical detail, since the real-life Pack Horse librarians did indeed make this kind of scrapbook to augment their library collections. Cussy's scrapbook, which combines the most up-to-date medical knowledge (in the government's health pamphlets) with the folk medicine of the hills (the midwife's cock stone prescription), shows the power of books to connect people across generations, to build up the community, and to teach people the things that will make their lives safer, better, and happier.

The juxtaposition of the government pamphlets with the midwife's wisdom also suggests how slowly things are changing in this corner of the world. In the 1930s, many new and important scientific and technological advances were happening, but due to both distance and distrust, people in places like eastern Kentucky were slow to benefit from them. By creating scrapbooks that will appear trustworthy to her patrons (because they include much of the received folk wisdom people are used to) but that will also give them necessary and helpful information, Cussy (and the Pack Horse project generally) carry enlightenment to the dark hills and hollows of rural Kentucky and contribute directly to improving people's lives.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☛☛ I looked down, knowing my place, knowing I was the one they were really afraid of, detested the most.

It was difficult enough being colored, much less being my odd, ugly color and the last of my kind. Somehow, folks like Harriett and Eula made it worse, made sure their color, any color was better than mine. I was an affliction on their kind and mankind. And I was to stay put, and exactly where they wanted to keep me put. Beneath them. Always and alone.

"You know the rules. Blues and Coloreds outside," Eula said, shaking her head, darting her nervous eyes between Queenie and me. "We can't have you using the indoor facilities. We wouldn't want to chance passing on a ... Well, we just can't have it!"

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter , Eula Foster (speaker), Queenie Johnson

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

At the Pack Horse Library center in Troublesome Creek for

her monthly shift, Cussy Mary has discovered that her mule accidentally bit another librarian, Queenie Johnson. Cussy wants to help Queenie wash out the bite, but Eula prevents them from using the bathroom, since they are both “colored.” This passage starkly lays out how Harriett and Eula’s prejudice against Cussy makes Cussy’s shifts at the library center miserable. Harriett and Eula are determined to keep so-called “colored” people like Queenie and Cussy in their place. They don’t see these women as human beings, only registering the color of their skin. And all their judgments (of Queenie and Cussy’s character, intelligence, and worthiness) proceed from the basic understanding that people who aren’t white are inferior. The fact that there isn’t any good reason for their hatred and discrimination—Eula can’t explain why it would be bad for them to use the bathroom—doesn’t seem to make Eula or Harriett question their behavior.

This passage is also one of several points at which Cussy Mary directly compares the discrimination she faces with the discrimination that Black people face. In fact, Cussy experiences more discrimination than the Black community. The book makes a strong argument against discrimination and racism. But the fact that the protagonist is, in fact, a white person (of European ancestry) despite her blue skin, complicates this message.

Chapter 10 Quotes


☛☛ The *Companion* was a popular request. Mountain women were snatching up new cures and remedies from the magazine, abandoning their old ways of healing.

[...]

“Be obliged to git one. Nester Rylie’s been reading it and she told me in passing last year, she ain’t rubbed groundhog brains on her babies’ sore teeth or needed to use the hen innards on the gums of her teething ones since. And after she’d read about a good paste recipe that cured thrush, Nester said, none of her nine youn’uns ain’t ever had to drink water from a stranger’s shoe again to get the healing.”

Related Characters: Martha Hannah (speaker), Cussy Mary Carter, Vester Frazier

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

Martha Hannah Smith, a mountain woman who is married to a local moonshiner and is raising a troupe of children in the hinterlands, wants Pack Horse librarian Cussy Mary to bring her a *Woman’s Home Companion* magazine as soon as possible. In this passage, she explains why: the home remedies in the *Companion* are vastly superior to much of the folk medicine that Martha Hannah and others continue to practice in their rural corner of eastern Kentucky. Some of the people in Troublesome Creek are suspicious of “government” books (so called because the program is administered by the United States government through the WPA) because they fear that outsiders want to come and change their way of life. But most of Cussy’s patrons understand that the information they receive from magazines and the government’s health pamphlets is meant to improve their lives. Those who refuse, like Vester Frazier or mothers who smear chicken guts on their children’s gums, are missing out and making their own lives harder.

The specific folk remedies that Martha Hannah mentions seem to show how primitive life can be in the Kentucky mountains—people’s remedies are largely superstitious. But these folk remedies also emphasize the harshness of life in the area, where few people have access to doctors or the modern drugs that could treat their pain and illnesses. Nevertheless, despite these hardships, neighbors demonstrate their humanity by helping and educating each other, and librarians like Cussy Mary bring otherwise inaccessibly distant new knowledge to them.

☛☛ I held the library book a moment and then said, “Miss Loretta, this is a Doctor Dolittle book, and I think you might like it some—”

Loretta held up a shushing hand and shook her head.

“Nonsense, child. And what I done told you before: I ain’t letting you read me them government books.”

“But—”

“Them’s books about rubbish and devilish deeds. Foolishness. Take it on back.”


“Yes, ma’am,” I said, wishing she’d let me read her one from the library once in a while instead of her Bible.

Every time I brought one I thought she might take a liking to, she’d sour and rile on. “Them city books ain’t fitting for my kind—ain’t got a lick of sense in them pages for us hillfolk. Nothing but foolish babble an’ prattle.”

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter, Miss Loretta

Adams (speaker), Vester Frazier, Martha Hannah

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

After visiting Martha Hannah Smith, Cussy Mary rides to her final Monday patron, elderly but independent Miss Loretta Adams. Like Cussy Mary herself, Miss Loretta showcases the fierce autonomy and independence of most of the mountain folk around Troublesome Creek. She's nearly blind, but she still lives on her own and makes a small living by sewing clothing and quilts for neighbors. Her independent thinking is on display in this passage as well—she refuses to abandon her principles for Cussy, despite her respect and affection for the younger woman.

Like Cussy Mary, Miss Loretta acknowledges the power of books to influence people. But because of this, the only book she chooses to read (or have read to her, thanks to her failing eyesight) is the Bible. Miss Loretta is just as suspicious of the so-called “government books” as some of the other mountainfolk. But she also demonstrates that it's possible to have an independent opinion without forcing other people to agree with you. Vester mistrusts Cussy's library books and wants to put a stop to her work; Miss Loretta mistrusts them but doesn't seem to have any strong feeling about the decisions others make on their reading materials. Not everyone embraces change and modernization at the same rate. But not all people who are suspicious of change are completely backward-looking.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter (speaker), Pa (Elijah Carter), Charlie Frazier

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of a long day on her route with the Pack Horse Library project, Cussy Mary gratefully retreats to the comfort of her bed, a fancy store-bought mattress that Pa gave her when she was recovering from Charlie Frazier's harsh beating. It seems that Pa bought the mattress in part to soften his feeling of guilt over forcing Cussy into a marriage that she didn't want and that gave her nothing but broken bones and damaged eardrums. But his gift also points to the power of humanity and human kindness in the face of enormous suffering and hardship. Because he bought the mattress at an exorbitant price from the Company Store, the mattress also points to the contrast between the humanity people can show each other and the inhumane way the coal company treats everyone.

The coal company makes huge profits by taking advantage of the miners. As the primary local industry, they can set wages, and then they can redirect most of the money they allegedly pay the miners back into the company by paying in company scrip. Miners can redeem these tokens at the Company Store, where the Company sets the (often inflated) price of goods. The people of Troublesome Creek place a high value on autonomy, independence, and self-reliance, so anything that threatens their ability to take care of themselves is automatically dangerous. And the mine company is the most dangerous threat of all.

Chapter 11 Quotes



●● Pa believed the mattress advertisement that promised to *soothe hurt bones and give better rest* would help me heal faster. Pa had credit to spend at the Company store that he used for the purchase, saying he'd had a little extra that month.

But Pa didn't have as much as two nickels to rub together [...] The Company didn't like for the Kentucky man to feel a dollar in his pocket, and they'd pay the miners mostly in Company scrip—credit that could be used only at the Company store—to make sure of just that. The Company [...] [kept] the families good 'n' indebted to them, insisting to any that might raise a brow, *it serves to smarten the miners, give the coal man a vicissitude from improper business standards, and educates them on sound business practices, on acquiring sound credit.*

●● Pa and I had seen our share of hunger. We only had the berries, morels, squirrels, rabbits, and other life we'd pinched from the forest. Sometimes Pa'd trade the miners his kills for other foods we couldn't get, like eggs, corn, and fruit. Rarely could we afford the expensive staples at the Company store. The Company scrip and my paycheck helped us to stay afloat a little, despite Pa using most of it to buy up the store medicines rather than a doctor's stronger ones to fight his lung illness. Still, he stayed in debt purchasing newfangled medicines, the next sure-fix potion that the store would bring in. Like a small bandage, the store-bought medicine would hide his sickness for a little bit, so that he could go back down into the mine and make more money for newer cures the Company kept stocking and pushing on the miners.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter (speaker), Pa

(Elijah Carter), Henry Marshall

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 93-94

Explanation and Analysis

As Cussy Mary climbs into bed on her expensive, store-bought mattress, she can't help but think about the privation and suffering of others, especially Henry Marshall, the little boy at the school who made her a present of the lifesaver he won in the spelling bee. Thanks to the Great Depression and the challenges of living in the rural eastern Kentucky mountains, pretty much everyone in and around Troublesome Creek understands what it is to go hungry. Most people live a subsistence lifestyle, growing, foraging, or hunting for the food they need to survive from the land. Cussy Mary and Pa don't have a garden or livestock, but they can forage and hunt in the woods, then trade the foods they find there with people who grow corn in their gardens or keep chickens for the eggs.

In part, Cussy Mary and Pa don't have a lot of money to spend on food because they just don't have a lot of money. But a lot of Pa's pay also goes back to the mine company through the Company store, where he's continually buying medicines in hopes of curing the lung disease that he has developed from years of working in the mines. This passage implies that part of the reason Pa buys these so-called "cures" is because they're less expensive than the proper medicines a doctor would prescribe. But this also speaks to the questions of autonomy and control that run through the novel. Pa's attempts to cure himself are another expression of the independent mindset that animates people in these mountains. He takes care of himself because he believes that a real man should be able to say he took care of himself and his needs. But the Company's bad business practices and willingness to abuse its miners undercut Pa's ability to take care of himself.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☝ I'd seen motorcars and coal trucks around town, read about them in books and magazines, but I never imagined I'd come this close to one, let alone ride in one. I stared at the shiny steel-winged lady perched on the nose of it.

Doc must've seen my bewilderment because he grinned and said it weren't nothing more than a radiator ornament called "the flying lady."

[...]

Then he opened the heavy door. "Time is wasting, Bluet. It's just a horse with wheels," he insisted. "A 1932 Plymouth automobile, is all. Get in. You'll find it's a comfortable sedan."

I know'd what it was, but the leap from knowing to actually touching one seemed overwhelming. I looked at Doc and then back to the machine, and pulled out one of Pa's handkerchiefs from my pocket to dab my brow.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter , Doc (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

Having finally secured Cussy Mary's participation in his medical investigations into the Blue Carters, Doc prepares to take her to the hospital in Louisville. They must make the lengthy journey by car. As this passage shows, modernization is slow to come to this corner of Kentucky. Although Cussy is familiar with the idea of an automobile, she never expected to see or ride in one. In part, this is because draft animals are still much more useful in rural, mountainous areas where cars can't go. Doc and Cussy must do the leg of the trip between the Carter place and the town by horse. But, in a larger sense, the car shows Cussy how big and unexplored the world is to her.

This passage also shows the strength of Cussy's brave and steadfast character, even in times of trial and fear. She feels nervous both about getting into the car, and also the medical tests that Doc wants to perform on her. And her fearful reaction to the car foreshadows her experience with the modern technology of the hospital, which will be frightening, painful, and traumatic. In this way, on a deeper level, both the car and the hospital suggest that not all progress is easy or painless. Nevertheless, Cussy dabs her brow and bravely continues, despite her misgivings.

●● It was a life I'd only read about in my books, and my hungry hands touched the glass, trying to touch the stories I'd read.



[...]


I fumbled with the crank, then finally opened the pane and breathed in smells of oil, gas, concrete, and other scents I couldn't name, tasted the peculiar spirit of the place, listened to the unusual buzz, the city's open hymnal.

The soot of the city, its oils and smoke and grit, filled my nose, burning, watering my eyes.

A motorcar hurried past us and honked, startling me. Another answered back, and still another and several more. Shouts, the pound of hammers, and music and loud greetings swirled from every direction. "There's so many voices. How do folks stand it?" I pressed my palms to my ears, swiveling my head to follow it all.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter (speaker), Doc

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

When Doc and Cussy Mary arrive in Louisville after several hours of driving, the city is both more exciting and overwhelming than Cussy was prepared for. In one way, her reaction to the city points to the power of books to expose her to the world that exists beyond her personal experience. The books, magazines, and newspapers she has read have prepared her for the sights and sounds of the city—automobiles, people in fashionable clothing, construction and progress. Books and reading can expand the mind, enlighten the reader, and grow a person's experience far beyond whatever limits their way of life imposes on them.

But this passage also points to the ways in which change and modernization can be both good and bad. There are things that are precious, unique, and admirable about the rural areas of Kentucky. When Cussy talks about the mountains, she invariably focuses on the quietness of the forests, the sublime views of the mountains and the sky, and the overwhelming abundance of plant and animal life. In contrast, the city is sterile and flat. It's filled with sounds and smells, but they're mechanical, unpleasant, and impersonal. Even the interactions between the drivers in the car, honking at each other in presumed impatience instead of taking point to a life that is busy, harried, and impersonal.

Chapter 17 Quotes

●● "I'm sorry the nurses were rough with you, Bluet," he said, "but it was important—very—and we'll learn soon about your family's blood and how we can fix it—fix you, my dear."

I felt a spark of anger slip behind my eyes, prompting a headache. What I wanted most was to be okay as a Blue. I never understood why other people thought my color, any color, needed fixing.

[...]

Fix. Again, the chilling word caught in my throat, and I suddenly wished Mama *had* fixed my birth with some of her bitter herbs. Then I would've never had to suffer this horrid curse of the blueness. Still Doc said it would be wonderful, and I couldn't help but wonder what my and Pa's life would be like if we were *fixed*.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter, Doc (speaker), Queenie Johnson

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek*, Cussy Mary feels deep ambivalence about her identity as a Blue Carter. On the one hand, the isolation, prejudice, and hatred she faces from other people have hurt her deeply, and she has internalized the idea that so-called "colored" skin (her blue skin, Queenie's black skin) is inferior to white skin. On the other hand, she recognizes the superficiality of this kind of discrimination: she lives the same lifestyle, believes in the same religion, and is subject to the same hardships as everyone else in Troublesome Creek. In this passage, Cussy switches between wanting to be accepted as a Blue and wanting to be free of the curse of being a Blue.

Over the course of the book, Cussy Mary comes to reject the prejudiced and discriminatory views of the people in town who look down on others whom they think are fundamentally different because of their skin color. But it's a long process for her. At this point, she still has a long way to go, but it's important to note that she's beginning to openly question why some people think it's not okay to be Black or blue. Her bitter wish that her mother had prevented her from being born into this cruel world also points to her understanding that people will never fully accept her. Even if she is okay with being a Blue, at least some people will always be bigoted and prejudiced. She must stop caring about their opinions.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☞☞ Winnie clasped her hands. “If only we could get more outreach programs up here. If only they could send a block of cheese with every book, a loaf of bread.” She tilted her head to the sky as if telling it to God.


I wished it too. Their hunger for books could teach them of a better life free of the hunger, but without food they’d never live long enough to have the strength to find it.

“Just one damn block of cheese,” Winnie scratched out in a whisper.

I thought of the cheese Doc promised. If I could bargain with him for more food, I could give it to the schoolchildren.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter , Winnie Parker (speaker), Pa (Elijah Carter), Doc, Henry Marshall

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

Cussy Mary brings books to the schoolhouse, but as time goes on, the effects of hunger and malnutrition become increasingly evident among the children, especially Henry Marshall. It’s a mark of Cussy’s good character and her kindness that in this moment she realizes that she can turn the trauma and discomfort of Doc’s medical experiments on her into something good by sharing the food he gives her with those, like the children, who need it more. In this plan, Cussy is also meeting hardship with humanity, supporting the book’s assertions that kindness and humanity can alleviate hardship and suffering. The government is trying to help people through the Great Depression with programs like the WPA and the Pack Horse Library. But it can’t fix all the problems in the world, it can’t provide food for all the hungry children. Cussy Mary and other generous souls fill that gap to provide what they can.


This passage also shows that Cussy Mary acknowledges the limit of the power of books to improve people’s lives. As Pa pointed out in the beginning, books don’t have the power to put food onto people’s tables. Cussy believes strongly in the power of books to improve lives through education, through their ability to provide hope, and through their ability to help people imagine—and be inspired to create for themselves—better lives. But although reading can inspire people to be good and to do good, it isn’t a cure-all for society’s ills.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☞☞ “I’m sorry, Mr. Smith,” I said, secretly touched they loved the books so dearly. Without the loans, his young’uns couldn’t learn because the moonshiner refused to send them to school. No man, no Kentucky law, could make a hillman do that. Most folks hadn’t even heard it was law. The land had its own decrees, held tight its hard ways of handling harder things. Folks would pack their little ones off to school only if it suited them, and not because of something written somewhere far away by city folks they’d never seen, or would ever see.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter (speaker), Devil John, Miss Loretta Adams, Timmy Flynn

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 150-151

Explanation and Analysis

While riding on her route one day, Cussy Mary is stopped by Devil John Smith, who complains that the books she brings to his wife and children are distracting them from their chores. Cussy is pleased by this demonstration of the power of books, which have captivated the family’s attention, even though there is much to do on a mountain homestead. She’s also all too aware of how important the Pack Horse Library project is in providing the little education that many children get. Although modern laws require all children to attend school, the hills give up their old ways slowly, especially when life is so hard and there’s so much work to be done. Many hands make the task of survival easier. In addition, there’s a strong streak of autonomy and independence in many of the mountainfolk who, like Devil John, will do as they believe best for themselves and their families regardless of what distant “city folk” in the government may say.



This is another moment in the book that shows how important Cussy Mary herself is to the mission of the Pack Horse Library. She has other patrons (Miss Loretta, Timmy Flynn’s mother) who are suspicious of the governmental intrusion into their lives by way of the library loans. But Cussy’s charming personality, friendliness, and careful attention to selecting loans for her patrons’ needs and tastes have a way of overcoming most resistance to the library project.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☛ I had also seen the feminine hygiene advertisements in magazines and newspapers. The pictures of the weeping lady with a dainty hankie to her eyes showed she'd been a *good mother, good housekeeper, good hostess, good cook*, all those things, until 6:00pm.

The feminine wash advertisement scolded the sad lady, insisted the perfect homemaker did one disgraceful thing her husband couldn't forgive by forgetting her smelly lady parts. It warned womenfolk about the dangers of neglecting intimate personal hygiene and reminded them to use the *feminine wash to keep from wrecking a marriage*. A *powerful germicide*, the product promised, and one that removes all kind of powerful things and even stranger things I'd never heard of like "organic matter" [...] It will keep your man happy and is a surety for a happy marriage.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter (speaker), Harriet Hardin, Charlie Frazier, Eula Foster

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

On one of the Thursdays when she's in town working at the library center, Cussy Mary overhears Harriet telling Eula about a recent embarrassing issue she had with itchy private parts. Having seen an ad for the new feminine hygiene product, Lysol, she had her cousin send her a bottle by mail, and it quickly cleared up her issue. Cussy has also seen the Lysol advertisements, which she describes in this passage.

It's very important to understand the history of Lysol as a feminine hygiene product to understand what this passage is suggesting about Harriet. Before birth control became legal in the United States (1965 for married people; 1972 for single people), "feminine hygiene" was often used as a euphemism for abortion and birth control. Lysol's original formula had ingredients that made it an effective means to perform a self-induced abortion, and it was a best seller for this purpose during the Great Depression.



At the beginning of the book, Cussy used a traditional home remedy (tansy tea) to end her pregnancy by Charlie Frazier. Although she doesn't understand the veiled words in the advertisement (in this context, "organic matter" certainly seems to suggest the results of a pregnancy), she's all too aware of the need for women to take their health into their own hands. In this context, Harriet's ordering the Lysol from out of state is just her version of the local autonomy—she's taking care of her health problems herself. It is important to


note that it isn't clear whether "itching" is Harriet's sly way of discussing an unwanted pregnancy; she could be referring to other feminine health complaints, like various infections. In this way, this situation suggests that Harriet might not be as holy as she wants people to believe, and she might be engaging in sexual practices (such as sex outside of marriage) that her society condemns.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☛ For a minute I envied her, wanted to send Junia home, unlace my heavy, tight shoes, and run free with her to escape Frazier, the doc and his medical tests, and everything damning to me—to hunt and fish in the woods like I'd done as a child. To be wilded. Have a wilded heart in this black-treed land full of wilded creatures. There were notches in these hills where a stranger wouldn't tread, dared not venture—the needle-eyed coves and skinny blinds behind rocks, the strangling parts of the blackened-green hills—but Angeline and hillfolk here were wilded and not afraid. And I longed to lift bare feet onto ancient paths and be wilded once again.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter (speaker), Pa (Elijah Carter), Angeline Moffit, Vester Frazier, Doc

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

While riding home from the library center in Troublesome Creek, Cussy Mary and Junia come upon Angeline, who is out hunting for food. Angeline hunts because her family is too poor to buy food, offering a reminder of the harshness of life in the eastern Kentucky mountains and during the Great Depression. Yet, Cussy envies what she sees as Angeline's freedom. Angeline can come and go as she pleases through the woods, but when Cussy returned to her library route earlier in the spring, Vester Frazier's hunting of her made her feel like she didn't even belong in the hinterlands of Troublesome Creek.

Moreover, at this moment, Angeline is able to solve her own troubles independently: her family needs food, and she can hunt. In contrast, Cussy can't change the color of her skin, convince everyone to treat her like a human being, or protect Pa from the potential of violence for his part in the miners' union negotiations. The yearning for freedom and self-determination is a part of all the mountainfolk in the

area, the book suggests, because it is a part of human nature. When it the ability to take care of oneself is thwarted, life can become very painful.



This passage also contrasts the beauty and abundance of life with the hard, harsh life that people live on it. Life is hard, but one can find beauty in nature and in human kindness and generosity, like that which Cussy Mary and Angeline share with each other.


Chapter 27 Quotes

☝☝ In front of the mirror, I pulled out a section of my hair, carefully wrapping the ends around a strip of fabric a couple of times, rolling it all to my scalp before tying the rags into tight knots.

When I finished I stared at myself. An old ballad spilled from my lips, and I stretched out an arm and pretended to accept a dance with a find man who'd won my pie. I twirled around the room once, twice, and again and again until I stubbed my toes on Pa's bedpost and yelped. I winced and limped back over to the looking glass. Feeling foolish and looking it, I yanked out all the rag curls and turned my darkening face away from the mirror, untangling my damp hair, scratching at my head.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter (speaker), Pa (Elijah Carter), Sheriff Davies Kimbo

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis


Cussy Mary rode into town, hoping to find a sign of Pa, and instead discovered that it was the night of the Pie Dance. She watched through the window until the Sheriff sent her home, reminding her that the festivities were not meant for so-called “colored” people. At home, Cussy thinks about the pretty dresses and festive hairdos she saw on the town's women, and she decides to recreate one for herself from instructions for rag curls that she read in a magazine. The reading materials in the library allow Cussy to recreate the finery she saw on others for herself, thereby giving her the opportunity to reclaim some of the humanity that she loses each time people in town tell her that she can't participate in white society.

But this passage, in which Cussy Mary accepts an imaginary dance from a suitor, also shows the limits of books. Books

can show Cussy Mary how life might be if her circumstances were different, but they don't have the power to actually change the things that make her life difficult. When she stubs her toe on Pa's bed, thus breaking through her daydream, it's a blunt reminder of the extent to which pain and difficulty characterize her life. It also reminds her that storybook endings usually stay in storybooks. Thus, Cussy undoes her careful work on a new hairdo, symbolically demonstrating her submission to the pain and suffering of her life.

☝☝ “Hold your tongue! The men picked me, and I have to speak for my fellow miners to get better pay and safer work conditions! It's thievery down in the shafts, the lung sickness waiting to snatch your last breath. The miserable long hours. And the Company bosses who'd murder anyone who wants better than that—they scalp our land, leave behind the dirt an' ash, their broken coal trucks and ghost camps. They've left their filthy, fancy boot prints everywhere on everything, the poor 'tucky man's back. Why, even the fish are dying from the poisons running into our streams.”

Related Characters: Pa (Elijah Carter) (speaker), Cussy Mary Carter

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

When Pa comes home from the secret union negotiations, he and Cussy Mary fall into a renewed fight about the dangers of representing his fellow miners when the coal company is all too happy to discourage unionization attempts with violence. The danger and importance of the union negotiations remind readers that not all modernization is good: the coal company is, like the government, an outside force. And their abuse of the miners sheds light on some of the reasons why locals might mistrust outsiders and the change that they bring with them.

The coal company simultaneously undermines the autonomy of the miners and destroys the idea of interdependence that usually characterizes relationships among people in this area. While most people highly value their autonomy, they also take care of each other. In contrast, the coal company treats its workers worse than animals, tying them to the mine and the Company Store with chains of debt. And the Company clearly doesn't care to invest in the landscape, the community, or the people. It

operates outside of the checks and balances provided by a community, destroying the earth and destroying lives. Pa's impassioned outburst details many of the ways in which the coal company destroys lives, crushes autonomy, and disrespects the local community and natural world.

Chapter 28 Quotes

“I feel the same as before, Doc.” But I turned back to the mirror and know'd I wasn't, nor would ever be. I brushed my hand slowly over my face, poked my lips that had colored a pretty pink, my cheeks a soft rose. *Normal*. I peered again at the stranger looking back at me, then looked at Doc, questioning.



“Modern medicine,” he exclaimed.

“I'm a stranger.” I stared at my reflection.

“A right pretty stranger at that,” Doc commented. I gazed back to the glass and inspected closer.

Pretty. Could it be? My neck looked white, like linen that matched my hands. I raised a palm and lightly braced it at the base of my neck. A tear rolled off my cheek, then another and several more, splashing onto my white hand. I was white, and that pretty white stranger was me. *Me*.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter , Doc (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

After a few trips to the hospital, Doc has analyzed Cussy Mary's blood and realized that she has a condition called methemoglobinemia due to a missing enzyme in her blood. A drug called methylene blue is an antidote to the condition, and when Doc injects some into Cussy Mary's bloodstream, the blue color leaches from her skin. Though Cussy has resented Doc's talk of finding a “cure,” believing that what she wanted most was for it to be okay for her to be a Blue, this passage shows how deeply she has internalized the bigotry she's received from others. Being blue isn't acceptable; Doc suggests as much when he compliments her on her beauty now, suggesting that she wasn't beautiful before. And Cussy can't stop looking at the beautiful stranger—herself—in the mirror, showing that she does indeed think that she is prettier as a white person.

The methylene blue is another example of modern miracle in the book. By increasing the oxygenation of the blood, it can successfully treat carbon monoxide and cyanide poisoning. And, by increasing oxygenation, it can change the

color of Cussy's skin. However, it's not a cure by any means: Cussy wasn't sick before, she was just different. The idea that she needs to be changed merely reflects the bigotry and discrimination of those around her.

“But Pa weren't listening to me or the doc, and a few minutes later, I flew out the door to relieve my stomach same as last night.

Finished, I crept back inside. Pa gawked at me, alarmed. “Daughter, are you hurt?”

Doc shook his head. “No. It's temporary, Elijah. Like the drug.”

“Temporary? Then it's a vanity, not a cure,” Pa snapped.

I winced.



“She should feel better directly. It's just a little discomfort that'll right itself, Bluet,” the doc said with sympathy in his voice.

“Prideful,” Pa grumbled. “Dangerous.”

“It's a safe cure,” Doc insisted. “And Bluet's strong.”

Pa scowled. “Belladonna cures ails too, and it'll turn mean an' slay the strongest.”

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter , Pa (Elijah Carter), Doc (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

The day after Doc gives Cussy Mary her first dose of methylene blue, he stops by to drop off a week's worth of doses for Pa and Cussy Mary. When Cussy rushes outside to vomit—vomiting and severe headaches being potential side effects of the drug—Pa becomes concerned. He shows disdain for Doc's cure, pointing out that he needs a cure for his lungs, not his skin color. A drug won't stop the discrimination and hatred of others, so changing the color of the skin is mere vanity.

In his comments, Pa emphasizes the shallowness of the discrimination he and Cussy face; they're healthy, they're kind, and they're fellow humans and residents of Troublesome Creek, subject to the same hardships and sufferings as everyone else. In light of these similarities, it's ridiculous for the tone of a person's skin to matter so much. Still, Cussy Mary is so desperate for others to accept her that she is willing not only to change herself to please others' ridiculous standards, but to make herself ill doing so. Older and wiser, Pa represents the belief that Cussy will

eventually arrive at that she is fine as she is, and if other people dislike her, it's their own inhumanity. But for the time being, the drug's side effects literalize the harm Cussy experiences from her inability to accept who she is and the inability of others to value her.

Finally, the drug is another pointed reminder that just because things are new doesn't mean that they are good, and it's important to be discerning about which innovations to accept and which traditional ways to preserve.

Chapter 29 Quotes

☝☝ “Oh my,” she said. “So pretty, and the prettiest li'l daisy I've ever seen. Isn't that right, Samuel?” She jiggled him up and down on her hip. The baby squealed with delight, poked a finger into his drooling mouth, and grinned at me. “Yessir, our Bluet's a looker, and one the boys are gonna want to hook,” she told him teasingly. “And look at you, Samuel, already a'flirtin'.”

Harriett walked out of the ladies' room.

“Uh-huh. One pretty lady,” Birdie said.

Harriett's heel landed beside me. She leaned her head dangerously close to mine. “A pig in lipstick is still a stinking pig,” she spat, her wet hiss spinning in the air as she swept past me to her desk.

I turned. Her red eyes bored into mine. And I held them, locked, and lifted my chin two-man tall, snatching back some of the humankind that had been stolen.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter , Birdie (speaker), Harriet Hardin , Doc

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 200-201

Explanation and Analysis

On her second day of being white, Cussy Mary's new appearance surprises her coworkers, who initially think that she's pale with illness. They complain to Doc, who insults Harriett in the process of defending Cussy's health. In this passage, the third librarian, Birdie, arrives with her baby. Birdie compliments Cussy on her beauty and teases her that she's about to become the target of all the boys' flirting. The baby's innocent reaction contrasts sharply with Harriett's, implying that racism and bigotry aren't inborn, but taught. When Harriett emerges from the ladies' room (where she was hiding and crying), she attacks Cussy Mary. Although she judges people based on the color of their skin, her hatred and bigotry aren't nearly so shallow, and it's clear

that she still despises Cussy and thinks her inferior, despite her new color. This foreshadows Cussy's attempt to claim a place in white society during the upcoming Fourth of July celebration.

It's also notable that Cussy Mary only feels enabled to snatch back some of her humanity from Harriett when she is white. When she was blue, Harriett's hatred hurt her, but she didn't have the bravery to stand up to Harriet. This shows how deeply Cussy has internalized the idea that white skin is better than the other colors; it's almost impossible for her to change this feeling, even though she's aware of how bad and hurtful it can be. Although the book strongly claims that people's humanity isn't dependent on the color of their skin, moments like this show the limits of its ability to reckon with how deeply ingrained the belief that whiteness is superior to other skin colors can be.

Chapter 32 Quotes

☝☝ I'd been foolish. Reached the worse. The drug had not redeemed me. I didn't belong at this bright, happy gathering with these lively folks and bubbly chatter. I belonged in darker places where darker thoughts kept me put, where sunlight, a cheerful voice, or a warm touch never reached me. Weren't no pill ever going to change that.

I threw the cake into a bush and mounted Junia, glancing once more at the crowd. Across the street, Jackson talked to a group of smiling men and women. He lifted his head my way, raised a hand, and called out, “Cussy Mary...”

I couldn't bear for him to see my disgrace, see me for who I really was—who I'd become in their eyes. “Ghee!” I kneed the mule hard, and she raced off toward our dark, dead holler.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter , Jackson Lovett (speaker), Vester Frazier

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis

Thinking that her white skin would be enough to earn her the spot in Troublesome Creek's society that her blue skin has always denied her, Cussy Mary boldly rides into town to participate in the Fourth of July celebration. Traditionally, like the Pie Dance and other social functions, the celebration has been segregated, and so-called “colored” people haven't been allowed to attend. The last time any

Carters tried to go, there was violence. As a gesture of goodwill and hope for her future relationships with people, Cussy brings a gift of food—although no one is willing to touch it for fear of contamination. The only person who seems to be interested in seeing Cussy in town is Jackson Lovett, and in her rush to escape, she barely notices him.

Cussy hardly notices Jackson because, to her surprise and horror, the town fails to welcome her with open arms; she arrives at the celebration just as unwanted and disliked as ever, even though she's changed colors. Embarrassed and ashamed, she rushes out of town, desperate to get back home, where she thinks that she belongs. Importantly, she associates herself with “darker places” than the “bright” gathering of happy (and all white) people. Despite the book's claim that a person's skin color shouldn't matter, this passage (in which Cussy implicitly equates whiteness with goodness and darkness with badness) is another place where the book indirectly engages with some of associations that underlie the racism and bigotry that Cussy and Queenie experience.

Once again, Junia steps into the role of Cussy's protector, this time carrying her away from the emotional harm of her trip to town in much the same way she's carried her mistress away from physical danger. This suggests that the discrimination that Cussy faces is just as dangerous to Cussy Mary as the physical violence represented earlier by Vester Frazier.



Chapter 33 Quotes

☝☝ “Where's my manners? I hope you get to feeling pert soon, ma'am. I miss seeing my bonny Picasso.” He grinned.

I stared at him blankly, and he added, “Picasso's painting of the pretty blue lady, the *Woman with a Helmet of Hair* that I'd seen in one of the magazines you brought us? You remind me of her. Your fine color. My woman always said God saved that best color for His home.” He pointed a finger up to a patch of blue sky parting the gray clouds. “Guess He must've had Himself a little bit left over.”

Astonished, I could feel my face warm. No one, not a soul, ever said that my old color was fine. *The best.*

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter , Oren Taft (speaker), Angeline Moffit, Harriet Hardin , Vester Frazier , Miss Loretta Adams, R.C. Cole , Eula Foster

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis



The day after Troublesome Creek's Fourth of July celebration, Cussy rides deep into the mountains to trade library books with Oren Taft. He and eleven other families live in a place so remote that it can only be reached by foot. This offers a reminder of how hard life can be in this harsh terrain and how important the Pack Horse Library is—there is no other way that the Tobacco Top community members would have access to the outside world. And it's clear from this passage that the horizons of their minds are vast indeed, despite the rural and isolated nature of their physical location. Despite living as one of the poorest of the poor, Oren not only knows who Pablo Picasso is, but he evidently appreciates the man's artwork, which is only accessible in Kentucky via books and magazines.

This passage also shows how important kindness and humanity are: in contrast to the small-minded bigotry and hatred of those who think Cussy's blue skin made her inferior, Oren appreciates her difference. He associates her blue skin not with illness, disease, and inferiority, but with art, beauty, and the heavens. Like many of Cussy's other patrons, including Angeline, Miss Loretta, and R.C. Cole, Oren doesn't seem to be upset or bothered by her appearance. As the book goes on, it becomes increasingly clear that all the hatred Cussy has felt comes from a small group of people, most of whom are associated with the town. The racist and discriminatory positions of Harriett, Eula, Vester Frazier, and others aren't universal, as this passage suggests.

Chapter 37 Quotes

☝☝ I touched the baby's hand, my own eyes filling, my mind grappling with losses, the unbearable pain of loneliness. Nary a townsfolk, not one God-fearing soul, had welcomed me or mine into town, their churches, or homes in all my nineteen years on this earth. Instead, every hard Kentucky second they'd filled us with an emptiness from their hate and scorn. It was as if the Blues weren't allowed to breathe the very same air their loving God had given them, not worthy of the tiniest spoonful He'd given to the smallest forest critter. I was nothing in their world. A nothingness to them. And I looked into Angeline's dying eyes and saw my truths, and the truths that would be her daughter's. Know'd that without love, in the end, her babe would have no one, nothing, and would be fated to die alone in her own aching embrace.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter (speaker), Angeline Moffit, Mr. Moffit (Willie) , Miss Loretta Adams, R.C. Cole , Oren Taft, Honey

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

Near the end of July, Cussy Mary rides to the Moffit's homestead one morning to find that Mr. Moffit has died by suicide; their baby, Honey, has been born a Blue; and Angeline is dying from complications of childbirth. The family's sad situation is a stark reminder of the difficulty and harshness of life in this part of the world. Maternal mortality is high, and despair is rampant. Angeline is about to be the victim of the former, while Mr. Moffit succumbed to the latter—in addition to his own bigoted horror over having a so-called “colored” child. This passage reminds reader that choosing humanity in the face of all this hardship isn't always the easy choice. Raising Honey will be hard for Cussy; it won't be possible for her to completely insulate another Blue from the hatred and bigotry of others. Yet, in the face of horror and suffering, Cussy chooses the most humane path: the path of loving and caring for others regardless of who or what they are.

Angeline doesn't know that Mr. Moffit has died and thinks that he has abandoned her and the baby. With her dying breaths, she asks Cussy to adopt Honey and raise her as her own. In this passage, Cussy thinks about what her life has been like and what Honey's life will be like as a Blue in a discriminatory society. She criticizes the racism and discrimination that have followed her all her life, barring her from town society, friendship, and even religion. She even feels that white people are unwilling to share the very air they breathe with her, and that's a thing that no one human can lay claim to owning. And while it's true that Cussy experiences a great deal of marginalization and bigotry throughout the book, this moment also shows some of the limits of her thinking, because people like Angeline, Miss Loretta, R.C., Winnie, and Oren Taft have welcomed, touched, fed, and cared for her.

Chapter 43 Quotes

“Let me tell you, Cussy, a miner's life is a short one.”

“Oh, Pa,” I fanned his words away.

“Daughter, they buried eight of 'em last January after the collapse. Sealed that pit with them eight poor souls trapped inside it.”

I had heard the horror of it all. How the men and young boys were trapped so far down in the midnight dust and crumbling rock, no one could reach them. Then a leak of poisonous gas put them to sleep. There weren't anything left to do, no way to rescue them except to cover the tomb and have a preacher hold a burial service at the face of the mine.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter , Pa (Elijah Carter) (speaker), Jackson Lovett, Angeline Moffit, Mr. Moffit (Willie)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 258-259

Explanation and Analysis

As Pa breaks the news to Cussy Mary that he's allowing another suitor to come and court her, they begin to argue. Cussy doesn't want her life to change and rejects the idea of marrying and leaving Pa alone. But, as Pa reminds her in this passage, she won't be able to stay with him forever. His priority as her father is making sure that she will be safe and provided for after his death, which he fears is coming soon. The life of a coal miner, as he says, is hard, and the book has already given many examples of why: Pa and other miners are sick with lung diseases from the coal dust; the animals are treated better than the miners; coffins are the best-selling item at the Company Store; and the Company responds violently to any attempt the miners make to unionize for better working conditions. The most horrific example is the story of the miners who were buried alive; the company didn't even try to rescue them, but sealed them in and performed their funerals, perhaps before they had even truly died.

Their callous treatment of the Company's workers contrasts sharply with the care and respect with which Jackson buried the bodies of Angeline and Mr. Moffit. In this harsh and unforgiving place, everyone faces dangers and hardships. It is the mark of a good person for someone to take care of the other people around them. According to this metric, Jackson, Pa, and Cussy Mary are excellent human beings, despite the poverty and trauma that have characterized their lives. In contrast, the nameless, distant coal company bosses are much wealthier in terms of money,

but much poorer in terms of humanity.

Chapter 46 Quotes

●● I gasped. It had never happened here, but I'd read about the laws in the city newspapers and know'd they were being enforced in other places. Folks were charged and thrown in jail for courting someone not like themselves, for taking another color to their marriage beds. It was an ugly law that let mere folk lord over different-type folks, decide who a person could or couldn't love.



[...]

Sheriff shifted and squared his shoulders. "The law clearly states that marrying a colored person destroys the very moral supremacy of our Godly people and is damning and destructive to our social peace."

"I'm taking my wife and daughter home," Jackson told the sheriff.

"You listen to me, Lovett. You think you can jus' waltz back in to Kaintuck with your highfalutin ways and soil the good people. No, sir, this ain't the west!" Sheriff's face heated with a fury.

Related Characters: Cussy Mary Carter , Jackson Lovett, Sheriff Davies Kimbo (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 276

Explanation and Analysis

As the story draws to a close, Cussy Mary and Jackson celebrate their October wedding in the Troublesome Creek courthouse. But immediately afterward, Sheriff Davies Kimbo approaches with a warrant for Jackson's arrest. The

couple have broken Kentucky's anti-miscegenation law, which prohibits marriage between white and non-white people. As Cussy correctly points out, the laws were an instrument the government used to perpetuate and enforce racial segregation, a way for white people to control the actions and limit the choices and opportunities of non-white people. The Sheriff confirms Cussy's thoughts when he declares that allowing so-called "colored" people to transcend their subjugated place beneath white people is somehow dangerous to the foundations of society. In fact, the only thing it threatens is alleged racial purity, and the people who adhere to those beliefs.

Importantly, Jackson doesn't reject the Sheriff's warrant with the claim that Cussy is white (of European ancestry) even though her skin is blue; he rejects the very idea that laws should prohibit people from marriage based on the color of their skin or any other external and unimportant determining factor. Nevertheless, the Sheriff maintains the illegality and illegitimacy of the marriage.

Finally, the Sheriff's reaction to Jackson and Cussy's marriage isn't just based on their alleged crossing of color lines; it's also a reaction against new the new and more enlightened ideas that Jackson seems to have formed from his reading and his time traveling to other parts of the United States, ideas which the Sheriff condemns as "highfalutin", and which threaten to "soil" or contaminate the order of society as it is in Troublesome Creek. Change is coming to the whole country and to Troublesome, and ultimately, the town will come to accept "highfalutin" ideas like universal education and the right to marry anyone. But change always provokes resistance, and the Sheriff shows that he is like so many other townsfolk in his resistance to changes that make him uncomfortable or make him question his place in the world.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE (“KENTUCKY, 1936”)

While riding along her route, a Pack Horse Library worker (Cussy Mary) discovers a corpse hanging in a tree. On the ground beneath it lies a squalling infant. As Cussy watches a bloodied sock fall slowly off the corpse’s foot, she notes its blue skin, so like her own.

The beginning of the book dramatically introduces the theme of hardship and humanity which will run through the work. It isn't clear yet whether the person is a victim of violence or self-harm, or why there is a baby on the ground. But the novel immediately claims that life is hard in this world, especially for people who, like blue-skinned protagonist Cussy Mary Carter, are different in any way.



CHAPTER 1

On the afternoon of January 1, 1936, Cussy Mary’s Pa (Elijah Carter) adjusts the courting candle, which keeps track of the time a suitor is allowed to visit on the family’s porch. Before his wife died, he promised that he would see their daughter, Cussy, respectably married. But Cussy thinks her life is respectable. She makes \$28 a month delivering **books** with the Pack Horse Library project.

The argument between Cussy Mary and Pa about the necessity of her marriage expresses the conflict between the traditional ways and the change that modernization has brought. Cussy values her independence and can support herself with her job, but Pa disagrees. The courting candle, which both adjust in this chapter, represents the more traditional ways of doing things that Cussy wants to reject.



Pa worries about Cussy Mary’s health and safety while she rides through the mountains; one librarian’s horse has already died under her. He thinks Cussy takes “dirty” and “airish” **books** into the hills. She answers that her patrons are hungry to learn, but Pa reminds her that physical hunger is a serious threat in the hills, too. Many people die of starvation. And he thinks that the best way to protect her from starvation is to get her a husband.

Cussy’s job, like life in rural eastern Kentucky generally, is brutal and hard. But, as Cussy protests, books can educate, enlighten, and transform lives in this harsh terrain. Still, not everyone is ready to embrace change and modernization, and many people feel suspicious of the government-provided reading materials Cussy carries.



The Pack Horse Library project is an initiative of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), bringing literature and art into the lives of rural Kentuckians through **books**. Before she got the job, Cussy Mary had shared Pa’s fears about her future. She had to send her application to the state capital to bypass the bigotry of the local supervisors. When she was accepted, Pa was surprised and worried about what it would do to her marriage prospects.

As a program administer by the WPA, the Pack Horse Library project represents an opportunity to improve the lives of folks living in rural eastern Kentucky, because books are powerful tools of education and enlightenment. Books—and the job—have given Cussy the hope of a better future and she wants to inspire her patrons as well. And Cussy especially needed hope because of the bigotry and discrimination she faces due to blue-toned skin, which marks her as different from the rest of the people in the area.



Cussy Mary and Pa are both “Blue People of Kentucky,” born with a blood disorder that turns their skin blue. Cussy’s great-grandfather was a Blue from France. His wife was a white-skinned Kentucky woman, but several of their children were Blue. To escape ridicule, superstition, and the belief that their coloring was from inbreeding, the afflicted families retreated into the hills. Cussy is the last one of her kind, which she knows usually means that a species has been hunted to extinction.

Pa’s skin color is mostly covered by the dust from his work in the coal mine. But Cussy Mary’s skin is visible. The head librarian, Eula Foster, despises her and considers her stupid. Because Cussy’s skin color hinders her marriage prospects, Pa offers a \$5 dowry and 10 acres of land. The suitors thus far have been more interested in the land than in Cussy herself.

Pa finally stops adjusting the courting candle. Cussy begs him to let her stay unmarried, but he says that the land is too hard for a woman to bear alone. He wants someone to take care of her after he dies. As the suitor approaches, Pa sets off for the mine, and Cussy resets the candle for a short visit.

The history of Cussy’s family suggests that discrimination is against people who are different is common—but also that it’s possible to see the humanity in a person despite their differences. Although Cussy’s grandfather was blue skinned, he married a white Kentucky woman. This foreshadows romantic opportunities for Cussy that she can’t yet imagine.



The fact that the educated, well-read library supervisor, Eula Foster, discriminates against Cussy Mary based on the color of her skin shows that bigotry isn’t just backwoods, ignorant superstition. It’s common among people in the broader community who can only feel common humanity with other white people.



In resetting the candle, Cussy shows that she is just as determined as Pa when it comes to deciding on her future. Like most of the people eking a life out of the hard mountains, she has a strong streak of autonomy and independence and will determine the path of her life on her own terms.



CHAPTER 2

Cussy Mary imagines her suitors as hungry trolls and herself as one of the Billy Goats Gruff from the fairy tale. The latest one is fat, and he just wants to see the deed to the land. His eyes flick between the deed and Cussy’s face for a few minutes, then he declares, “Not even for all of Kentucky,” and leaves.

By the end of January, old, dirty, and foul-smelling Charlie Frazer has asked to marry Cussy Mary and Pa has signed over the deed. While Charlie waits to take Cussy to the priest, she pleads with Pa to change his mind. She’s repulsed by Charlie and scared of his family, which includes vicious and “hunt-hungry” Pastor Vester Frazier. But while Pa is clearly conflicted, he insists that Cussy go. She pleads and prays, but her father closes the door on her, and her words are swallowed by the dark.

Cussy Mary interprets her experiences through the books she’s read, showing the power of books to help people understand their lives. Sadly, her experience has been mostly painful, thanks to the way that people ignore her personality because of her odd skin color.



Pa clings to tradition and insists that the only way for Cussy to be respectable is to marry, yet the only man who will have her is dreadful. Tradition is limited, and Cussy’s modern belief that she can take care of herself better than Charlie can will prove to be true. Pastor Vester Frazier gets a passing introduction here. That the novel describes him as vicious and “hunt-hungry” suggests that he’s dangerous in some way that may become important later.



Cussy Mary is horrified when Charlie tries to have sex with her. He's not gentle and he holds a pillow over her face to avoid looking at it. When she fights to get loose, he beats her until she is barely conscious. As he penetrates her a second time, his face turns ashen gray. When she comes to, Pa and Doc are tending to her broken bones. Charlie died of a heart attack. Pa buries him—and the courting candle—in the yard.

Charlie sees Cussy as a blue devil rather than a fellow human being. He can't look at her face and treats her with disdain and violence. Pa's tenderness counteracts Charlie's inhumanity. Burying the courting candle with Charlie is an admission of his failure and his promise to keep Cussy safe from men in the future.



CHAPTER 3

Cussy Mary's brief marriage left her with broken bones, a mule she names **Junia**, and a pregnancy. She pulls Charlie's root from her womb with an herbal tea. And then she gets her job with the Pack Horse Library back.

The disruption of Cussy Mary's marriage to Charlie Frazier is brief. She uses traditional remedies to end the resulting pregnancy without a fuss, showing how the old ways can continue to be useful even as the world changes.



On her first day back, Cussy Mary rides Junia up into the mountains. Before her marriage, she'd rented a horse. But she rescued poor, abused **Junia**—Charlie's only valuable possession. Pa worried that Junia would be ornery, and thought she was only fit for a "miner's sacrifice." This is an animal fitted with a lantern and sent into an emptied mine to check for gas buildup. If the animal doesn't set off an explosion, the miners know it's safe. Cussy nursed Junia back to health, but the mule still distrust and attacks men.

Junia is a mule, a donkey-horse hybrid. Mules are sterile and have a reputation for having bad tempers. It's not clear why Charlie abused her, but he did, just like he abused Cussy Mary. The affinity between the book woman and her beast suggests the peril of being different, difficult, and stubborn—traits Cussy Mary and Junia share. When Pa claims that difficult mules are only valuable as miner's sacrifices, he raises an unspoken question about the value of difficult (and different) women like Cussy. But the tie between the two also suggests that a person's (or a mule's) value lies beyond their superficial appearance, in the strength of their character or their importance in their community.



As Cussy Mary and **Junia** come beside the trail that leads to Charlie's home, Junia startles. Cussy can't hear anything suspicious, although she's lost hearing in one ear thanks to Charlie's beating. They crest the hill and Cussy hears a train whistle in the distance. She thinks about the people on it travelling through the beautiful Kentucky countryside. Once, she dreamt about a train carrying a company of Blues far beyond the borders of the state.

On the trail, Cussy Mary's horrific experience with Charlie Frazier is juxtaposed with the sound of the train whistle in the distance, which suggests that it's possible to escape the hardships she faces. Cussy Mary dreams about leaving her rural home—about the possibilities that exist beyond the claustrophobic mountain hollows and the bigotry and isolation she faces.



Junia's snorting pulls Cussy Mary from her reverie. They have reached the Moffit place. Seeing a patron waiting for her frees Cussy from the winter's traumas. Returning to the books is a sanctuary and joy for her heart.

Charlie Frazier treated Cussy Mary as if valued her as less than a human being. In contrast, her patrons value her and wait anxiously for her return. Because they are shared property, books have the power to create friendships and bring people closer together.



CHAPTER 4

Angeline Moffit impatiently waits in the yard for Cussy Mary and chastises her for staying away so long. Cussy introduces **Junia** and Angeline recognizes the mule's biblical name. Junia was the only female apostle named in the Bible, and Junia the mule is Cussy's fierce protector. She already saved Cussy from a bobcat and a potential landslide.

Cussy Mary can't talk about the winter's events, but Angeline has already heard some of it. Cussy has a children's **book** for Angeline, who is learning to read, and a *Popular Mechanics* magazine for Mr. Moffit. It features an airship on the cover. Although Eleanor Roosevelt flew in one to Kentucky, Cussy and Angeline find it hard to imagine seeing one in person.

Angeline slips her hand into Cussy Mary's, and Cussy stiffens. No other white person ever touches her that casually. It makes her yearn for her mother, or for a child of her own. But she knows she will never have a man; town gossip says that a Blue Devil murdered Charlie Frazier in his bed. As the women enter the house, Angeline tells Cussy that Mr. Moffit "busted" his foot recently, although Eula Foster said that he'd been shot for stealing a chicken.

Angeline drags an empty lard tin next to the bed for Cussy Mary to sit on so she can read to Mr. Moffit, who is illiterate. Cussy holds the magazine so he is spared the sight of her blue skin. As he pulls the covers up, Cussy notices that the tips of his fingers and toes are blue. She wonders if it's from his injury and illness, or if he is also a Blue. She's heard stories about some who grow out of the color as they age.

Despite her evidently hard life, Angeline is an apt student. In the mountains, hardship limits people's opportunities, but it can't define who they are. Junia's name indicates the importance of the work she and Cussy do. Biblical apostles carried the Good News of the Christian gospel throughout the ancient world; Cussy Mary and Junia carry hope and possibility throughout rural eastern Kentucky in the form of library books.



Angeline rises above her poverty through literacy that allows her to connect to the larger world. There's a sharp contrast between the technological advances in the world, like airplanes, and the hardscrabble existence in the hills. The changes happening in the world sometime seems so distant and different from the day-to-day reality of the mountainfolk that they are almost impossible to imagine.



Angeline treats Cussy Mary like a person, ignoring the color of her skin. But Cussy can't enjoy Angeline's kind gesture because its contrast with the normal, bigoted, and fearful treatment she receives from people just emphasizes her isolation. Angeline loves Cussy, but this just reminds Cussy of how unloved and unwanted she generally is by people who can't see beyond her skin color. Mr. Moffit has been shot for stealing a chicken, which reminds us how desperately poor and hungry many of the people in and around Troublesome Creek are. Nevertheless, his theft is shameful, leading Angeline to talk about it euphemistically.



Mr. Moffit represents many white people in Troublesome Creek, who consider Cussy "colored" (a slur for Black in an era of grave discrimination), and therefore think associating with her is degrading to themselves. But Cussy catches a glimpse of fingers and toes that suggest he might be a Blue himself. If he is, but people consider him white, this might explain some of why Cussy seems to make him so uncomfortable.



Cussy Mary reads until Mr. Moffit falls asleep, then finds Angeline in the yard, practicing writing words. Angeline returns her last **book**, which got a little busted when Mr. Moffit threw it into the yard during a fight. Cussy can see that he gave up on his hard life long ago, and that his anger is an expression of this despair. Sometimes, his anger frightens Angeline.

The last time Angeline returned a busted **book**, Eula told Cussy Mary to remind her that the government pays the librarians' salaries only. The books are donated, and the project doesn't have money for replacements or unnecessary repairs. Cussy promises to fix the book herself. As Cussy prepares to leave, Angeline gives **Junia** half of a scrawny carrot from her tiny garden. Then she asks Cussy to see if Doc will come tend to Mr. Moffit's foot. She hands over a packet of her special corn seeds to offer as payment.

Angeline worries about Mr. Moffit, especially since she's pregnant and due in July. She's planning to name the baby Honey, even though Mr. Moffit says that's a "colored's name." She reminds Cussy Mary to tell Doc how valuable the corn seeds are—they're from her grandmother's crops. If Cussy won't be in town soon, Angeline suggests that she ask Jackson Lovett to take the message to Doc. Jackson, Cussy's new patron, just got back to Kentucky from working on the Hoover Dam.

Angeline tells **Junia** to keep Cussy Mary safe. Somehow, she heard about another librarian, whose horse broke a leg and died at Hell-for-Certain Creek (pronounced "Hell-fer-Sartin" by the locals). She and Mr. Moffit both have kin out that way, though neither have ever visited the remote town. The librarian survived, completing her route on foot. As Cussy Mary rides off, Angeline hears the call of a rain crow, which the mountainfolk think prophesies death.

CHAPTER 5

Halfway through the woods that lie across the route, **Junia** suddenly stops when she hears a twig snap. Out of the corner of her eye, Cussy Mary thinks she sees a spirit, then recognizes Pastor Vester Frazier, who is leaning on a tree and waiting for her. Vester has a history of tormenting people who are different while claiming to chase the devils out of them. Surviving victims have been deeply traumatized. Vester has been after Cussy for her whole life; Pa has had to run him off the family land three times since she was born.

Books can bring hope to their readers. The fact that Angeline is learning to read while Mr. Moffit isn't (and he treats the books with disregard) suggests that she is more optimistic about the future than he is. He and Angeline share the same harsh life, but he's succumbed to despair, and she hasn't.



Cussy Mary, sharing the hard life of the hills with Angeline, shows understanding and human decency toward her patron. In contrast, Eula Foster (who lives in town) has little patience for the busted books. Her stinginess contrasts with Angeline's generosity; her family can't survive without stealing chickens and can't pay for medical treatment, but she still shares the meager produce of her garden with Junia.



Mr. Moffit dislikes the name "Honey" because it sounds "colored," implying that all "colored" things (like Cussy Mary) are bad and beneath him. Angeline's situation reflects Pa's desire for Cussy Mary to marry: she is scared to lose her husband's protection. Life is hard in the hills, so it makes sense that Angeline is worried. In this context, the fact that she provides Cussy's first introduction to Jackson Lovett foreshadows his future role as Cussy's protector.



Junia is Cussy Mary's protector. The autonomy of her library route also means that she must rely on herself and her mule to keep her alive and out of danger—other librarians have faced dangerous situations before. Angeline's mention that both she and her husband have kin in the same town foreshadows revelations about these kin that will come to light later in the book. The call of the rain crow also signals impending disasters.



Cussy Mary's encounter with Vester Frazier recalls the violence and fear she suffered at the hands of his cousin, Charlie. And it provides insight into her isolation and fear. Vester doesn't just dislike Cussy because she is a Blue—he thinks anyone who is different from his "kind" (white folks who believe in Vester's specific version of Christianity) is bad, and possibly demonic.



Cussy Mary tries to get **Junia** to brush past Vester, but Junia refuses. When she dismounts to lead the horse by hand, Vester grabs her bridle and kicks the mule. Junia topples over and Vester holds her to the ground with a boot on her neck. Addressing Cussy as “Widow Frazier,” a title she despises, Vester accuses her of spreading the word of Satan through the hills. He offers to give her Jesus, saying he will help “pull her through the fires” and give her salvation.

Junia is Cussy Mary's protector, but she can't protect Cussy Mary from everything; both face violence and abuse from Vester (just as both did from Charlie). Vester's threats to Cussy mix the personal and the social: he's opposed to her because she is a Blue and a heathen (not a Christian, in his opinion), but also because he distrusts the government books she lends. He is thus representative of other hillfolk who fear change and resist the modern ideas that library books represent.



Cussy Mary begs Vester to let **Junia** go. He does, but grabs Cussy instead. He snarls that her **books** are sinful, she was born of sin, and she needs a church; she retorts that her books are clean and that her mother taught her the Bible. But the Blues have no church. Vester claims that the only pure word of God is what God tells him to say, which is that she's a devil who evilly murdered Charlie.

Vester Frazier distrusts Cussy Mary's books in part because people who read can find their own ideas and become less likely to accept his interpretation of the Bible. He associates modernization with wickedness and devilry, and he associates Cussy Mary with both. Thus, to control the world around him, he strives to control on her.



Gripping her arm tighter and beginning to drag her into the forest, Vester says it is his duty to save her. Cussy Mary knows that a Pack Horse librarian has been raped. The Sheriff didn't appreciate that and had harshly punished the offender. Cussy tries to warn Vester of a similar punishment, but he doesn't care about the law or respect the Sheriff. The two men are related by marriage but have bad blood between them.

In this moment, Cussy Mary's work has isolated her, and she's vulnerable to Vester's violence (sexual and otherwise) because of her gender and color. Vester doesn't fear punishment because doesn't see Cussy as fully human and therefore doesn't expect anyone would want to protect her.



It looks like Vester will get his way and succeed in dragging Cussy Mary to the river for a baptism and a “salvation” the likes of which her husband couldn't provide. He starts to strangle and kiss her. But Cussy Mary sees a shadow, hears a smack, and **Junia** charges into the clearing, scaring Vester off.

Although Cussy values her autonomy and independence, these traits make her vulnerable. Luckily, she has the support of others, including Junia and whoever made the mysterious shadow that encouraged Junia to charge.



CHAPTER 6

Shaken from her encounter with Vester, Cussy Mary breathes a prayer of gratitude. But because she isn't allowed into any of the churches, she feels insecure in her faith. She's furious that Vester robbed her of the joy she'd felt that morning and scared of his power over her.

One form of the discrimination against Cussy Mary as a Blue is barring her from attending church. This catches her in an impossible loop: people think she's bad because she doesn't go to church, but because she's different, they won't let her go to church. Nevertheless, Cussy believes in God and has her own faith.



Finally, Cussy Mary and **Junia** reach Lovett Ridge. It's a lovely place, with a view of the mountains below and the scent of apple and honeysuckle on the breeze. Compared to the dark woods and hollers, it seems sacred. Jackson Lovett is at work in the yard. When she drops two books on the ground, he tries to help her pick them up, but ends up with a bite from Junia for his efforts. As they talk, Jackson keeps stealing glances at Cussy. In his eyes, she sees gentleness, curiosity, and loss.

Jackson offers **Junia** a piece of **apple**. Her desire for the treat overcomes her mistrust of men, and she takes it. Then he looks at the **book** Cussy Mary brought, *A Plea for Old Cap Collier*, by Kentuckian Irvin S. Cobb. Cobb's books are usually popular with the men, but Jackson says he would prefer John Steinbeck. Cussy is impressed by his taste; most of her male patrons either can't or don't care to read and prefer mechanic magazines to books.

Jackson thanks Cussy Mary for the **book**. He asks her to call him by his name, puts out his hand to shake hers, and asks her name. But before he can touch her, Junia steps between them. Cussy Mary says that most people call her "Bluet," but when he says goodbye, he calls her "Cussy Mary."

The contrast between Lovett's Ridge and the dark hollow where Vester confronted Cussy Mary is stark. Even before she meets Jackson Lovett, he is putting her at ease and making her feel safe. Cussy's reaction to the landscape foreshadows her later relationship with Jackson. And then, when she meets him, he betrays no fear or disgust over her oddly colored skin. Jackson, like Cussy, has seen loss and pain, but loss and pain has been made gentle, not harsh.



Jackson shows his kindness in his patience toward Junia. His ability to overcome her distrust foreshadows a deep relationship with Cussy; if Junia trusts him, then it's safe for Cussy to trust him, too. Jackson shares a love of literature with Cussy that distinguishes him from most of the other local men, suggesting the power of books to grow a person's character.



Jackson sees and treats Cussy Mary like a human being. Like Winnie, he calls her by her name instead of the stigmatizing nickname, "Bluet." And, like Angelina, he doesn't seem to be afraid that touching her will somehow contaminate him.



CHAPTER 7

Junia and Cussy Mary arrive home after dark. Pa was worried because she's late, and she doesn't tell him about her encounter with Vester. Pa is on his way to a union meeting, so Cussy quickly packs his **lunch**. Strikes are dangerous for the miners, and she frets that Pa might be hurt or killed in the next one. But he wants to stand up for miners' rights, since the Company treats them worse than animals. Pa's older brother was tricked into being a miner's sacrifice (to spare a mule) before Cussy was born. And recently, a miner was injured and the mule he was working with was killed in a cave-in. The Company docked the miner's pay for the animal's value.

Despite his own worries, Pa has taken time to clear part of the path that goes into town before Cussy Mary's shift at the Library Center next week. She reminds him to take his stick for defense against any creatures he might encounter on the way to the mine.

Life in this area of Kentucky at this time is hard and precarious for almost everyone. The malicious and greedy mine Company treats its miners as subhuman, worth less than the pack animals they use in their work. That's why Pa represents his fellow workers in union negotiations, despite the danger of doing so. And the story about his older brother illustrates the idea that, while there's plenty of hardship to go around, it's automatically harder to be a Blue, since the local, predominantly white, population discriminates against them based on their skin color.



Despite the hardship of their lives in the coalfields and as Blues, Pa and Cussy maintain their humanity by showing care and concern for each other and the people around them. Pa's work exhausts him, yet he still finds time to clear Cussy's paths to make her job easier.



With Pa gone, Cussy Mary begins her chores. She sweeps and mops the coal dust from the floors, washes it from Pa's bedding and clothes, washes her own clothes, and takes three trips to the spring to fill up the tub for Pa to wash when he gets home. Chores and nighttime make her miss her mother; they used to sing and read to each other to distract themselves from the work and their worry over Pa's safety. With domestic work done, Cussy rebinds Angeline's **book** and adds to the newest scrapbook she will circulate on her route. It has comic strips, hill wisdom, remedies, poems, essays, recipes, and craft patterns.

Cussy Mary thinks back over the day. Schoolboys skipped crowdad hunting to hear her read; Martha Hannah dropped her clean laundry in the dirt; Mr. Prine actually smiled at her; and Miss Loretta cried. These reactions make Cussy feel appreciated, and she has a surge of affection for her patrons. She reviews the stops for the rest of the week, then puts her pillow on the table and rests her head on it. When she was five, her mother made them matching dresses out of a blue fabric with bluebirds on it. She swore it made their skin look whiter and more normal. Cussy's mother was buried in her dress, and Cussy used the fabric from hers to make the pillow. Humming one of her mother's lullabies, Cussy imagines her mother stroking her hair as she dozes off.

Later, Cussy Mary startles awake to the sound of **Junia** braying in the yard. With Pa's shotgun in hand, she ventures onto the porch. She can't see any wild creatures in the yard, but she knows she's being watched. Someone—probably Vester Frazier—is hunting her. With her good ear, she hears footfalls and rustling sounds that slowly die away, and when all is silent, she retreats to her sleeping loft with the gun.

CHAPTER 8

On the second Tuesday of the month, it's Cussy Mary's turn to work in the library's headquarters, which are housed in the Troublesome Creek post office. As she arrives, Doc greets her in the street. She tries to offer him Angeline Moffit's seeds, but he interrupts. He won't help a chicken thief only for him to go out and try to steal more chickens, which are more valuable than human lives in Kentucky. Cussy mumbles about Angeline's pregnancy. Doc drops the corn seeds in the dirt but offers a free checkup for Angeline. This reminds him that Cussy might also be pregnant by Charlie Frazier. Continuing to address her by the nickname he gave her long ago, Bluet, he suggests that she could use a checkup too. Cussy Mary is uncomfortable, knowing that his friendliness covers a scientific curiosity about Blues. As he rides off, she picks up Angeline's seeds.

Although it's the 1930s, Pa and Cussy live in an area sufficiently remote that they have neither electricity nor indoor plumbing. Their already hard life is made more challenging because of the polluting coal dust that seems to touch everything. Yet Cussy still finds the time and energy to take care of the books she carries to her patrons, since the books seem to be the only way that people can improve their lives or expand their knowledge beyond their harsh subsistence existence.



The juxtaposition between the maternal love Cussy remembers while cuddling her pillow and the harsh reality of her life, where she faces a lot of hateful discrimination, highlights the challenges Cussy faces as a Blue. But it was her mother who taught her to read, too, and so the contrast reminds readers that books have the power to overcome discrimination and hatred and bring people together. Cussy Mary's encounters with her patrons, who waited months for her return, show the power of books. Everyone is relieved and happy to see her, even patrons like Mr. Prine who are more stand-offish because of her blue skin.



Cussy Mary rescued Junia from neglect and abuse, and the mutual dependence between woman and animal is shown by Junia's role as Cussy Mary's protector. Junia underwrites Cussy's autonomy and independence by protecting her, but Cussy's quick dash for Pa's gun shows that she's also more than capable of taking care of herself.



The Library Center is in the town of Troublesome Creek, and the contrast between the kindness of many of Cussy's patrons and the general discrimination of people in town is on display almost immediately. Doc refuses to help Mr. Moffit, not only because Angeline can't pay him with cash, but also because Mr. Moffit has been branded a chicken thief. Mr. Moffit's act of desperation means that people now see him as less worthy of care and help than other people and underwrites their discrimination against him. This markedly contrasts, with Cussy's approach, which is to help and be kind to people like Angeline and Mr. Moffit. Some of the discrimination Cussy faces is fairly benign, like Doc's nickname for her, which offers a pointed reminder that she is different from other people. But it's discrimination nevertheless; Doc is only interested in her because of her difference.



The Center is used for sorting, repairing, and housing the reading materials. As Cussy Mary opens a window to allow the breeze into the stuffy room, she watches a delivery of caskets—always the first thing to be sold out—arrive at the Company Store. On the other side of the room, her supervisors gossip about the upcoming town dance. Their laughter, Cussy knows, comes at others' expense.

Harriett Hardin, the assistant supervisor, switches on the donated radio. She will only allow the news to be played; she thinks the jazz on the other stations is wicked music. Cussy Mary admires the diction of the people on the radio, but when she tried to copy it, Pa told her to stop putting on airs. While she listens to news of the Kentucky Derby and Pulitzer Prize winners, Cussy bends old license plates into bookends. She needs new ones for her outpost, an old, abandoned chapel where a courier exchanges her books on weeks that she doesn't go to the center.

Outside, **Junia** nickers, and Cussy Mary looks up to see Jackson coming out of the Company Store. As he feeds Junia an **apple**, Harriett sashays to the window and ogles him. She reasons that a “handsome, smart man” needs a “smart, pretty girl” like herself. She's planning to win him over with her Peach Pie at the upcoming Pie Bake Dance. It's called that because all the single girls bake pies, and the man who makes the highest bid for a pie earns the right to dance with its baker for the rest of the night. Cussy hasn't ever been because there's a clear “No Coloreds” sign at the door.

Suddenly, Harriett realizes that Jackson is feeding **Junia**. Turning to ask Cussy Mary why, she brushes against her sleeve and reacts with horror. She never liked Cussy; she refused to train her for her route, then claimed that she was too thick-headed to learn. As Cussy tries to apologize, Harriett notices—and draws attention to—the darkening blue of Cussy's skin as she blushes. Harriett declares that it looks like an “ugly ol' inkblot” and calls on Eula to agree. Cussy suspects that Harriett intentionally shames her to see her skin darken as she blushes. After Harriett goes back to her desk, Jackson comes to the window and talks with Cussy Mary about a new **book** he acquired.

The fact that the Company Store always sells out of coffins first offers a pointed reminder that the Company profits off its mistreated workers' early deaths. Cussy Mary symbolically opens a window to allow fresh air into the library center, but it can't blow away the gossip of Eula Foster and Harriett Hardin. Their casual cruelty contrasts sharply with Cussy's kindness.



Harriett Hardin's control over the radio puts her narrowmindedness and racism immediately on display. She fears novelty (new music, for example) as wicked, and it's notable that she particularly dislikes jazz, a genre strongly associated with Black musicians. The contrast between the posh accents on the radio with Cussy's dilapidated outpost reminds us of the harsh reality of life in these hills. And Pa's rebuke for Cussy's airs suggests a danger associated with the things Harriett likes, including the people on the radio.



Junia is Cussy Mary's protector, so it's a sign of his kindness that she allows him to approach her. Harriett's appreciation of Troublesome's new resident offers a reminder that Jackson is a very eligible bachelor and sends a very clear message to Cussy that he's out of her league, despite the fact that he seems to be on the lookout for Cussy in town. The pie dance, too, offers a stark reminder that Cussy is considered “colored,” and discriminated against accordingly in her community.



Junia's uncharacteristic patience with Jackson suggests to Harriett the possibility of a closeness between Cussy Mary and Jackson. Apparently jealous, since she thinks Cussy is a lesser human thanks to her skin color, she becomes biting and mean. Harriett represents the worst of human discrimination and hatred in Troublesome: not only does she dislike Cussy and make fun of her, but she also reacts as if Cussy's very presence is somehow dangerous or contaminating. In contrast, Jackson specifically looks for opportunities to talk to Cussy.



After making the bookends, Cussy Mary begins to sort a box of new donations. While putting things aside for her patrons, she finds a novel that she knows Harriett wants desperately to read. She brings it over with a friendly smile. Harriett's excitement over it and the way she also loves **books** makes Cussy forget how mean she can be. And, at least momentarily, it makes Harriett forget how much she dislikes "Bluet." But then she remembers and orders her back to work.

Near the bottom of a box, Cussy Mary finds a practically current newspaper. She flips through it, skimming the headlines and studying advertisements for a women's form-fitting bathing suit (\$6.95) and a flowery blue Mother's Day dress that costs \$12.88. Lost in thought about her own mother, Cussy is surprised when Eula comes up behind her, snatches the newspaper from her hands, and warns Cussy to tie up **Junia** behind the building. In the front, she is accosting passers-by. Harriett chimes in to say that she would have shot Junia for meat.

Cussy Mary turns to leave and bumps into Queenie Johnson. Queenie says **Junia** got "the devil inside her" when Vester walked by and hit her with his stick. When Queenie tried to intervene, Junia bit her accidentally. Harriett admires Vester, who baptized her nieces, and says he shouldn't be bothered by "filthy *beasts*." Then she orders, "Bluet, back to work." Cussy turns to reply and the look on Harriett's face chills her. She intuitively knows that Harriett is one of Vester's followers and that she has probably participated in his murderous baptisms. Harriett's hatred in the room and Vester's from across the street make Cussy feel like she's being hunted.

Cussy Mary tries to take Queenie to the ladies' room to wash her wound, but Eula stops them, pointing to the "No Coloreds" sign above the door. Queenie is the only Black librarian. Eula denied her application five times before Queenie went over her and applied through the central office in Louisville. When she came in with her WPA work order, Eula paled and Harriett turned purple with rage. Eula made Cussy train her, and the two eventually became friendly.

Although Harriett is unkind and discriminatory towards Cussy Mary, Cussy Mary maintains her own sense of kindness and humanity. She looks toward books, hoping that they are enough to overcome Harriett's hatred and forge a connection between the two women. For Cussy Mary, books are enough; she is able to appreciate Harriett when she thinks of her as a reader. But for Harriett, books aren't enough, and no book or act of kindness could change her attitude toward Cussy.



The Great Depression is nearing its end, yet the advertisements Cussy Mary sees in the newspaper suggest a wealth unheard of to anyone in her corner of rural Kentucky, where life is still harsh and the best-selling item at the Company Store is a coffin. Although Eula isn't quite as harsh toward Cussy as Harriett is, she still isn't very kind to her. When she asks Cussy to move Junia, it suggests that, like the ornery mule, people think that Cussy should be kept out of the sight of others to avoid accosting them with her blueness.



Jackson was able to get close enough to Junia to share an apple with her; in contrast, contact with Vester Frazier makes Junia mean and spiteful. In contrast to the mule's good sense, Harriett Hardin is firmly on Vester Frazier's side. When she declares that beasts shouldn't bother him, she's speaking to Queenie and Cussy Mary, implicitly including them in the category of "beasts" for their lack of proper respect toward Vester.



Eula's reaction when Cussy Mary and Queenie try to use the bathroom clearly shows that, for many people in town, there's no real distinction between Cussy (who is white despite her blue skin) and Queenie, who is Black. The general attitude is that so-called "colored" (non-white) people are inferior. The similarity in their history with the Pack Horse Library project underlines this similarity.



There are only eight non-white people in Troublesome Creek: Queenie, her three sons and mother, Doc's housekeeper, Pa, and Cussy. Eula wags a finger at Cussy, reminding her "You're only allowed to *clean* [the bathroom], Widow Frazier;" Blues and Coloreds must go to the outhouse. Cussy is certain that Harriett and Eula fear and detest her more than Queenie. And Harriett nearly falls out of her chair exclaiming that "they" could pass a disease to everyone else.

Cussy includes herself and Pa in her survey of the non-white population of Troublesome Creek, emphasizing her feeling that she is marked and treated as "colored." And Eula's reminder that she can clean—but not use—the indoor bathroom reinforces this feeling. Cussy feels, furthermore, that she is somehow more objectionable to people than the town's Black residents, even though they seem subject to the same sort of treatment.



CHAPTER 9

The following Monday, Cussy Mary doesn't see Angeline or Jackson on her route. Or Vester, fortunately. But when she stops at the schoolhouse, she is enthusiastically welcomed by the teacher, Winnie Parker, and her eight students. A girl gives Cussy a knitting pattern to add to her scrapbook; the children ask for books about China and the World War. They discuss the books she's brought before.

In contrast to the cruel and discriminatory treatment Cussy Mary experiences in town, once she gets back out into the mountains on her route, she is welcomed with kindness and excitement. Readers of all ages wait anxiously for her arrival, and despite the general hardship of everyone's lives, they are anxious to participate in the library project by sharing their own wisdom and experiences.



Cussy has a *Love Story* magazine for Winnie. She keeps it hidden away for women who ask for "exciting" reads. Winnie's husband went to Detroit. She's lonely, and Cussy figures the magazine will ease her loneliness. Winnie was the only person who visited Cussy after Charlie's death. She's also the only person who has never called Cussy "Bluet" or "Widow Frazier."

One feminine hardship is the loneliness of women separated from their husbands, many of whom have left for larger urban centers to find work. Loneliness links Winne and Cussy, offering a pointed reminder that the discrimination against Cussy based on her skin color foolishly fixates on appearance rather than character. And Winnie, like many of Cussy's patrons, considers her a friend and treats her with kindness.



Winnie talks Cussy Mary into reading to the children, which she does from the bench of the piano Doc donated to the school after his wife died. One little boy, Henry, says he wants to be a Pack Horse librarian. The other children mock him, since they think all the librarians are girls. But Cussy explains that they have some widowed women and even a man working routes.

The tendency of people to compartmentalize others is on display in the children's rush to mock Henry for wanting a "girl's job." But Cussy sees the passion in his desire, and as she knows, it's foolish and demeaning to decide what people can and can't do based on their outward appearance.



Cussy Mary is about to leave when Henry runs out of the schoolhouse with a present for her, wrapped in a piece of paper. It's his prize from the spelling bee. Cussy asks after his family, since his mother is pregnant. Henry says the baby is due soon, and he hopes that this one will live. Cussy looks at Henry's ribs, which are clearly visible through his too-small shirt and his pale skin.

In a world of hardship, Henry's family is especially downtrodden. He's slowly succumbing to malnutrition and hunger, and many of his younger siblings have apparently died at birth or in infancy. But these traumas haven't destroyed Henry's kindness or generosity, and although he has almost nothing himself, he shares what he can with Cussy.



CHAPTER 10

Cussy Mary leaves Mr. Prine's *Time* magazine, the only loan he'll accept, on his porch. She must lead **Junia** by hand through the thorny path of Saw Briar Trace. Hungry, although she's eaten all her food, she unwraps Henry's present and discovers that it's a pineapple Lifesaver candy. She re-wraps it to stash away with her other treasures—her mother's thimble, some pretty buttons, a Bible, Pa's old penknife, and a letter written by her great-grandfather.

At the Smith cabin, Cussy Mary finds Martha Hannah and her brood of children working on dinner chores. She wants a *Woman's Home Companion* magazine because her neighbors are learning home remedies from it that are more effective than traditional mountain wisdom. Cussy promises to bring one as soon as she can. As Martha's moonshiner husband stalks into the yard, Cussy rides off to her last stop.

A few miles past the Smith place, Vester lies in wait for Cussy Mary, but **Junia** spots him, panics, and leaves him behind as she runs off the path. They run into a woman and her son out picking berries. Cussy starts to tell them about library services, but the boy is terrified to see a "Blue Ghost" in person and his mother hurries him away.

Finally, Cussy Mary arrives at her last stop, the home of Miss Loretta Adams. Nearly blind from bad eyes, Loretta can still read a little and sew beautiful quilts and dresses. After pouring tea, Cussy props the wobbling table with a library **book**, then reads to Loretta from her Bible. It's the only book Loretta wants and Cussy hasn't found anything else to interest her. Loretta "borrows" the library book to prop up the table during their visits to keep her conscience clear that she isn't cheating the government.

The mutual dependence between Cussy Mary and Junia is on display when Cussy has to lead the mule by hand through a particularly painful and challenging patch of terrain. Their willingness to do this suggests yet again the importance of their role in carrying books to the far-flung patrons in the mountains.



One of the reasons the Pack Horse Library project is so important (and controversial) is that it's bringing new and modern ideas to rural Kentucky. Vester Frazier and others (including sometimes Pa) fear the changes that are happening around them. But housewives like Martha Hanna realize that there is value in innovations including the new, less superstitious remedies they're learning about.



As always, Junia is on the lookout to protect Cussy Mary. It's a good thing, too, because Cussy can't depend on other people for help. Her encounter with the woman and boy, both strangers to her, shows that the instinctive reaction to her difference is fear and discrimination. If she didn't have Junia, it's hard to know whom she would be able to count on for help, since others don't seem to see her as fully human.



In contrast to the fear and abhorrence of the boy and his mother, Miss Loretta Adams treats Cussy with kindness and generosity. Both women are independent characters—Miss Loretta still lives alone although she's nearly blind—but their relationship shows the interdependence of humanity. Both women need each other for companionship and mutual support. Miss Loretta also shows that it's possible to be wary of modernization and change without resorting to violence, unlike Vester and others.



Before Cussy leaves, she gets a tincture-soaked rag for Loretta's eyes. Handing it over, their fingers brush and Cussy freezes in horror. Loretta grabs her hand and tells her that she's a fine mountain woman, no matter what color her skin is. Cussy is overwhelmed with the loneliness and shame most people make her feel. After tucking Loretta into bed, Cussy mounts **Junia** and heads home in the dark, frightened to know that Vester is hunting her in the woods.

It seems that Cussy Mary has experienced enough discrimination to render her permanently suspicious of others. Despite two other moments where white people (Angeline and Jackson) touched her without fear, her instinctive reaction is that people will find her contaminating, like Harriett does. Miss Loretta argues that it's what inside Cussy—her character—that matters. But while Vester stalks her, Cussy can't feel safe.



CHAPTER 11

At home, Pa excuses Cussy Mary's lateness, since he has a soft spot for Miss Loretta. Although it's his night off, he's heading to the mine to cover a shift for another miner whose wife is in labor. Pa tells Cussy to get something to eat from the basket Doc left earlier. He occasionally brings **food** and treats to try to talk Pa or Cussy Mary into letting him examine them or take blood or skin samples. Cussy Mary starts to tell Pa about the noises she's heard in the woods, which he assumes is a bobcat. As he walks out the door, she mumbles about her encounter with Vester, but he doesn't hear her.

Despite the hardship of his life and the discrimination that he faces, Pa is still committed to taking care of his fellow miners, demonstrating his humanity and kindness. Pa cares for others without expecting for things in return. By contrast, Doc's generosity is meant to entice Cussy Mary or Pa into allowing him to perform medical experiments on them to find the root cause of their blue skin.



Alone, Cussy Mary hurries through her chores. She lies down on the mattress that Pa bought at the Company Store hoping it would help her heal faster after her beating. He had to work extra shifts for two weeks to cover the cost. She thinks about the horrific hunger Henry and families like his suffer. No one has enough, and the Company keeps everyone in debt. The injustice and anguish make Cussy scream.

The costly mattress that Pa buys for Cussy represents his love and concern for Cussy, though the mattress might also reflect Pa's guilt over forcing Cussy's marriage to Charlie. Despite her own difficulties, Cussy is worried about those who have less than she does, showing her kindness and empathy and underscoring the terrible toll of life in the hills.



CHAPTER 12

The hardest drop on Cussy Mary's Wednesday route is Hogtail Mountain, where she climbs up to a WPA fire watchtower to deliver **books** to R.C. Cole. He's trying to use his learning from the library loans to work his way up to fire watch dispatcher, then forest ranger. Today, he can't come down because he's keeping an eye on a potential fire in the distance. The work is dangerous—his father died in a lightning strike, and a thunderstorm almost got R.C. himself last summer.

The remoteness of R.C. Cole's tower offer yet another reminder of how remote and isolated some of Cussy Mary's patrons are. Without her service, there's no way they could access books and the opportunities they provide. Yet, the remote tower also illustrates the independence and resourcefulness of people who can live in these hard places. For R.C., the books offer a chance to better himself and to move up in the world.



In addition to his old loans, R.C. gives Cussy Mary two letters, since she can get them into town—and on to their recipients—faster than he can. One is to Ruth Beck’s father, asking for her hand in marriage. Firewatching is a lonesome job, and after a year of faithful courting, R.C. is ready to take the next step in their relationship.

At the foot of Hogtail Mountain, Cussy Mary waits for Queenie since their paths cross on Wednesday. To pass time, she reads a passage from *Wind in the Willows* aloud to **Junia** in her best newscaster voice, stumbling over some of the longer words. When Queenie rides up behind her, she gently mocks Cussy for concreting up her own “musical words” with “city airs.” Cussy protests that she wants to learn as much as she can, to know all the words and their meanings. Queenie lends her the dictionary she got from her pa.

Queenie has been thinking of leaving, maybe for Philadelphia, where she learned that there’s an assistant librarian job opening. She applied last week. Queenie longs to live in a big city where there is opportunity and a Black community. As she and Cussy Mary part ways, Cussy envies Queenie for having a community to belong to. Even in the city, Cussy fears she’d be singled out for her blue skin.

Cussy Mary sometimes delivers her patrons’ letters with their **books**, and she has mail for the Evanses. Mr. Evans is away, and Mrs. Evans is illiterate, so she asks Cussy to read the letter to her. The letter from their son announces the birth of their first granddaughter, named after Mrs. Evans, and bears news of their success in cattle ranching in Nebraska. As a thanks, Mrs. Evans gives Cussy some crackling **bread** for her ride.

Cussy Mary’s next patron is Timmy Flynn. Because his mother refuses the Pack Horse Library, Cussy leaves his **books** in a pot on the edge of the property. Today, Timmy playfully sneaks up on Cussy. He’s skinny and underfed, but too prideful to accept charity. So Cussy tricks him into eating the **bread** Mrs. Evans gave her. Before she leaves, she has another trick up her sleeve, convincing Timmy to carry her best scrapbook to his mother. Cussy hopes that the recipes and whittling tips it contains will convince her to borrow some more books. As Timmy runs home and Cussy Mary turns back to the path, she and Junia hear something—or someone—rustling in the trees behind them. They’re still being hunted.

Given the remoteness of some of their patrons, the Pack Horse librarians sometimes rendered assistance carrying messages and mail between patrons and town, as Cussy Mary does for R.C. here. Despite his ability to live on his own, R.C. is lonely and would like the companionship of a wife, pointing toward the interdependence that characterizes human nature, no matter how independent an individual may be.



Cussy Mary faces so much discrimination and abuse that she doesn’t always want to be herself, and her attempt to appropriate the city-educated voice of the newscasters is an element of her desire to transcend her appearance. Queenie chastises her because she understands that it’s a person’s character that counts, not their appearance. And Cussy has a good character, alive with intelligence and curiosity.



Queenie also understands the importance of belonging to a community, something neither she nor Cussy have in Troublesome Creek. Unfortunately for Cussy, however, there isn’t a big city where she can go to live among other Blues.



The letter from the Evans’ son, like Cussy Mary’s earlier conversation with Queenie, offers a reminder that escape from Troublesome Creek is possible, and that life is much easier in some parts of the world. Nevertheless, Cussy lightens the hardship of the mountains when she reads the letter to Mrs. Evans, and in response, Mrs. Evans generously offers her some food, one of the most precious gifts in the mountains.



Like Miss Loretta, Timmy Flynn’s mother is suspicious of the content and nature of the books that the Pack Horse Library offers. But, also like Miss Loretta, her caution doesn’t translate into hatred or violence like it does for Vester. Again, she demonstrates that there are a variety of viewpoints on modernity and change. Like everyone else, Timmy has a hard life and doesn’t get enough of the things he needs to thrive, whether that’s food or books. Cussy, because of her kind nature, shares both with him (and his mother) in abundance.



CHAPTER 13

Junia's screams—and a shotgun blast—rouse Cussy Mary from a deep sleep. She rushes down from the loft and tries to arm herself, but Pa's gun is missing. Opening the door, she realizes that he's in the yard, trying to keep Junia away from a body on the ground. Cussy quiets the mule, then realizes it's Vester Frazier lying, mule-trampled, on the ground. A collapse temporarily shut the mine down and Pa came home early to find Vester—and his hunting knife—on the ground. Junia must have heard and busted out of her stall to attack him.

Cussy Mary tells Pa that Vester has been stalking her, and about their encounter in the woods on her first day back to work. Although they both know that Vester will never leave them alone, Pa insists that they carry him inside and send for Doc because they're "God-fearing folk," but Cussy knows he really means they're "careful folk," who have to be wary not to run afoul of the white people who hate and fear the Blues.

In the end, Junia succeeds in protecting Cussy from direct danger by trampling Vester. But this will open the door to yet other kinds of abuse down the road. Although Cussy is proud of her independence, in the end, she still needs the help and protection of others like Junia and Pa. No one can go through life truly alone, as Cussy is learning.



In stalking and hunting her, Vester has been treating Cussy Mary like an animal rather than a human being. But Cussy and Pa choose to treat him like a human being. In part, this is for self-preservation: they're already stigmatized and distrusted, and they can't risk their precarious safety. But it's a brave demonstration of humanity and kindness in the face of hatred.



CHAPTER 14

Doc pulls a sheet over Vester Frazier's dead body. Junia trampled his ribs and "other innards," but Pa also gave him some foxglove to stop his bleeding. Although he claims it was a normal dose, too much could have hastened the pastor's death. It looks bad that two Fraziers have been found dead with the Blue Carters, even though Vester was on Carter land and Pa should have the right to defend himself. Cussy Mary and Pa are in a very vulnerable position. Vester was kin to the Sheriff, and that might overrule their personal bad blood. Not even his attempt to rape Cussy Mary will be accepted as an excuse—the community tends to shame and shun women who accuse men of rape rather than protect them. Doc and Pa send Cussy Mary outside while they discuss how to fix this problem, and she fears that Doc wants to fix it with her.

Foxglove is a plant herbalists use to treat bleeding and heart disorders; by dosing Vester with it, Pa is relying on old folk ways of healing. But because folk remedies were prepared at home rather than in a lab or factory, it's hard to know the active dose in any preparation. It's possible that the overdose was accidental, but also that it wasn't, and the question of responsibility further endangers Cussy Mary and Pa in just the way they feared at the end of the previous chapter. Cussy's multiple vulnerabilities are on display at this moment, too. People discriminate against her because she's Blue, but in a society that tends to blame women for their own sexual assaults, her gender also puts her at a disadvantage. .



CHAPTER 15

On the porch, Cussy Mary eavesdrops as best she can on Pa and Doc. She hears Pa repeat Vester's dying words, that God told him to "plant his white seed in her to rid the land of the Blue Devil." And although Vester was a devil and a charlatan, he's a valued member of the community to many people. Pa says something that Cussy can't hear, and Doc says it's a lot to ask a man to look the other way without compensation. All he asks for is permission to perform the medical research on Cussy Mary that he's always wanted to do. Cussy Mary runs to Junia's stall and nearly collapses from fear.

It's clearly foolish to make judgments about people based on their appearance rather than their character, but that's what most people seem to do. Vester Frazier was an evil, devious, and unholy man who wanted to rape Cussy Mary. But unlike Cussy Mary, Pa, and other non-white people, Vester was well liked and respected. Doc offers to help protect the Carter family, but by using Cussy's participation as a bargaining chip, he betrays a dehumanizing attitude toward her—he doesn't treat her as if she is a member of his kind of person, since she has a different skin color than him.



CHAPTER 16

Two days later, Cussy Mary protests that she's just Blue, not ill. She doesn't want to go with Doc to Lexington; she wants to stay home and work on a scrapbook for her patrons. Pa grabs her wrist and insists that she will go and help with the experiments. Maybe they will even discover a cure. Once again, Pa is trying to keep Cussy safe. If Doc says anything about Vester, they'll be executed. Their self-defense was justified, but Blues have been hanged for less.

At 7 a.m., Doc arrives to collect Cussy Mary. They ride his horse into Troublesome Creek, where his Jamaican housekeeper, Aletha, refuses to allow a Blue into the home of her late mistress, "Missus Lydia." Her accent is musical but so thick that Cussy can barely understand her.

To get to Lexington, Doc and Cussy Mary will take his car. Cussy has seen them at a distance, but she's never ridden in one before. At first, she's scared stiff, but soon she's marveling at the speed and smoothness of the ride. She is even lulled to sleep by the gentle motion of the car and the warm sunshine.

Doc gently wakes Cussy Mary up when they reach Lexington, and she is overwhelmed by the fancy clothes people wear, the easy availability of newspapers (which are so precious and rare in the mountains), the smells of oil and concrete, and the sound of urban bustle. When they arrive at the hospital, she sees a nun in real life for the first time. Doc leads Cussy through the maze of hospital corridors to the Colored Ward, where he brings her to a room and asks her to undress and put on an examination gown.

Cussy Mary protests that she isn't ill because she knows that there's nothing inherently wrong with her skin color. She feels stigmatized and isolated because of the way other people react to it, but that only shows their short-sightedness and discriminatory tendencies. Nevertheless, her skin color has rendered her vulnerable to the judgments and control of others, and to preserve her safety, she must help Doc advance scientific understanding.



Earlier in the book, Cussy Mary maintained that her situation was worse than that of the Black residents of town, since her skin color is both devalued and considered unnatural. When Aletha, who is Black, refuses to let her into Doc's house, this seems to reinforce Cussy's sense of persecution.



Although Cussy Mary is aware of the existence of cars, she never expected to ride one herself. At first, the modern technology is alarming, but she soon becomes comfortable with it, suggesting that people shouldn't fear change as much as some in Troublesome clearly do.



As they enter the city, the overwhelming details of the urban landscape strike Cussy as strange and mechanical. The city and the hospital are a bewildering maze of paths that she can't navigate herself, which contributes to the feeling that Cussy is a small person unable to control her own destiny. And, since Doc is using Cussy Mary as an experimental subject rather than an individual, he further contributes to her sense of dehumanization.



Cussy Mary, overwhelmed and panicked by the new atmosphere and the medical tools on display, is unwilling to comply. A Black man named Dr. Randall Mills will be joining Doc to examine Cussy and after introductions, the two men leave the room so Cussy can change. When she realizes that the exam gown is split up the front—or back, she can't tell—she refuses to put it on. Impatient, Doc summons two nurses, who wrestle Cussy Mary to the floor, undress her, and administer a sedative via anal suppository. They marvel at her blue skin, poking, slapping, and commenting on it. They lay Cussy, naked, on the exam table with her arms and legs spread out and restrained with leather straps. For a few moments, Cussy can feel the doctors' hands "crawling over and down and inside" her, taking samples, until she falls into a drugged sleep.

Doc is kinder and more humane to Cussy Mary than many of the other people in her community—or the nuns who prepare her for examination. But still, his gentleness turns to impatience and frustration when she doesn't comply with his orders. Again, this suggests that his ability to see her as an individual human being (rather than an interesting scientific specimen) is limited. He reminds us of the range of discrimination and abuse that Cussy faces. Sometimes it's outright abuse, like when Harriett and Eula mock her. At other times (like in the hospital), it's a more subtle belief that she's not worthy of the same dignity as other people.



CHAPTER 17

Cussy Mary awakens from her drugged slumber in the back seat of Doc's car. She feels queasy and sore. One of her arms is swathed in bandages. Fearfully, she asks Doc what he did to her, and Doc turns towards her. He promises that the abrasions won't scar and that she will be as fine as a person with chocolate-colored blood can be. He says, "I'm sorry the nurses were rough with you, Bluet," but the research is important and may allow him to fix her. Cussy doesn't want to be fixed; she wants to be accepted as she is.

Cussy Mary's experience at the hospital is degrading and terrifying, in large part because she doesn't know what happened to her there. Doc treated her as an interesting body, not as an individual in charge of herself. Doc addresses her by her demeaning nickname, "Bluet," reinforcing the idea that others—including him—really can't see past the color of her skin. His eager justification of his research, which will benefit him more than Cussy (who doesn't feel like she needs to be fixed), undercuts his apology for the rough treatment



Cussy Mary realizes she has cramps, and Doc reports that they took samples of her blood, skin, and cervix. He offers her a **snack** of pear and cheese, but she's in too much pain to eat. Doc hands her the food and some laudanum drops to ease her pain, and Cussy is surprised at how they make her feel instantly better. Then he gives her a bottle of rubbing alcohol and a jar of honey, instructing her to clean and treat her cuts daily until they heal. Cussy smiles; every Kentucky woman knows about honey's healing properties, but it's hard to get ahold of. She tucks the medicines into her bonnet and falls back asleep.

For all the terror in the possibility that Vester would rape Cussy, in the end, it's Doc who violates her body by taking intimate samples from her. Discrimination and the violence it allows come in many forms, some overt, and others justified by scientific research. But Cussy finds a way to turn her suffering into something good when she realizes that she can take Doc's gifts of food and medicine and share them.



CHAPTER 18

Cussy Mary and Doc arrive back in Troublesome Creek just before dark and take Doc's horse back to the Carter place. Before he leaves, Doc gives Cussy two satin hair ribbons to replace the twine that used to secure her braids. She says, "thank you," and accepts them, even though she knows that his generosity will last only as long as she complies with his experiments. As Cussy reaches the porch, Doc tells her once more that he thinks he can cure her.

Doc's gesture of a gift seems to recognize Cussy Mary as a fellow member of his "kind," but she's all too aware that Doc's interest in her is instrumental and will only last as long as she's helping him. Generous gestures are highly valued in this harsh countryside, and Cussy is generous with others. In contrast, Doc's "gift" is more like a payment.



Inside, Pa has fallen asleep covered in coal dust. He rouses enough to ask Cussy Mary if Doc took good care of her, and she reassures him. He also gives her a coal-blackened envelope to take to R.C. Cole. Cussy packs Doc's medicines and the letter into her satchel, then tends to **Junia**. In the warmth of the evening, she goes to the creek to bathe, taking a mirror with her. She looks at her face in the mirror, feeling horror rise at seeing her blue skin. She doubts that there's a potion strong enough to cure her, no matter what Doc says. Before she dresses, she inspects the areas where the doctors sampled her flesh using the mirror. None of the scratches are deep.

Inside, Pa is dressing for the mine, even though it's Saturday. He's going to a secret union meeting. When the Company catches wind of any organizing, they tend to use violence and arson to shut the miners up. Cussy doesn't fuss at Pa but makes sure to add the **pear** and cheese Doc gave her to his lunch bucket. He leaves with a promise to rent a horse and clear some of the briars on her trails later in the week.

Cussy Mary eats some biscuits and starts her evening chores. While she works, her thoughts return to the hospital, and she tries to imagine what the doctors did to her. To wash away her feelings, she furiously scrubs her clothes on the washboard until her mind stills. Calmed, she prepares for her Monday route by setting aside a news article about a fire for R.C., adding a **book** from her mother's collection to her satchel, setting aside a baby care pamphlet for Angeline, and packing up Doc's medicines and some freshly cleaned bandages. These precious gifts are worth more than gold, or chickens: they are what Mr. Moffit needs to live, and the Moffit family won't survive without them.

CHAPTER 19

Cussy Mary finds Angeline working in her garden. Her first question is when Doc is coming. In answer, Cussy returns the unwanted corn seeds to her. Mr. Moffit has developed a bad fever, and Angeline throws the seeds to the ground before rushing inside and collapsing into tears at her husband's bedside. Above the bed is a calendar marked "Honey" that counts down the days until her baby's arrival. Mr. Moffit's foot is red and swollen and leaking foul-smelling, greenish pus.

In the aftermath of the violent and terrifying day at the hospital, Cussy Mary finds solace in the routines of her life and reminders of how important her role in the community is (she's about to bring mail and necessary medicines to her patrons). When she bathes, she looks at herself and feels horror over her blue skin. This contrasts with her repeated claims that she doesn't need to be fixed, suggesting that she has internalized the discrimination and hatred that she feels from others.



Neither Cussy Mary nor Pa can protect the other from the dangers of their respective jobs. Each is motivated in part by their desire for autonomy and control over their own destiny and in part by their humanity and desire to help others. Cussy can't stop Pa, but she can show her care and concern by sharing the food Doc gave her with him.



Cussy's scrubbing of her clothes suggests that she feels polluted in some way by her experience at the hospital. And, since Harriett has already compared her to an inkblot, the idea of stains is strongly associated with the discrimination that Cassie routinely suffers in her home. Doc's experiments are a subtler version of Harriett's hatred; both suggest that there's something wrong with Cussy, and her desire to clean herself and her clothes shows how much she has unconsciously absorbed these messages. But she still finds strength and solace in doing things that help other people around her.



The harsh realities of life are on display at the Moffit household, where poverty, hunger, and sickness have brought Mr. Moffit to the brink of death just as Angeline is about to have their first child. In contrast to this pain and suffering, Doc's focus on "curing" Cussy Mary's blueness seems petty, suggesting that there are more important things to do than to discriminate against people who have a different skin tone.



Cussy Mary explains that she's brought medicine: willow bark to make a tea that will ease the fever, alcohol to wash the wounds, honey to disinfect them, clean bandages, and laudanum for the pain. Angeline, overjoyed, places Cussy's hand over her swollen belly so she can feel the baby's vigorous kicking. Then, the two women set about tending to Mr. Moffit. But when Cussy lifts his leg to wash his foot, he rouses and swears at her. He doesn't want a "colored [to] touch me an' bring more infection." Angeline chastises him for being ornery, but Mr. Moffit refuses to accept Cussy's aid, and Cussy quietly leaves the house.

Cussy Mary's medicines are a mix of the traditional (willow bark and honey) and modern (alcohol, laudanum). There's value in the old ways, but also in the new ideas coming in from the outside world. Sadly, Mr. Moffit's fear and hatred of Cussy's difference (her blue skin) still blinds him to her generosity, and rather than accepting what she has to offer, he runs her out of the house. It seems that he would rather die than be touched by a so-called "colored" person, showing just how deep discrimination can run and how irrationally it makes people behave.



CHAPTER 20

Several hours after leaving the Moffits, Cussy Mary arrives at Jackson Lovett's place. He looks up from tending his garden with a happy greeting for her and **Junia**. Cussy hands him a copy of *Brave New World*, which used to belong to her mother. The **book** is banned in Kentucky, but Pa managed to get a copy as a Christmas present for Cussy's mother years earlier. Cussy flushes a peacock blue while defending the book as "clean." It's at least cleaner than many of the real-life dramas going on in the hills. She loves its vision of a society with no hunger, illness, or war. Suddenly, she feels stupid and worried: what if Jackson reports her to the Center and she loses her job?

The book that Cussy Mary shares with Jackson is deeply meaningful to her, since it's one of her few connections to her mother and represents the love between her parents. It also reminds us that people fear the power of books to influence people's ideas; banned books are usually perceived as threatening to the status quo of a society. But, as Cussy points out, terrible and distressing things happen in real life all the time, and expecting a sanitized version of life in books is silly. Still, sharing the book is a significant risk, and it shows that (like Junia before her), she's coming to trust Jackson.



Finally, Jackson says, simply, "Your mother has good taste." When Cussy Mary explains that her mother died, he offers a heartfelt condolence. Then he thrills her by thanking her by name for the book. Jackson retrieves an apple and his previous loan from his cabin. He hands the **book** over to Cussy alongside a copy of Pearl S. Buck's *Sons* as a personal loan. The two are both fans of Buck's work, especially *The Good Earth*. Both are drawn to the character of O-Lan, who was too ugly to be loved but impossibly brave, and Farmer Lung, who loved the land.

Jackson and Cussy bond over the banned book she's brought him (showing that they aren't small minded and fearful about the power books have) and over other books that have given them a context to understand the human struggle for survival in a harsh world. Their conversation—in which Jackson calls her by her name—contrasts with Cussy's earlier attempt to connect with Harriett through books; Harriett rejected the offer of friendship while Jackson reciprocates it.



Jackson loves the land, as does Pa, who tells Cussy that it will stop feeding the people if they hurt it. And the Company hurts the land recklessly. Jackson is clearing some of his land by hand and selling the timber. But he doesn't plan to take too many trees; just enough to make space for a barn and to thin the forests a little bit so new trees can grow.

The greed and recklessness of the mine companies, which see the land and the people who live there as tools to make money, makes life in rural Kentucky even harder. There are responsible and irresponsible ways to use the land; Jackson's way is humane and responsible because he's a good and thoughtful person.



Painfully aware that she's said too much and stayed too long, Cussy thanks him for the **book** and prepares to leave. She's astonished when Jackson walks her to **Junia**. After feeding the mule a bit of **apple**, Jackson offers Cussy a slice. But as she reaches for the fruit and her fingers touch Jackson's, Junia rears and knocks them apart. As the mule stomps indignantly down the path, Jackson laughs in amusement.

Cussy Mary is surprised that Junia has come to trust Jackson, even though she trusts him herself. But Junia's motion keeps them from touching and suggests that Cussy isn't yet ready to consider a deeper relationship with Jackson. Nevertheless, by sharing books and food with each other, they have already demonstrated their care and concern for each other.



CHAPTER 21

Cussy Mary is so late that Winnie stopped expecting her at the schoolhouse. This week, Henry has developed the telltale rash of pellagra (a potentially fatal vitamin deficiency). He's starving to death. Cussy tries to offer him the **apple** in her bag, but Winnie stops her. It wouldn't be fair to single out Henry publicly; all the children are hungry. Winnie wishes that there was more outreach in the hills, that a block of cheese or a loaf of bread would come along with the Pack Horse Library **books**. Nevertheless, she takes the apple from Cussy and promises to give it to Henry privately. His mother's latest baby didn't make it. From inside the school, Henry presses his face to the glass and waves good-bye to Cussy, as silent and pale as a ghost.

This conversation dramatizes Pa's claim at the beginning of the book that books, while nice enough, don't put desperately needed food in people's bellies. Henry's rash is an ugly and inescapable reminder of the difficult life and extreme poverty in this area. While individual acts of generosity, like Cussy Mary leaving him an apple, are meaningful, they aren't enough to fix the problem. Only modernization—better schools, more infrastructure, unionization to prevent labor abuses by coal companies—will ultimately address the issue.



CHAPTER 22

Cussy Mary skips Mr. Prine because she doesn't have a new *Time* magazine for him. Instead, she rides straight to Martha Hannah's house. Cussy's mind wanders from the medical tests to Jackson to new songs on the radio, and she's surprised when **Junia** stops up short in alarm. Fortunately, it's not another Frazier. It's Martha Hannah's husband, the moonshiner Devil John. He looks to be in a troublesome mood, and he tells Cussy that there's a problem with her **books**. They're keeping his children and wife from doing their chores.

As always, Junia is on the lookout for Cussy Mary, alerting her to potential dangers and keeping her from harm. Devil John doesn't want to harm Cussy Mary, even though he looks a little scary. He's suspicious of the books, since they are preventing his family from doing the very necessary work required to survive in the mountains.



Cussy Mary apologizes but secretly she's thrilled. Devil John refuses to send his children to school—most mountain folk don't know it's the law and wouldn't care if they did know—and her **books** are their only shot at learning. Devil John doesn't want any more wasteful, "highfalutin books that fritters away time." In response, Cussy pulls out a *Boys' Life* magazine that was donated by the Boy Scouts. It shows how to tie knots, fish, and make rabbit traps as well as teaching them some prayers and sermons.

Devil John's refusal to send his children to school is yet another example of resistance to modernization. The fiercely independent mountainfolk don't want to be told what to do by a faraway government and are more worried about their day-to-day survival than anything else. Nevertheless, Cussy Mary demonstrates the power of books to expand people's horizons when she successfully talks Devil John into accepting loans that are useful for him and his family.



The mention of sermons only riles up Devil John, who doesn't want a "charlatan's fire-waving finger up [his] ass." He wasn't a fan of Vester Frazier. Cussy Mary remembers the day she encountered Vester in the woods. She thinks that she saw a shadow or heard a noise, and she wonders if Devil John sent Junia back to save her. Devil John keeps talking, saying that Martha Hannah reads the Bible every day to the children. As he becomes intrigued with the *Boys' Life*, Cussy brings out her scrapbook, and teases some of its contents to Devil John, which include good chores and tips from the local water witch on choosing a divining rod. Finally convinced, Devil John decides to allow only canning and recipe books after planting and harvest. All the other books will need to wait until the winter.

Devil John's rejection of Vester Frazier is a reminder that not everyone in town has the same beliefs and alliances. While many people are on Vester's side (the side of racism, prejudice, hatred, and violence), there are exceptions. And it seems like Devil John may not just tolerate Cussy Mary but like her and be concerned about her well-being; she thinks that it's possible that he helped rescue her the day that Vester attacked her in the woods.



CHAPTER 23

R.C. Cole is thrilled to see Cussy Mary on Wednesday morning, dancing with excitement to get a reply from his girlfriend's father. But he's crushed when the letter informs him that he's not good enough for Ruth Beck. Her father wants her to have an honorable, proper provider, like a coal miner. He refuses to allow her to marry anyone in the "We Poke Along" program, as some people call the WPA. Cussy knows that there are many local men too proud to accept "charity" to erect outhouses, build roads, or construct bridges on the government's payroll, and they would rather starve instead. R.C. declares that he won't let Ruth go, and he takes off down the mountain path, headed for town to get her. Cussy only knows about romance from books, but she still cheers R.C. on.

Mr. Beck's dislike of the WPA program is representative of the distrust many people in this corner of Kentucky have over the intrusion of the government and the changes of modernity. Yet, in light of the greed and inhumanity of the coal company, Mr. Beck's preference for coal miners (of which he is one) is shortsighted. The coal company takes and abuses, while the WPA is adding value and important resources to the community. Displaying the strong autonomous streak that characterizes the rural Kentuckians in the book, R.C. refuse to take Mr. Beck's no for an answer.



CHAPTER 24

People are starting to wonder about Vester Frazier's absence. The talk doesn't worry Cussy Mary, because everyone knows that the Blues aren't allowed in church and didn't associate with the pastor. But knowing that Vester is buried in the yard frets at her mind, and she takes to piling stuff on top of his grave until one night Pa disinters him and moves the body elsewhere. Slowly the talk shifts to the conditions in the mine, the vengeance of the Company against the union, and the missing miners, one of whom is Pa. When he didn't come home one night, Cussy and **Junia** checked his route for signs of animal attack. Finding nothing, Cussy sent a letter to another miner by way of Queenie, asking for news.

Cussy's fear and guilt manifest in her obsessive attention to Vester Frazier's grave. But the talk of the town doesn't focus on the pastor for long, since there are many other hardships and difficulties to contend with. When Pa goes missing, Cussy immediately fears violence, since the mine company frequently uses violence to enforce its will on its employees. In this moment of fear and uncertainty, Cussy Mary can rely on the help of others—her coworker Queenie, the other miners, showing that she is perhaps not as isolated as she sometimes fears.



When a large delivery comes into the center, Cussy eagerly rides to town, hoping that Queenie has news for her. At work, Cussy's nervous distraction makes her clumsy, drawing Eula's anger. Cussy listens to Eula and Harriett share meanspirited gossip about the townsfolk. She's shocked when Harriett explains the Lysol douche she's been using to treat her itchy lady bits. She saw an advertisement for the product in a magazine and had a cousin mail her the Lysol. Its box was busted open at the post office; embarrassingly, everyone saw what she'd ordered. But it was worth it to clear up her woes before her cousin, Cory Lincoln, arrives for the Pie Bake Dance. Everyone knows Harriett is sweet on Cory.

Cussy Mary hears **Junia** fussing outside, and she looks up to see Jackson Lovett approaching the post office with a bouquet of blue flowers. Before Cussy can intervene, Junia snatches the flowers from him. When he catches sight of Cussy in the window, he calls out that Junia likes flowers like a proper lady, and Cussy wonders who he was planning to give them to. Harriett, attracted by the commotion, snaps at Cussy, the "stinkin' inbred," to keep the window closed, stop daydreaming, and get back to work. Tears well up in Cussy's eyes. She knows that Harriett's family has had some close-kin marriages; many people have, since it's hard to meet or marry outside of the hills. In contrast, Cussy's grandfather came all the way from France.

The youngest librarian, 18-year-old Birdie, enters the Center. Harriett mocks her because she's tall, calling her "Bird's Nest." She's followed by Constance Poole, who has stopped by to gossip with Eula and Harriett. Finally, Queenie arrives. She ignores Harriett's order to start on the most thankless task, because she's only there to resign. She shows Eula the letter confirming her appointment to the Philadelphia library. When Harriett finds out that she's going to be making \$4.85 more a month—almost \$4 more than Harriett and Eula—Harriett gripes that it's "a crime to pay a darkie more."

Cussy Mary knows that without Queenie, she will be the only colored librarian and her life will be harder. But she's also proud of her friend. A few minutes later, Queenie quietly hands Cussy a note from her Pa. Cussy shelves the last books in her pile, stuffs a newspaper into her satchel, then rushes out the door, ignoring Eula's cries of "Widow Frazier" and Harriett's furious cries of "Bluet!"

Modernity and change come in many forms, one of which is an increasing female control over bodily autonomy and reproduction. Early in the book, Cussy uses an herbal remedy to induce an abortion after she discovers that she's pregnant with Charlie Frazier's baby. The Lysol douche that she and Harriett have seen advertised is also meant for use as a discrete abortifacient. While it's not clear if that's exactly how Harriett used it—she references symptoms that could arise from various infections—this moment suggests that Harriett's belief in her own moral superiority is suspect. Her incestuous attraction to her cousin confirms her poor moral sense.



It seems obvious that the blue flowers are meant for Cussy Mary—Junia seems to be trying to accept them in her place—yet Cussy can't accept this thought. She's so used to being devalued and demeaned that she can't imagine that someone would want to pay good attention to her. Harriett, on the other hand, seems to understand immediately that Jackson is interested in Cussy, and responds with abuse. Since she sees Cussy as a lesser human because of her skin color, she is angry at signs that other people value her. Moreover, Harriet exposes the arbitrary nature of her when she complains that Cussy is inbred—Cussy isn't, while Harriett is. But Harriett is white and therefore protected from judgment in a way Cussy isn't.



Although Cussy Mary and Queenie bear most of Harriett's abuse, at heart she's just a mean gossip and spares no one her cutting comments, including the white librarian, Birdie. Still, she reserves most of her anger for people who, unlike herself, don't have white skin. While it's clear that she doesn't like Queenie and won't miss her, she resents that the Black woman found an opportunity to better herself, and she's particularly angry at the idea that a non-white person would be paid a wage better than Harriett herself for any reason, including having a better job than hers.



The people in town treat Cussy Mary with the same disdain and discrimination they reserve for other non-white people, and she fears that if she's the only target of Harriett and Eula's disdain, her life will get worse. Yet, Cussy also demonstrates her ability to ignore their abuse when she rushes out of the center with the letter from Pa despite their angry cries. Notably, both call her by hated labels rather than her name, showing their disdain for her as a person.



CHAPTER 25

Cussy Mary is relieved that Pa is alive and horrified to realize the position she put Queenie in. The Company harasses or harms anyone they catch passing union notes. Cussy waits until she and **Junia** are completely alone on the trail before opening the letter. Pa is in “family talks”—code for union negotiations—near the Tennessee border. He says he’ll be home in two nights.

When **Junia** halts, Cussy puts down the letter and sees the rattlesnake directly in their path. She tries to force Junia to go around but the mule refuses, and in their argument, Cussy is thrown to the ground. She and the letter land within inches of the rattlesnake’s bite. Suddenly, she hears a loud explosion. Convinced that Company men are after her, she hides her head in her arms. But it’s just Angeline, out hunting. The women quickly realize that Junia refused to go off the trail because she saw the rattlesnake’s nest there. Angeline shoots it, then gathers the dead animals for her **dinner**. Angeline looks wild and free, standing barefoot on the roots of the old trees, and Cussy feels a momentary desire to be wild again, like Angeline, like Cussy herself was as a child.

Angeline reports that Mr. Moffit is healing, thanks to the medicines. She takes Cussy’s hand and kisses it. Cussy recoils, warning Angeline that she shouldn’t be seen touching her, for fear of angering Mr. Moffit or exciting gossip and trouble among other people. Angeline doesn’t care much for Mr. Moffit’s pride, or for the talk of people who don’t care for her and her family like Cussy does. As the women part ways, Cussy’s stomach growls at the thought of the rabbit and rattlesnake **stew** Angeline will be making for dinner, knowing all too well that she won’t have anything more substantial than wild nettle soup herself.

CHAPTER 26

Cussy Mary cooks a pot of nettles on Friday, hoping for Pa’s return. She’s too anxious to wait, or read Jackson’s **book**, so she finally rides **Junia** into town, where the Pie Bake Dance is in full swing. Cautiously, she peeks through the window of the old feed store to watch. Everyone is wearing their best clothes whether they are nervously chatting or boldly dancing. She sees the table laden with pies and thinks of her own recipe for sweet sorghum pie. She sees Harriett in a very short dress, hanging on her cousin’s arm. It all looks dreamy and distant to Cussy, like a magazine picture. The music reminds her of dancing on the porch with her parents and her uncle when she was small.

The fact that it was potentially physically dangerous for Queenie to pass word between Cussy Mary and Pa only highlights the generosity and courage of her actions, showing how people can take care of each other with human goodness.



Yet again, Junia acts as an extension of Cussy Mary, protecting her from dangers that Cussy doesn’t (or can’t) see. The rattlesnake offers a reminder that it isn’t just the hatred of others or the greed of the mine company that makes life dangerous in these parts: everyone has to contend with brutal natural conditions, as well. Life is hard, and it’s only made harder when people refuse to help each other out. Angeline, out shooting rattlesnakes to feed herself, doesn’t have the time to waste on discrimination or hatefulness. Her life is thus simpler and more innocent than the life of others like Eula and Harriett, or even Cussy Mary herself, and Cussy briefly envies her freedom.



The exchange between Angeline and Cussy Mary yet again shows that Cussy Mary is more worried about contaminating others than others are worried about being contaminated by her. She has internalized the discrimination and hatred she receives from Eula, Harriett, and others. She feels that she is less than a full human even when people are treating her as a valuable and loved person.



*Cussy’s growing dissatisfaction with her allotted place in life in *Troublesome* manifests in her impatience for reading. Books can show us a better world or distract us from the pain we face in our world, and Cussy can’t find solace there anymore. She wants to be an accepted and valued member of her community, but she finds herself literally on the outside, barred from the dance and other social functions by signs that say, “No Coloreds.”*



Cussy Mary is so engrossed in the spectacle of the dance that she doesn't hear the man coming until he's wrapped his arms around her. He's drunk, and he slurs into Cussy's ear that he only wants some of her "pie." Cussy struggles to break free, and suddenly there's a crack and the man falls to the ground. She turns to see the Sheriff, Davies Kimbo, standing over him. He warns the drunk to get out of town immediately or face the consequences.

Sheriff Kimbo is surprised to recognize Cussy Mary at the dance. Trying to avoid the subject of her missing father, she says that she has always been curious about the dance and snuck into town to see it. Pointing to the "No Coloreds" sign, the Sheriff says he can't watch over the dancers and her at the same time; she must go home right away. As she mounts **Junia**, he asks if she's seen or heard news of Vester. Cussy, the knowledge and fear in her eyes hidden by the dark, answers that she sees no living souls on her route except her patrons. She just doesn't mention the dead one who hunted her.

CHAPTER 27

Upset from her experiences in town, Cussy Mary hurries home. Thinking about the ladies' fancy dresses and hairdos at the dance reminds her of an article she saw in one of the library magazines that showed how to make rag curls. She tears up a strip of old fabric, wets it, and dresses her hair. Then dances around the room in the arms of a pretend suitor...until she stubs her toe on the bed.

Pa returns home at dawn, bloodied and bruised. Yet he feels responsible to continue the union talks, because his fellow miners selected him to be their spokesperson. Suddenly, Cussy Mary wonders if the only reason they picked Pa is that he's a Blue, and they feel that his life is more expendable than everyone else's. When she asks Pa if his skin color has anything to do with his union duties, he barks between coughs that it's because he is "a Kentucky *miner*, and a damn good one!"

Cussy is so distracted by the vision of the society she wants to be a part of that she doesn't hear danger approaching her. The attempted rape is a graphic reminder that as a Blue and as a woman, she's doubly vulnerable. Fortunately, the Sheriff saves her, fulfilling his duty to preserve law and order in the town.



Still, although he enforces the law and protects the local citizens, like Doc, the Sheriff looks at Cussy as less valuable than other members of the community because she is "colored." She can't even stay on the outside looking in, but must leave town, suggesting that the Sheriff and others are still unreasonably afraid that she will somehow contaminate or ruin their white society. The Sheriff also asks about Vester, showing that not everyone has forgotten about his disappearance and reminding Cussy of the dangers she faces.



Despite the discrimination, hatred, and hardship that she faces, Cussy Mary's human spirit is irrepressible. While she's internalized people's low opinion of her skin color, she also understands that she's valuable. Curling her hair and pretending to dance allows her to demonstrate that value, if only to herself. It also shows the power that books and other library materials to bring the ideas of the wider society to isolated areas.



Cussy Mary worries that Pa has been picked for the most dangerous job because he is a Blue, and thus his fellow miners consider him less worthy and more expendable. Her fears aren't unfounded; Pa's brother was tricked into being a miner's sacrifice years ago. Yet, Pa's essential concern for his fellow miners—a mark of his humanity—means that he'll fight for them despite the hardship and danger.



The next morning, Doc takes Cussy Mary back to Lexington. On the way they pass Kentucky horse farms with stables bigger and grander than any person's house Cussy has ever seen. At the hospital, Cussy shows Doc the knife she brought with her, and she tells him that she will participate in the tests only if she can keep her undergarments on and the black-hearted nuns aren't involved. Doc agrees, and Cussy presses her advantage to ask him for more **food**.

In the Colored Ward, a small Black girl becomes hysterical with fear at the sight of Cussy. Dr. Mills and Doc ask Cussy questions about her family's habits and medical history. When they ask about her kin, she offers to write out a list of her relatives. Dr. Mills is surprised to discover that she's literate, and Doc brags that she's not just literate, she's one of the Pack Horse librarians. When Dr. Mills asks Cussy to read off a letter chart on the wall, she huffs that she already proved she knows her letters. Doc explains it's an eye test. The doctors discuss the possibility the Carters have a recently discovered hereditary blood disorder.

Dr. Mills wants to keep Cussy in the hospital for observation, and when she and Doc protest, he brags that he doesn't need their consent. He can claim that she's a threat to public health and involuntarily quarantine her. Doc erupts in anger, refusing to let Dr. Mills keep Cussy for "[his] interest." Doc thinks that Mills, as a Black man, should understand what persecution feels like. The two men step into the hall, and Cussy can hear them exchanging heated words. When they return, Dr. Mill's coat is crumpled, and he's silent. Doc asks Cussy to give a blood sample that they can test for the hereditary disorder. Impatient to leave, she readily agrees.

CHAPTER 28

Early on Sunday morning, Cussy packs up the **food** from Doc—two blocks of cheese, three loaves of bread, some fruit, jam, and candy—and leaves it on the porch of the school for the children. Sharing it makes the tests worthwhile, and she thanks God for his blessings.

The poverty of the mountains contrasts sharply with the wealth of the Kentucky horse breeders. After the last trip into the hospital, Cussy Mary is prepared: she will defend herself against the nuns and Doc if she must. As in other moments of danger and difficulty, Cussy draws on her own strength and independence—and she uses the opportunity to help her friends and patrons by securing more of the food they so desperately need.



The little girl's fear draws attention to the oddity of Cussy Mary's blue skin and reinforces her feeling that Kentucky society despises and fears her even more than the Black people society also ostracizes. At this stage, the book suggests that white people aren't the only people who discriminate against others. Dr. Mills also takes Cussy's Blue skin as a sign of mental inferiority and is thus surprised to discover that she's literate.



When Dr. Mills wants to keep Cussy in the hospital, he threatens her autonomy and reminds her of her powerlessness against the will of others. He knows that her Blue skin isn't a sign of illness, but he can use this as a rationale to keep her, and most other people (ignorant of her color's true cause) would believe him. In this moment, Doc protects Cussy, earning her gratitude. Evidently, while he's happy to blackmail Cussy into participating in research for his own interest, he's unwilling to extend the same benefits to Dr. Mills. While he notes the similarity between the discrimination that Cussy Mary and Dr. Mills both face (as so-called "colored" people), Doc can threaten and rough up Dr. Mills because the power of white people in racially divided society of the early 20th century protects him.



Cussy Mary continues to turn hardship and suffering—the degradation and terror of the medical experiments—into humanity by sharing the food Doc gives her with those who need it more: Winnie and the students in her school.



On Wednesday night, Doc startles Cussy while she's reading the **book** Jackson gave her. His tests have confirmed that Cussy has methemoglobinemia, a blood disorder that is carried by a recessive gene. He explains that when people with the recessive gene have children, they can pass the disorder on. It can be cured with a drug called methylene blue. Doc injects Cussy, and her hands change from blue to white. It's astonishing: Cussy looks at her reflection in the mirror like she's seeing a stranger. When she pinches her cheeks, they turn pink, not blue. But then, she rushes into the yard to vomit. Doc explains that the drug's side effects, like her nausea, are usually temporary.

The white skin is also temporary, and by the time Doc tries to convince Pa to try it the following morning, Cussy is turning blue again. Pointing to the coal dust on his skin, Pa declares that he only needs his coal-blackened lungs fixed. Sadly, Doc doesn't have a cure for that. Trying to convince Pa, Cussy takes another dose. She quickly turns white, but just as quickly must rush outside to vomit. If the drug is temporary, Pa declares it is "vanity, not a cure." Taking it is "prideful" and "dangerous." Doc tells Cussy she can stop taking it if the side effects are too much, but the thought of being Blue is more horrifying to her than the sickness. She can't stop admiring herself in the mirror, despite the disapproval in Pa's eyes.

CHAPTER 29

Shortly after Doc leaves, Queenie rides into the yard. She has come to say goodbye. She is shocked to discover the change in Cussy Mary, who was already pretty but is "a'might prettier now." She convinces Cussy to ride into the Center with her to surprise Eula and Harriett. Before they go, Cussy tries to return Queenie's dictionary, but Queenie insists that she keep the **book**, which she got from her own father, as a gift.

Cussy Mary vomits on the way into town. Queenie offers her a biscuit to settle her stomach. Cussy tries to refuse, unwilling to take valuable **food** from someone else because of her vanity. But Queenie reminds Cussy that she would do the same if their situations were reversed and gently insists that Cussy eat.

The explanation of Cussy's condition and the medicine that "cures" it demonstrate both the potential and the limits of modern innovation. Knowing why her skin is Blue isn't going to change the way people treat Cussy. And the drug can be lifesaving in the right circumstances but also cause devastating side effects. Nevertheless, Cussy has so internalized others' hatred and fear of her blue skin that she thinks she is more attractive when she is white.



There is a sharp contrast between Doc's eagerness to "cure" Cussy's blueness—even though her skin color is just a superficial difference—and his inability to address Pa's black lung disease. People who are more concerned with the color of someone's skin than their health and safety have the wrong priorities. Nevertheless, discrimination has so hurt Cussy that she grasps at the cure, even if it is, as Pa says, vanity. On one level, she recognizes that people shouldn't care about her color, but on another, she knows that she won't ever fit in with blue skin.



Queenie declares that Cussy Mary was beautiful before, but even she has internalized so deeply the idea that only whiteness is good and beautiful that she thinks Cussy is prettier now that her skin color has changed. Cussy isn't yet able to see herself in the way that the people who love her (Pa, Queenie, Angeline, and Jackson) do. The gift of the dictionary solidifies the relationship between the two women and symbolizes that it will last beyond their upcoming separation.



Queenie demonstrates her humanity by sharing her food with Cussy Mary, just as Cussy Mary has tried to alleviate the hardship of others with gifts of food. In this harsh and hardscrabble existence, kindness and generosity are extremely important.



Queenie is excited about her move, the chance to earn a library degree, and a better future for her sons in the city. She's excited to celebrate Independence Day for the first time in Philadelphia since non-white people weren't allowed to participate in Troublesome's celebration. If Cussy Mary is white now, maybe she can go this year.

As Cussy Mary and Queenie walk into the library Center, Harriett screams for them to get "Out, out, out!" believing that Cussy's new skin color indicates contagious disease. Eula holds a hanky to her nose. The commotion attracts Doc, who happened to be in the adjoining post office. He steps in to declare that Cussy, one of his patients, is fit and healthy. Harriett protests that she's white when she shouldn't be. Doc towers over her and says that if she doesn't pay attention to the fitness of her own plump body instead of Cussy's pretty one, she will never get a man. Angry and ashamed, Harriett retreats in tears to the bathroom.

Loud enough for all to hear, Doc tells Cussy Mary that she's looking "quite lovely today," then leaves. Queenie demands her pay, rousing Eula from her shock. Cussy collects hers too, then meets Birdie and her baby at the door. Birdie also compliments Cussy's beauty, but Harriett stalks up and hisses "A pig in lipstick is *still* a stinkin' pig." Cussy turns to face her, holding her gaze proudly to snatch back some of the humanity that Harriett has stolen.

CHAPTER 30

Cussy Mary rides through the perfect June morning to her outpost, but soon the emotional trauma of the morning catches up and her head starts to ache. Jackson, on his way into town for a timber deal, overtakes her on the trail just as she faints. She comes to on the ground with Jackson cradling her. He's worried that she is ill, but she explains that she's just feeling the side effects of the medicine that "cures" her color. They fade as the drug passes through her system and she turns blue again.

Jackson shakes his head, suggesting that the cure might be worse than the alleged ailment. With horror, Cussy Mary realizes that he considers her vain, just like Pa does. Jackson tries to tell her that there's nothing wrong with her, or her color. But, recalling people's scorn and hatred and her terrible marriage, Cussy strikes out. There's nothing wrong, she declares, with *his* color in a world that only wants whiteness. She hurries home feeling small and ashamed.

Queenie sees Philadelphia as a chance to finally become free and to participate in American society. The racism and discrimination prevalent in Troublesome Creek have kept her permanently on the outside. She's eager to stake a claim for her independence, humanity, and value.



Eula and Harriett react to white Cussy Mary the way they reacted to Blue Cussy, with revulsion and fear. This shows how baseless their discrimination is, and how long-lasting. Cussy's blue skin wasn't a good reason to treat her badly. But because they don't care about treating Cussy well, Harriett and Eula will continue to find reasons to discriminate against her. Doc doesn't help matters when he publicly shames Harriett, even though he's trying to help Cussy.



Doc and Birdie, like Queenie, complement Cussy Mary on her beauty, but this is a new development. He didn't call her lovely when she was blue, and so his comments just reinforce the idea that only whiteness is beautiful. It seems that Cussy is finally getting what she wants: inclusion, kindness, and human dignity. But the cost of others' approval is very high.



The cost of being white grows ever higher the longer that Cussy takes the drugs. Nevertheless, desperate to be accepted and valued, she's willing to take the risks. Jackson, like Eula and Harriett, assumes that her pallor is a sign of illness, but he reacts with care and concern rather than fear and loathing. Cussy Mary is already loved and valued by good people, even if she can't yet accept it in her desire to be loved and valued by people (like Harriett) who have shown themselves to be meanspirited and discriminatory.



Cussy Mary is ashamed to realize that Jackson might think she's vain. She values his opinion of her as much as her father's, hinting at the importance he holds in her heart. But at the same time, he speaks to her out of his own ignorance. He has faced hardship and trauma in his own life, but he is well-liked in the community, and he can't imagine the discrimination that Cussy Mary has faced.



CHAPTER 31

The longer Cussy Mary takes the medicine, the worse the side effects become. By July 2, she can barely make it up Hogtail Mountain. She doesn't want to have to climb the stairs of the watchtower, but with no sign of R.C. she resignedly starts. He opens the door when she is on the first landing. They're both shocked: he because Cussy is white, she because he's been badly beaten. Behind him is a girl who also sports a split lip and black eye.

While R.C. goes back upstairs to get her some water, the girl talks with Cussy Mary. She's Ruth Beck, R.C.'s girl, and she's very proud of her man. Between the two young folks, Cussy gets the whole story: Ruth's father was angered by his proposal and so he beat Ruth. R.C. had to fight Ruth's father and brothers to prove his worth, but once he had "earned" her, the family blessed their marriage and welcomed him into the clan.

Cussy Mary leaves R.C. a flyer for the Independence Day celebration and an *American Forests* magazine she set aside for him. She can't imagine a man loving her as he loves Ruth. As she descends the stairs, R.C. asks her to take care of herself. She's important to her patrons, and they can't have her sick or dead.

Like other patrons and friends, R.C. has always valued Cussy Mary, even when she was blue. She's feeling sorry for herself as she starts to climb up the stairs, but as soon as she realizes that he himself has been hurt, she remembers that she's not the only one who faces hardship in life.



R.C. took it upon himself to earn Ruth over the objections of her family by proving himself to be the kind of man who could take care of her, showing off his independent streak. The outdated ritual also underscores how slowly this rural corner of Kentucky is modernizing.



R.C. and Ruth both inspire Cussy Mary and make her sad because she doesn't feel that she's loveable. The fact that she still feels this way, even though her skin is currently white, suggests that she realizes that she won't fit into white society after living outside its walls for so long. Nevertheless, R.C. reminds her that she is, and has always been, valued by her friends and patrons.



CHAPTER 32

The summer day sizzles with heat as Cussy Mary rides into Troublesome for the Fourth of July celebration. She made a Bible **cake** (the recipe for which relies on memorized Bible verses) for the community potluck, and to placate Pa. He bought expensive sorghum for it at the Company Store for her.

In town, people are spreading a feast on tables outside. Everyone is dressed up, and children are playing tag and kick the can in the streets. Other children play with homemade toys like apple dolls or whimmydiddles. There's a raffle, and the prize is a quilt made by the sewing bee club.

Despite hints that white society isn't prepared to accept her, Cussy Mary still rides into Troublesome Creek to participate (for the first time) in the Fourth of July celebrations. She brings a cake as a symbolic gesture of her generosity and her willingness to leave the past behind her.



The town is alive with activity and joy on this festive day. But the fact that Queenie could never attend and that Cussy Mary couldn't before today offers a sharp reminder that this society doesn't actually include all of its residents equally.



Cussy Mary has only been to the celebration once before, and her family had to leave suddenly when a fight broke out between her uncle and a drunk man. Pa didn't want her to go this year. He worries that the people who hated Cussy when she was a Blue are small-minded and won't stop hating her just because she's changed colors. But Cussy thinks that her respectability, her position as a librarian, and her newly white skin will allow her to fit in. When she runs into children from her route, they do indeed greet her warmly.

Cussy Mary sees Jackson dismounting from his horse on the other side of the street. Harriett rushes over to him, but after a moment, he tips his hat and dismisses her. He doesn't notice Cussy as she walks towards the sewing bee club's sewing circle, where Constance Poole and six others put finishing touches on the celebration quilt.

In the spirit of the day, Cussy Mary decorated her old, brown dress with some lace and seed pearls she found in her mother's trunk. She tied her rag-curl hair back with one of the satin ribbons Doc gave her. She stands for a few minutes, listening to the women chatter about eligible bachelors. It's clear that Constance is sweet on Jackson, and Cussy knows they would make a handsome couple.

Cussy Mary's head starts aching and she contemplates retreating. But, reminding herself that she's now white, she wishes the sewing circle ladies a Happy Fourth and offers them a slice of her Scripture **Cake**. She offers to help with the quilt. The ladies take her pallor as a sign of illness, and they pull away from her until Constance dismisses her after a few embarrassed seconds. As she walks away, she hears one comment on the gall of "a heathen making a Bible cake," while others call her a disgrace and a spectacle. Cussy scurries back to **Junia**, realizing that the drug hasn't redeemed her. The people in this bright, happy place will never accept her, making her feel like she is only fit for the darkness of the woods. She ignores Jackson's friendly greeting and races toward home.

CHAPTER 33

Cussy Mary rides straight to her outpost, vomiting twice on the way. Her hard feelings dissolve as she escapes into reading the **books** that await her there for her Friday route.

Pa's experiences have taught him that discrimination isn't weak enough for something as simple as Cussy changing her skin color to destroy it. Cussy is correct in her understanding of her importance to the community. But she misjudges the community. In her desire for acceptance, she ignores those who already accept and like her because of her library work.



Harriett showed interest in Jackson earlier in the summer, and although she's sweet on her cousin, she's also still clearly interested in Troublesome's most eligible bachelor. He shows no interest in her, but he also doesn't seem to notice Cussy. Undeterred, Cussy approaches the quilters to make a bid to join Troublesome's society.



Like most of the people in the area—especially those living outside of town—Cussy doesn't have many nice things. But she shows her independence and cleverness in dressing up her old dress and dressing her hair festively. Despite her efforts and her brave face, her automatic pairing of Jackson with Constance instead of herself suggests that she still sees herself as less valuable than the other women in town.



Like Harriett and Eula, the ladies think that Cussy is ill, not "cured" of her blueness. And they show that though Cussy can change her appearance, she cannot change the opinions of other. Eula, Harriett, Constance, and others will always be able to find reasons to exclude people they think are different or inferior. Pa, Jackson, Queenie, and R.C. tried to show Cussy that she was valuable no matter what color her skin was, but it's only now that she realizes her desire to be white is a sort of vanity. If people can't accept her for who she is even when she changes to suit their desires, she won't ever be able to change their minds.



Cussy Mary hides away from everyone in her shame, but she finds that books have an almost magical ability to sooth pain and transport a person beyond their own troubles and limited existence.



On Friday, the day after the celebration, Cussy Mary and **Junia** take a heavy load through dark passes and steady rain to bring **books** to Oren Taft. Their meeting place is his grandparents' old home, which is slowly rotting away and covered with wild roses and wisteria. His community of 11 families is unreachable except on foot. The "holler dwellers" who live there are the poorest of the poor.

Catching sight of Cussy Mary's face, Oren asks if she's quite well. Cussy says she's just tired, although the drug keeps making her sick and she and Pa are fighting over her taking it. Oren gives Cussy a bag of fat ramps from his wife, and a recipe for ramp biscuits with hog jowl to add to her scrapbook. Cussy is reluctant to take the ramps, since **food** is so precious in the mountains. But Oren insists.

As they exchange the **books**, and Cussy Mary thinks about how important Oren's willingness to carry books to his community is. She encourages him to apply for Queenie's old job. Oren is pleased and honored. He bids Cussy good health and goodbye, telling her he misses his "bonny Picasso"—her blue skin reminds him of the beautiful blue sky and a painting he saw in one of the library magazines, Picasso's *Woman with a Helmet of Hair*. Then, like a librarian-Santa Claus, he heaves the books onto his back and sets out for home.

CHAPTER 34

That weekend, Cussy Mary has another fainting spell. While she recovers on the floor, Pa bends over her in tears, begging her forgiveness for giving her the blue curse. Ashamed of her "foolish airs" and frightened, Cussy stops taking the methylene blue. She can't afford to be sick or lose her route, and the words of Jackson and Oren are making her think that, if God made her Blue, then blue must be enough for her. When she tells Doc, he simply says that he'll get her more medicine if she changes her mind. But after she turns her back on it, his visits become infrequent and impersonal.

Cussy Mary's meeting with Oren Taft reminds readers of the importance of the Pack Horse Library project; without Cussy, Oren and his community would not only lack books but most contact with the outside world. Coming on the heels of her disastrous experience in town, it suggests that those who denigrate her don't understand her true worth.



Like everyone else, Oren misreads Cussy Mary's pallor as illness. And his reaction—concern rather than disgust—shows that he values her as a human being. Despite being the poorest of the poor, Oren and his community still show their humanity by acts of generosity, like sharing wild onions with Cussy Mary and offering a recipe for her to add to the scrapbook she circulates among her patrons.



When Oren associates Cussy with the Picasso painting, he points towards her inherent worth as a human being and reinforces the comments that Queenie and others have made about Cussy's beauty and worth. Notably, despite his poverty and isolation, Oren is worldly and sophisticated enough (thanks to the Pack Horse project) to know who Picasso is and to see that a person's value isn't limited by the color of their skin.



Cussy comes to terms with who she is because of several influences. First, she sees that patrons like R.C. Cole value her as a person and a librarian. Second, Oren Taft suggested that she's pretty because of her skin color, not in spite of it. Third, renouncing her identity as a Blue risks passing judgment on her own kind, confirming that she sees them as less worthy than other people. Doc was interested in Cussy because she represented an opportunity for him to showcase his scientific and medical skills. When she stops participating, he loses interest in her, suggesting that he still doesn't value her as a human being instead of a test subject.



On a hot Monday afternoon, Cussy Mary rides into the schoolyard. The children were dismissed when the superintendent came by for his annual meeting. He brought news that the WPA is building a new stone school and that Winnie's husband is going to bring her to Detroit at the beginning of August. Winnie wishes she could stay during the months it will take to find a replacement but without her husband's blessing, the superintendent won't let her. And there's one final piece of news: despite the food someone has left for the students, Henry is now too weak to come to school. His mother has requested a drop-off and read.

Henry is added to Cussy Mary's route the next week, and she skips R.C. to ride to his tiny, remote cabin. His mother, Comfort Marshall, meets Cussy at the door. Cussy gives her a sack of **food** (courtesy of a basket from Doc), and when Comfort tries to give her a gift in return—a tiny metal crucifix—Cussy refuses, saying, "Jesus needs to stay with you." A heap of children lie on a corn-shuck mattress, and Cussy notices that all they have to eat is a pan of morel mushrooms and wild thistle soup.

A skeletal Henry lies on a pallet in the corner, too weak to sit up. Cussy has brought *Peter and Wendy* to read and a homemade Pack Horse librarian badge. She solemnly swears him in, then gathers his siblings and asks him to read to them. He can barely make it through the first sentence: "All children, except one, grow up."

CHAPTER 35

Cussy Mary is lost in grief as she rides away from Henry's house, so **Junia** notices Devil John first. He has found her to report that his children are working hard on their chores now. Cussy congratulates him, distractedly thinking about Henry. As Devil John continues, it's clear that he's proud of his children and enjoys listening to them read. They're teaching him to spell some words, too. He asks if Cussy can bring more "Boy Scout reads," a new Bible, and a scrapbook, which she promises to do the following week. And he gives her a bottle of moonshine as a gift.

The work of the WPA represents opportunity for many impoverished people and hope for a better future. But in the near term, Cussy faces the first in a devastating series of losses in the news that Winnie is leaving. Her inability to make her own decision highlights the limitations placed on women and offers a pointed reminder of why Cussy Mary resisted marriage so vehemently. As a wife, Winnie doesn't have full control over her life. And none of the WPA's improvements will save the life of Henry, who is dying of starvation.



Comfort Marshall has suffered much hardship (she recently lost a baby and is about to lose one of her other children), yet she still tries to offer Cussy Mary hospitality and a gift. Hardship may subject people to sub-human conditions, but it can't destroy their humanity and kindness. Cussy refuses the gift, acknowledging that her life, while difficult, is much easier and better than that of the Marshall family.



By making time for Henry, Cussy Mary acknowledges his importance and gives him back some of the humanity his circumstances have stolen from him. This moment also shows the power of books to offer solace in hard times. Henry is dying, but the idea of Peter Pan, the boy who doesn't grow up, comforts him.



Yet again, Junia watches out for Cussy Mary when she needs it. But this time, Junia doesn't alert her to a threat, but to an unexpected source of joy. Devil John has come to ask for more books, since the ones that Cussy recommended have encouraged his children's industry and improved their lives. In the previous chapter, books had the power to carry Henry away from his suffering peacefully. Here, their power is much more practical: they can improve lives by teaching people new ideas and new, better (and often, more modern) ways of doing things.



Later, just as Cussy Mary is about to leave Timmy Flynn's house, his mother comes splashing across the creek with the scrapbook Cussy left a few weeks earlier in her hand. Cussy doesn't have the energy to deal with her fussing and is pleasantly surprised when Mrs. Flynn asks for another **book** just like it. And despite her grief over Henry, her heart warms with a small joy.

The encounter with Timmy Flynn's mother is a sort of extension to Cussy Mary's encounter with Devil John. Like the moonshiner, Timmy's mother was suspicious of the books, wary of the government intruding in her life. But Cussy shared a scrapbook that she'd made herself, featuring useful items and local wisdom. It convinced Timmy's mother that not all books are bad and encouraged her to become a library patron herself.



On the way home, Cussy Mary and **Junia** stop to rest by the creek. Cussy's water bottle is empty, but she doesn't trust the creek water—who knows if it's contaminated by the mine or people's privies. So, she drinks the moonshine. It warms her belly and quiets her troubled spirits, and soon she finds herself deep into an angry prayer for Henry and all the other victims of the blood-soaked Kentucky soil.

Wary of drinking the water—a reminder of the harsh and often unsanitary conditions in this corner of rural Kentucky, where no one has indoor plumbing—Cussy Mary opts for the moonshine instead. She gets a little tipsy, and the alcohol lowers her inhibitions. Freed from the pressure to behave and act in socially-appropriate ways, she vents her anger at God for the cruelty of the world.



CHAPTER 36

On Thursday, Cussy Mary finds a letter from Queenie waiting at the outpost. Despite the distance between them, the letter took only 16 days to arrive. Queenie misses the stars and the quiet of the mountains. Philadelphia is always full of bustle and business, and there are many beggars. Both she and one of her sons have been robbed. But the library is glorious, and her boss appreciates her, and is encouraging her to apply to the Hampton Institute Library School.

The letter from Queenie offers a glimpse of a world that has more opportunities for Black people (and, by implication, for blue-skinned Cussy Mary), although Philadelphia is no utopia. Life is hard there, but the balance of hardship and humanity are better. And Queenie, having escaped the grinding poverty and small-mindedness of rural Kentucky, has the opportunity to improve herself through the power of books and education, which the library and the Library School represent.



CHAPTER 37

The late-July morning is miserably hot as Cussy Mary rides Junia to the Moffit homestead. Both woman and mule catch sight of the body hanging from the tree at the same time. And the baby lying on the ground next to an empty lard tin. Cussy slides to the ground, picks up the newborn, and runs into the cabin calling out Angeline's name. She finds her friend in bed atop blood-soiled sheets, barely alive.

The hardships of life have finally overwhelmed Mr. Moffit and caused him to take his own life. And Angeline is barely clinging to her life. In a place and time where doctors were few and far between and people like the Moffits couldn't afford them, dangers lurked in every aspect of life. It seems that the rain crows Angeline heard in an earlier chapter were warning her about her impending death.



As Angeline puts Honey to her breast, she tells Cussy that when the baby was born, less than an hour ago, Mr. Moffit got mad and took her away. He said he'd rather be dead than stuck with Angeline and Honey, said he wouldn't keep her, said he married a white and now people would think he hadn't. It's only then that Cussy looks at the baby and sees that she is a Blue. But it was Mr. Moffit who carried the genetic mutation, not Angeline; she noticed it when he was sick, and his fingers and toes showed blue. It's Angeline who "married...a colored an' didn't know'd it."

Cussy Mary wants to fetch Doc, but Angeline knows it's pointless. Her mother died the same way after birthing her last child. Angeline begs Cussy to take Honey. She is sure that Mr. Moffit will never come back for the baby (even though she doesn't know he's committed suicide), her kin are all dead, and he was abandoned by his own as a baby. Cussy knows all too well the life of ostracism and loneliness that Honey faces, and for a moment she's overwhelmed by it. Honey deserves rich love that the white world won't give her. And Cussy knows that if she doesn't take and protect Honey, no one will. She promises to care for the baby, and Angeline kisses Cussy's hands.

Angeline's last library loan was a *Good Housekeeping* magazine, and she asks Cussy Mary to read an article she'd marked to her and Honey. Opening the magazine, Cussy sees a picture of a stylish mother holding a plump, well-dressed, and happy baby on her lap. She stops reading when she senses that Angeline is drawing her last breaths, and she whispers, "I love you," to her friend. Angeline's final words are to her daughter: "I want you to read lots of books [because] books'll learn you, Honey." The magazine falls from Cussy's lap to the blood-soaked floor and she begins to pray. Her desperate pleas for Angeline's miraculous revival turn into a howl of fury over the pain in the world.

CHAPTER 38

Cussy Mary lays on the Moffits' bed in shock until the blowflies start to fly in the window, attracted by the smell of death. Cussy covers Angeline's body, carries Honey out on the porch and sits there, rocking Honey and trying to figure out what to do. If she asks Pa for help, people might blame them, as Blues, for the deaths. She isn't even sure anyone knows Angeline was pregnant, or even if anyone else was aware of their hardscrabble life on their tiny homestead. But she knows she must care for Honey and see Honey's parents properly buried.

Mr. Moffit died by suicide rather than face the shame of having a "colored" child—because Honey is Blue. It's characteristic of his intolerance toward others that he thought it was somehow Angeline's fault. Because of Doc's explanations, Cussy understands that both Mr. Moffit and Angeline had to have carried the recessive gene. Angeline doesn't realize her own role, but she does know that Mr. Moffit carried the blueness, which became apparent during his earlier illness. Yet she shows no shame over her husband's color because she doesn't share his intolerance and discriminatory tendencies.



Life is brutal in this corner of rural Kentucky, and Angeline faces her impending death calmly; she saw her mother die this way, too. Cussy Mary protects her from the knowledge of Mr. Moffit's suicide but she can't shield Angeline from an awareness of the difficult life Honey will face as a Blue and an orphan. Thinking about the love and care that Honey deserves is painful for Cussy, since it reminds her of the love and care that she, too, deserves but hasn't received.



Cussy Mary read to Henry as he was dying but wasn't able to sit with him until his last breath, because that was his mother's right. Angeline has no mother and no other kin, so Cussy Mary sits and reads to her until she slips away. This is an act of love for a woman who, like Cussy, was alone in the world. To her dying breath, Angeline believes in the power of books to change lives, and her final wish for her daughter is to grow up surrounded by books and their wisdom. When Cussy howls in grief over Angeline's death, it recalls her drunken raging against God over the pain and suffering of the world.



Despite the hardships of life, Cussy Mary is determined to not lose sight of her humanity or anyone else's. That's why she was willing to adopt Honey, and it's why her next concern (after Honey's safety) is to make sure that Angeline and even the tormented and hateful Mr. Moffit are buried with dignity. As elsewhere in the book, suffering has the power to bring out the best in human nature.



Cussy Mary carefully empties one of her saddlebags, lines it with her cushion, and places Honey inside. She tells **Junia** that they must carry Honey to safety, very gently, for Angeline's sake. Then she points the mule towards Jackson Lovett's place, praying that he'll be home and willing to help. And with one of Angeline's lullabies on Cussy's lips, the three ride out of the yard.

Junia has been Cussy Mary's protector since her short-lived marriage to Charlie Frazier. In a way, Junia has been a part of Cussy Mary's family. It's fitting, then, that she becomes Honey's protector, too. And then Cussy and Junia turn for help to the one person besides Pa they trust unreservedly: Jackson.



CHAPTER 39

Cussy Mary wrestles with deep misgivings as she rides up the mountain. She hasn't seen Jackson in weeks, not since the Fourth of July. He hasn't been home when she's delivered his books. He isn't outside when she arrives, and she stands on the porch for a long moment before bringing herself to knock. Just as she's about to leave, he opens the door, shirtless, with a pencil tucked behind his ear. Cussy sees books and paper scattered on his table. He clears a space for her to sit, then roots around to find his library book, explaining he's been traveling to Georgia recently to help a friend.

It's been a while since Cussy Mary has talked with Jackson. Their last conversation ended badly, with Cussy lashing out at him for presuming to tell her how to live her life. She hasn't seen him since she made the choice to stop taking the drug and submit to the reality of her skin color. He doesn't seem upset to see her and welcomes her unquestioningly into his home, where the mess shows that he's been busy helping his friend. He hasn't been deliberately avoiding Cussy.



Honey squirms in Cussy Mary's arms, and Jackson notices her for the first time. With growing alarm, he notes Cussy's disheveled appearance and blood-stained clothes. Words tumble out of Cussy's mouth about the baby and the Moffits, and the Moffits' deaths. Jackson forces her to slow down and explain the story carefully. She tells him that Honey's mother died from giving birth and her father hanged himself rather than face the shame of having a colored baby. She's come to Jackson to ask for help burying the bodies before the animals get them.

In an earlier chapter, Jackson wasn't very sympathetic towards the plight of the Moffit, stating that being shot was a just consequence for Mr. Moffit's chicken theft. Nevertheless, Cussy Mary has come to trust in his humanity so deeply that she believes he will help her lay them to rest now. Perhaps his kind treatment of her, despite her odd color, has inspired this confidence.



Jackson stops Cussy with a wave of his hand and asks if she's really planning on burying a chicken thief and taking in an orphan. Stung by his harsh words, Cussy declares herself Honey's mama, and says she will bury the Moffits by herself if she has to. She runs from the house, but Jackson hurries after her, promising to give them as proper a burial as a person can give in "this graceless land." Cussy manages a strangled "obliged" of thanks before turning down the path towards home.

At first, however, it seems like Jackson will revert to his old views and hold the Moffits in the same contempt as everyone else seems to do. He's surprised that Cussy Mary would be kind enough to take on another woman's orphaned baby. Jackson's harshness horrifies Cussy, and she declares that she'll do it herself—showing off her independent streak. But then Jackson proves himself to be the kind, decent man Cussy believes him to be, and he offers to help.



CHAPTER 40

At home, Cussy Mary feeds Honey a thin gruel made of boiled bread while she argues with Pa. He's worried about the implications of Cussy keeping the baby as an unwed mother. She thinks the timing is close enough that she can pass Honey off as her own baby from her brief marriage to Charlie Frazier. No one else but Jackson will know the truth. Angeline never made it into town for the exam Doc offered her, and it's unlikely that anyone else knew that she was pregnant or would suspect the baby was hers.

Most importantly, Cussy argues, Honey is a Blue, which means she must somehow be their kin. Pa recalls a rumor that his uncle had a bastard in Hell-fer-Sartin, who was given away by its mother before she left for Ohio. The story matches what Angeline said about Mr. Moffit's past. Cussy tells Pa about Henry's death from pellagra. She doesn't want Honey, their last kin, to face a similarly terrible fate. Just then, Honey opens her eyes and smiles at Pa. He reaches out a finger, which she happily sucks on. Cussy can see him softening, and soon he's telling her to ride into town to buy some real milk for her baby.

CHAPTER 41

Leaving Honey at home with Pa, Cussy Mary rides to the Moffits' homestead to see if Jackson has been true to his word. She finds him out back standing over two fresh graves. When she dismounts, she's surprised to watch Junia sidle up and gently nuzzle his arm. He refuses the money Cussy tries to offer him for the work of gravedigging and shows both concern for Honey and respect for Cussy's willingness to take on the hard task of raising her. Then he pulls out a ring that he braided from locks of Mr. Moffit's and Angeline's hair before he buried them.

Jackson tells Cussy that his mother and brothers died of smallpox when he was 12. His father cut locks of their hair and tucked them into the family Bible, saying it was important to keep a part of them living. Jackson added his father's hair to the Bible after he drank himself to death two years later. Cussy tells him about the grief-triggered drunken tear Pa went on after her mother died. It's the first time she's shared the story, and it startles her to realize how she trusts Jackson.

Throughout the book, Pa's primary concern has been for Cussy Mary's safety, and being a single mother will just expose her to more judgement and discrimination, even if Cussy can convince people that Honey is hers and Charlie's legitimately conceived baby, not the result of some extramarital romance.



Cussy reminds him of the obligation they have to Honey, not just as Blues, but as good human beings. She had the benefit of a family to cushion her a little bit against the cruel judgments of the world; without Cussy and Pa, Honey won't even have that small cushion of love and safety. Henry's death shows that the world can be harsh and cruel to anyone, not just people who are different.



Cussy Mary trusted Jackson enough to ask for his help, but she still wants to verify that he's kept his word. He's done this and more, taking clippings of their hair to save as a memorial of their lives in addition to burying them. And his refusal of Cussy's offered payment demonstrates his kindness toward his fellow humans, no matter what he thought of their choices.



The burial gives Jackson an opportunity to share more of his life with Cussy Mary. His tale reminds readers that virtually no one is untouched by suffering in this part of the world.



After his father died, Jackson explains, he left Kentucky swearing never to return. But a Kentucky man's wandering legs won't allow themselves to be planted except in Kentucky soil, so he returned. Cussy says that her folks always told her that her French great-grandfather came across the ocean to "collect his 'tucky heart." They named her after the town where he was born because she looked like him. Jackson quips that he knew she didn't get her name from swearing too much.

Jackson talks about being torn between wanting to stay and to flee Kentucky. Cussy Mary can't really imagine leaving, even though, as she tells Jackson, Queenie has invited her to come to Philadelphia, where there are better opportunities for colored people. This reminds Jackson of his words to Cussy on the day she fainted, and he apologizes for speaking out of his ignorance of her painful experiences. He says he was foolish because all he saw was a "smart librarian, a fine lady," but now he understands more. It seems like he's about to say more, but then he abruptly turns back to the graves, saying he's not finished.

Jackson collects two decent-sized rocks which he plans to take home and carve the Moffits' names into before placing them as headstones. He scatters a handful of dirt over the graves with a brief prayer. And then he's off. Cussy Mary stays for a while, talking to Angeline and promising to take care of Honey.

CHAPTER 42

When Honey is a week old, Cussy Mary takes her to Miss Loretta's home. Miss Loretta isn't prepared for the visit, and she chides Cussy for having missed recent weeks. When Cussy introduces Honey—the reason she hasn't been around—Miss Loretta is delighted. Cussy has come to ask if Miss Loretta will watch the babe while she is on her route. Miss Loretta is more than happy to oblige. Because she's too proud to accept payment, Cussy plans to pay Doc to take care of her eyes. Spectacles could give her back her eyesight.

The story also explains Jackson's autonomy and independence from the prejudices and beliefs of most of Troublesome Creek. He left the area as a young man and experienced much more of the world than most people. He expanded his mind by widening his experience, but he still felt drawn to the beauty of rural Kentucky, despite its dangers. Even knowing how hard life was there, he chose to return. Both Jackson and Cussy belong to Kentucky.



Jackson has the freedom to leave—he's done so before, he's not a Blue, and as a man he can protect himself and find work. Cussy Mary doesn't feel like she has the same freedom as Jackson or even Queenie, who's making a life in Philadelphia. The mention of Queenie—whose departure left Cussy Mary the only non-white-skinned person in the area—reminds Jackson of his last argument with Cussy Mary, and he apologizes, showing both kindness and humility. He didn't consider how her skin color might have made her life difficult, because he didn't pay attention to it. He only saw who Cussy is as a human being, and one whom he respects and likes.



Jackson continues to show his humanity by his intention to mark Mr. Moffit's and Angeline's graves. They might have lived hard and short lives, but his desire to monumentalize them claims that their lives were nevertheless important.



Becoming a mother to Honey compromises Cussy Mary's highly valued independence. In order to keep her library route, she must accept and ask for help. Cussy Mary and Miss Loretta are interdependent. Neither's autonomy is disturbed by their arrangement, but it's mutually beneficial to both: Cussy gets care for Honey, and Miss Loretta will get necessary medical attention.



CHAPTER 43

Two weeks later, Pa lights a new courting candle. This one is completely naked, fixed to an old saucer, since he's not going to disturb the dead to find the old, time-keeping candle holder. As in the winter before, Cussy begs him not to force her to marry. But he's determined to get a man to care for Cussy and a pa for Honey. He tells her that this time, the light will hold fire—that it will bring Cussy the marriage he wants so much for her.

Their argument is punctuated by Pa's racking coughs. He's also more determined than ever to get Cussy married, since the mine is about to shut down. He rejects Cussy's suggestion of a WPA job, since he feels that it's undignified to "beg for scraps" and to have to take a "Pauper's Oath." Cussy knows that anyone working for the WPA must swear that they're impoverished and keep their homes open to random inspection to prove it. The only reason no one has inspected their home already is that they're so far from town and difficult to reach.

Cussy's final argument is that she doesn't want to leave Pa. She wants to stay and take care of him. But, as he points out, he's the one who will soon be leaving. A coal miner's life "is a short one," and he's too sick to be cured, even if Cussy takes him to Philadelphia. He wants to make sure that Cussy has a husband and that she and Honey have the life he could never give Cussy and her mother.

Pa refuses to answer Cussy's repeated question of who would be willing to marry a Blue until the suitor's horse can be heard in the distance. Then, he points towards the sound and says, simply, "That one," before setting out for the mine. When he's out of earshot, Cussy hurls the candle into the yard where it smashes against a rock and breaks, then sits back to wait. She's sure the suitor will turn around as soon as he catches a glimpse of her anyway.

The nakedness of the new courting candle suggests how shameful Cussy Mary finds it when Pa suggests that she can't take care of herself without the help of a man. Plus, his earlier attempts to find a husband backfired because of people's prejudice against her skin color. Unlike ever before, Pa seems assured that this next suitor will be Cussy's last, hinting that he knows more than he's telling her.



The fact that the mine is closing permanently suggests that the company has finally gotten all of the value it can leach from the Kentucky mountains. It took the coal and the money, and it is leaving behind all the men who, like Pa, have become ill working for them. The life of the Kentucky coal miner is one of hardship and sorrow. Still, Pa has his self-respect and pride in the knowledge that he can take care of himself and his family without government assistance.



Cussy has experienced many traumatic losses in a short period of time: Winnie, Henry, and Angeline. Pa's reminder that a coal miner's life is short suggests that Cussy will lose him soon, too. As his dying act, he wants to make sure that Cussy and Honey are protected from the prejudice, discrimination, and hatred they face as Blues.



Pa refuses to give a hint of the suitor's identity, building tension for both Cussy Mary and for readers. However, his confidence in leaving Cussy Mary and Honey alone with this man after what happened with her last suitor (Charlie Frazier) suggests that he has a great deal of trust in him. In a moment parallel to her earlier adjustment of the candle for a shorter time, Cussy Mary protests and asserts her autonomy over her own life by smashing the candle.



CHAPTER 44

The suitor is Jackson Lovett, and when he rides into the yard, he picks up the candle from the dirt and tells Cussy Mary that he'll need it for when his daughter gets her first courter. Cussy is shocked, and she tells Jackson that she and Honey already have everything they need. She refuses to accept his charity, and she refuses to give up her job. Jackson protests that he doesn't want her to; she's too important to the community to stop working. Besides, the WPA has started making exceptions for married women. Jackson confirmed this by reading the paperwork himself, even though Eula and Harriett were singularly unhelpful.

Cussy Mary still distrusts Jackson's motives, but then he tells her that he went to Pa and asked for permission to court her—six times before Pa said yes. Cussy is shocked; she assumed that Pa had wheedled a courtship out of Jackson. She can't see why Jackson would marry a Blue. But he's determined to marry her because he loves her, and he'll tell everyone in Kentucky if he must. Cussy has lived in darkness and brokenness for so long that although she wants to fall into his arms and accept his love, it seems easier and safer not to.

Jackson promises to love and protect Cussy Mary and Honey, but Cussy refuses to leave Pa alone in his sickness. Jackson tells her that there's room for all of them, including Pa, on the mountain. He reaches out to touch her face, gently, tells her how much he truly loves her, and asks her to be his bride, to leave the hollow and come up onto the mountain with him. Cussy looks into his eyes, knowing she wants to be on the mountain with him forever. And he pulls her into a kiss. No one has ever seen Cussy as anything other than her ugly color before, has been able to make her feel valuable and worthwhile before. And so Cussy, feverishly, says yes.

CHAPTER 45

After Jackson leaves, Cussy Mary is too excited to sleep. So is Honey. She reads to the baby, folds laundry, and tries to read her own book. Her mind is bursting with happy plans: teaching Honey to read with Jackson, introducing Honey to her patrons. The sound of approaching riders bring Cussy back to reality. Two miner's mules enter the yard, dragging a stretcher behind them.

Cussy Mary's confused reaction to Jackson's proposal points toward two key elements in her life: her strong sense of autonomy and independence, and the way that people's hatred and prejudice have traumatized her. She continues to assert that she can care for herself without help, and she initially thinks that the only reason Jackson is there is because she's an unmarriageable charity case. Despite their shared interests and experiences, she can't yet imagine that he loves her, a Blue whom most people seem to despise.



The depths of the pain and trauma Cussy Mary has suffered from years of abuse and discrimination become clear as she struggles to accept Jackson's love. After so many years of others treating her as subhuman, it's hard for her to trust that anyone could love her. Her difficulty despite the evidence of respect and friendship from so many of her patrons shows how deeply ingrained her feelings of inferiority have become.



As a final attempt to hold Jackson at bay, Cussy Mary protests that she must take care of Pa as well as Honey, since they are the last Blues, the last of her kind. But Jackson loves Cussy and her kind, and he plans to take them all into his life and his family, showing the power of kindness over inhumanity and discrimination.



Just as it seems that Cussy Mary's life is improving, the hardship and suffering of life in the rural Kentucky coalfields reasserts itself. It's not immediately clear what's happened to Pa at the mine, but it's clearly bad.



Cussy runs into the yard and throws herself on Pa's body, begging him to wake up, telling him that she's going to marry Jackson. One of the miners dismounts and introduces himself as Howard Moore. He explains that Pa volunteered to help him "[pull] pillars" (mining the support beams of coal left to keep tunnels open) that night. Pa got trapped, and by the time they found him, he was nearly dead. Mr. Moore sat with him, talking and praying, until he passed.

The coal miners always take care of their own. They set to work digging a grave for him in the family cemetery, and one miner always stays with Pa's body to watch over him until he's tucked "good 'n' safe into the ground." A few hours later, Jackson rides into the yard. He was in town and heard about the accident. The miners all chipped in for a coffin, and he's brought it up for the burial. Soon after dawn, a preacher arrives, and they lay Pa to rest with the rest of the Blues.

CHAPTER 46

Cussy Mary and Jackson wait until October to get married, because Pa always said that a fall union would grow steady and strong, while a summer one would be quick to wither. On the appointed day, she visits Pa's grave and tells him how much she wishes he was there for her wedding, to see what her **books** have finally given her. And when Jackson brings her into town, he hands her a wedding present. It's the founding book of their marital library, a collection of poetry by William Butler Yeats.

Harriett and Eula watch Cussy Mary and Jackson walk to the courthouse. Jackson brags that it's a lovely day to marry "Troublesome's finest gal." And while Eula's face softens a little at the sight of Honey, Harriett's hardens. She yells out, reminding Cussy that if she's doesn't come into the Center by 7 a.m. on Monday, she'll be fired. With a suggestive wink, Jackson promises to get his bride into town on time. Eula goes back into the center, and Harriett storms off down the street.

Pa died because of the mine company's cruel and inhumane disregard for the safety of their employees. In an effort to get every last lump of coal out, they ask the men to work in tunnels on the verge of collapse. Their inhumanity contrasts sharply with Pa's generosity and concern for his fellow mine workers. In a way, he's allowed himself to be a miner's sacrifice: his death means that Howard Moore lives. Since Jackson will now take care of Cussy Mary, Pa dies secure in the knowledge that she will be okay.



Unlike the inhuman coal company, the coal miners know how to treat each other with respect and honor. Earlier, Cussy Mary worried that the miners asked Pa to represent them in union talks because he was Blue and therefore thought to be expendable. But their concern to make sure he's properly buried shows that they saw Pa for who he was as a person, not the color of his skin.



Cussy Mary and Jackson honor Pa's memory by setting their wedding date in the fall. And on the appointed day, Cussy Mary visits her parents' grave to honor her family's legacy. They didn't have much to give her in terms of worldly goods, and they weren't able to protect her from prejudice and discrimination. But they taught her to read and to love books, which led to her independent work with the library project and to her future husband. Jackson's wedding gift is a testament to the enduring power of books in his and Cussy's lives.



Jackson has never worried what people think about his relationship with Cussy Mary; he sees who she really is and doesn't care about the color of her skin. And he can't resist mocking Eula and Harriett. They never believed that Cussy Mary deserved humane treatment or respect, and now they have to watch her marry Troublesome's most eligible bachelor. Harriett tries to reassert her control and superiority by threatening to fire Cussy, but Jackson clearly won't let that happen.



Mr. Dalton, the banker and a friend of Jackson's, and Doc are there to witness the wedding. Just as they're about to begin, Mr. Moore knocks on the door and insists they stop so he can speak to the officiant. While Cussy Mary and Jackson nervously fret, Mr. Moore and the judge leave the room. When they return, Mr. Moore tells Cussy that Pa asked him to stand in his place and give her away at her wedding.

After the short ceremony, Cussy Mary and Jackson step outside into a crowd of well-wishers from Cussy's route. Jackson mentioned the wedding to a few people while he was clearing Cussy's trails. Birdie, R.C., Ruth, Martha Hannah, Devil John, Timmy Flynn, his mother, and Miss Loretta's nephew (bearing her wedding present) are there. Cussy Mary basks in the love she feels for these people, and in the newfound knowledge that they love her back.

But then Sheriff Davies Kimbo approaches. The Center door opens, and a smug-faced Harriett appears. Jackson is under arrest for breaking the anti-miscegenation laws that prohibit marriage between a white person and "Negroes or persons of color." Cussy protests that Sheriff didn't care when she married Charlie Frazier, but he says that the laws have changed over the summer, and now they include people of *any* color, including Blues.

The crowd begins to stir, some voices supporting Cussy Mary and Jackson and others siding with the Sheriff. Jackson refuses to go. Doc claims that no law has been broken; Cussy has a medical condition, and that treatment with pills can make her white. Sheriff refuses this explanation as "hogwash," although R.C. and Ruth corroborate seeing Cussy's white skin. Sheriff is willing to admit that "Bluet's a good enough lass," but she's still colored. And how can Cussy have a medical condition if the Doc's already said she is fit?

When the wedding is temporarily delayed, Cussy Mary and Jackson worry that someone is trying to ruin their day—a plausible fear for Cussy Mary, who has always experienced prejudice and mistreatment from people in town. But it's just Mr. Moore. His desire to stand in for Pa is a reminder that the miners saw Pa as a person, not just a Blue.



Throughout the book, Cussy Mary has focused on her feelings of shame and isolation. Nevertheless, she has many friends, people who see her as who she is instead of focusing on her skin color. To remind Cussy of her importance, Jackson has invited these people to celebrate their marriage.



But the joy is short-lived, because in this harsh world, the power lies with the forces of discrimination, represented by Sheriff Kimbo and Harriett. Anti-miscegenation laws reinforced racial boundaries and asserted the superiority of white people over Black people in the pre-civil rights era. Although Cussy is technically white (because she's of European, not African, descent), the fact that her skin isn't visibly white marks her as a so-called "colored" person.



Although in this moment, the forces of discrimination have the power, it's clear from the reactions of the growing crowd that the issue isn't settled. Doc's scientific explanations—and the Sheriff's rejection of them—show how little discrimination and prejudice have to do with reality: it doesn't matter that Cussy Mary really isn't different than anyone else in town. As long as she looks different, hateful people will discriminate against her.



Suddenly, Cussy Mary remembers Doc saying this to Harriett, who has stepped forward from the crowd with a triumphant look on her face. Now Devil John adds his voice to the cries to let Jackson go, but he quiets when Sheriff threatens to cut off his moonshine business. Once more, Jackson tries to leave peacefully, but Sheriff grabs him. The law, he says, is the law and according to it, Cussy is “just another nigger.” This is too much for Jackson, who attacks the sheriff. But he’s outnumbered by the Sheriff and his two deputies and in a moment, he’s lying on the ground, under arrest and badly injured.

Harriett steps forward to relish her triumph over Cussy Mary; rather than improve her own life, she’d rather use artificial distinctions like skin color to hold other people beneath her. Throughout the book, Cussy has compared her treatment to the way that her community discriminates against Black people. When the Sheriff applies a racial slur to Cussy, it both confirms her feeling and emphasizes the contempt he feels toward her. It’s only at this point that Jackson attacks; previously he wasn’t much different than mountainfolk like Devil John who ignore the laws requiring them to send their kids to school. Autonomy is a key trait of the people in this part of the world. But when the Sheriff expresses his racism and hatred for Cussy Mary aloud, Jackson forcefully reasserts her humanity by attempting to protect her honor.



Cussy Mary kneels over Jackson as R.C. bursts from the crowd and attacks the Sheriff, who easily knocks the thin boy back. He growls that if R.C. won’t stay in his place, he’ll end up in prison too. Sheriff tells Doc to tend to Jackson in the jail, then turns to Cussy Mary and orders her to take her colored babe back to the holler where they belong before he arrests her...or worse. He says he’s letting off without charges because her Pa was a good man who made sacrifices for the miners. And because he assumes that Jackson was able to smooth-talk her, a “simple-minded Blue.”

R.C. attacks the Sheriff because he understands Cussy Mary’s value as a human being and her importance in the community. In contrast, the Sheriff can’t look past the color of her blue skin. He has a grudging respect for Pa, whom he thinks was a good miner despite his skin color. But he can’t consider that anyone who looks different from him (in other words, who has a non-white skin tone) can truly be intelligent or autonomous.



Cussy Mary is disgusted. She accuses the Sheriff and everyone else of using Pa as a miner’s sacrifice, and of sacrificing Blue lives to ensure their own, taken-for-granted safety and security. Sheriff casts his eyes down but nevertheless rips up the marriage license and warns Cussy that he’d better not catch her in town on library business. If she doesn’t leave now, he threatens, he’ll arrest her and send Honey to the “Home of the Idiots” in the state capital. Devil John pushes through the crowd to Cussy Mary. He warns Sheriff that he’ll dedicate himself to seeing him voted out of office as soon as possible, and then volunteers to take Cussy Mary and Honey safely home, but she declines. As she climbs into Jackson’s wagon with Honey, Cussy feels foolish for dreaming. Dreams are for **books**.

Cussy Mary calls the Sheriff and those who think like him out on their selfish disregard for people who share their humanity, even if they look different on the surface. But it doesn’t matter: at this time and in this place, the law backs hatred and discrimination. And these laws don’t just target so-called “colored” people; society also removes and institutionalizes anyone it deems mentally inferior, just as the Sheriff threatens to do to Honey. In this dark moment, Cussy feels as if books have lost their power: they haven’t made her world kinder or more just.



CHAPTER 47

Four years have gone by and it's now 1940. Cussy writes a letter to Queenie, who's nearly done with her library school. She thanks Queenie for the book she sent as Honey's fourth birthday present and tells her friend that the little girl wants to be a librarian when she grows up. Troublesome is about to get its own lending library in town, and Cussy was recently given an award for her service to the Pack Horse Library. Jackson has been released from prison and is healing from his beating, but one of the conditions of his release is that he can't come back to Kentucky for 25 years. He has been living in Tennessee while his friend helps him arrange the sale of his property on the mountain. They're planning to go to Ohio.

Honey interrupts Cussy just before she signs her letter. She wants to read her a **book** that Miss Loretta gave her for her birthday, because "Books'll learn you, Mama. I'm book Woman, an' I read you this one." Jackson tells his little Book Woman that they will read on the porch while Cussy finishes writing. He will have to leave for Tennessee before dawn, but his secret visits to the holler and Cussy's childhood home are sweet. As he carries Honey outside, asking her to read her happy story, Junia whinnies from her stall. And Cussy Mary whispers a hope-filled prayer as she signs the letter "Cussy Mary Lovett."

Cussy Mary left town after her disastrous wedding day convinced that books didn't have the power she once thought. But four years later, it's clear that books do have power in ways large and small. Queenie has a better life and education thanks to them; Cussy has been recognized (despite her skin color) for her library service; Honey is clearly happy and well-loved, despite her blue skin. And Jackson's love for Cussy Mary outlasted the forces of hatred and discrimination, the pain of his beating, and the trauma of his jail time.



The legacies of the people who lost their lives in this harsh and unforgiving land live on, too. Honey's words recall Angeline's dying wish for her daughter to learn by reading lots of books. And with the planned move from Kentucky to Ohio, it's clear that Honey's life will be better, safer, and kinder than both her birth mother's and her adopted mother's. Books brought Cussy Mary a family that she never thought that she would have. And the family, and the books they share, give her hope for the future.





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