

# The Wednesday Wars



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GARY SCHMIDT

Gary Schmidt was born in a small town on Long Island called Hicksville. Various parts of *The Wednesday Wars* are autobiographical and based on his experience growing up in Hicksville, New York: his seventh grade teacher had pet rats, his teacher stressed the importance of diagramming sentences, and Gary wasn't considered particularly smart. He only began to thrive in school when a concerned teacher stepped in and fostered a love of reading. Schmidt attended Gordon College, where he earned an English degree in 1979. He then earned a master's degree and a PhD in medieval literature in 1985. After this, he began working as a professor of English at Calvin College, where he teaches creative writing and children's literature classes. He married his wife, fellow author Anne Stickney Schmidt, in 1979, and the two had six children. They also co-wrote a book about prayer, religion, and writing. Anne died in 2013. Two of Schmidt's novels, *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* and *The Wednesday Wars*, won the Newbery Honor, which recognizes exceptional children's literature. In addition to teaching at Calvin College, Schmidt also teaches writing courses in prisons and detention centers. His experiences doing so inspired his 2015 novel, *Orbiting Jupiter*.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Vietnam War took place from 1955 to April 1975. The United States invaded Vietnam in order to prevent the spread of Communism, as espoused by the northern Communist regime known as the Viet Cong. By 1967, when Holling's story starts, a third of the US population, most of them young people, believed that the US was misguided in its involvement in the war. It's believed that this segment skewed so young because the youth were the ones who were affected by the draft. Around this time, in the spring of 1968, the CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite actually traveled to Vietnam to report from location. Upon his return, he echoed other officials who no longer supported the war, causing President Johnson to remark that he effectively lost the middle class when he lost Walter Cronkite's support. Alongside the Vietnam War, the US was engaged in the Cold War with the Soviet Union, which was also rooted in a fear of Communism. The Cold War saw both countries build up their nuclear arsenals, which is why Holling and his classmates practice bomb drills in *The Wednesday Wars*. Also during this time, American youth and minorities were involved in protesting for civil rights, and many of those conflicts came to head in 1968. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968, sparking violent protests in a

number of American cities.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Gary Schmidt has written several historical fiction novels for young adults, including a sequel to *The Wednesday Wars*, titled *Okay for Now*, and his most famous novel, *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*. Other notable young adult historical fiction novels include Gennifer Choldenko's *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, which takes place on Alcatraz Island in 1935, and Pam Muñoz Ryan's [Esperanza Rising](#), which deals with Mexican immigrants to the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. Like *The Wednesday Wars*, both of these works are coming of age novels. Although it is funny and has a happy ending, *The Wednesday Wars* largely centers on the Vietnam War and its emotional impact on people in Holling's community. Notable literary works about the Vietnam War include Tim O'Brien's anti-war novel, *Going after Cacciato*, and his collection of short stories titled [The Things They Carried](#). Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* offers a Vietnamese perspective of the war. In *The Wednesday Wars*, Holling reads a number of Shakespeare plays including [Macbeth](#), [Julius Caesar](#), [Romeo and Juliet](#), and [The Tempest](#), as well as Robert Louis Stevenson's [Treasure Island](#).

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Wednesday Wars*
- **When Written:** 2005-2007
- **Where Written:** Michigan
- **When Published:** 2007
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Bildungsroman; young adult fiction; historical fiction
- **Setting:** A small town on Long Island, 1967-68
- **Climax:** Though there's no clear climax, Holling's request that Mrs. Baker refer to him by his first name instead of as Mr. Hoodhood is a major turning point in Holling's coming of age and quest for independence.
- **Antagonist:** Doug Swieteck's brother and the penitentiary crowd; Holling's dad; the Vietnam War
- **Point of View:** First person narrated by Holling

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Nobody Has Names Like That.** Initially, Gary Schmidt's editor tried to reject Holling Hoodhood's name on the grounds that it was too weird, despite the fact that "Holling" is a nod to the mid-20th century children's author Holling C. Holling, and "Hoodhood" is the last name of one of Schmidt's son's friends. Schmidt convinced the editor to keep the name by showing her

strange names of real students from his class rosters.

**Autobiographical, With a Twist.** The premise of *The Wednesday Wars* is mostly autobiographical: Like Holling, author Gary Schmidt spent afternoons alone with his teacher, Mrs. Baker, while his classmates were at Hebrew school or catechism. Unlike the novel, the real-life Mrs. Baker unfortunately never came to like him, and he spent the entire year doing janitorial work on those afternoons.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Holling knows on the first day of seventh grade that his teacher, Mrs. Baker, hates him. She gives him a dark look when she realizes that he's the only Presbyterian student and will therefore be in school on Wednesday afternoons instead of at catechism or Hebrew school. Holling walks home to the **Perfect House** that afternoon and decides to recruit his parents as allies. His parents insist that nobody hates someone without reason, though Holling's dad also tells Holling that the Baker family is considering his architecture firm to remodel the Baker Sports Emporium, so Holling shouldn't do anything to make Mrs. Baker hate him. The next day, Holling is terrified that Mrs. Baker is trying to sabotage him. At recess, Doug Swietek's brother forces Holling into a game of soccer. Holling trips Doug's brother, and Holling notes that Mrs. Baker looks disappointed that her assassination attempt failed.

On Wednesday afternoons, Mrs. Baker has Holling perform classroom chores. He hates it, but he remembers his dad's warning. One Wednesday, as Holling runs outside for recess, Mrs. Baker asks him to fetch trays of pastries from the cook, Mrs. Bigio, for the Wives of Vietnam Soldiers gathering later. Holling arranges them under the open window. That afternoon, Mrs. Baker hands Holling a box of erasers and asks him to clean them in exchange for a cream puff. As he pounds the erasers against the wall outside, he suddenly realizes that the chalk dust will ruin the cream puffs, but is too late to save them. The ensuing gathering is a disaster, as Mrs. Bigio ends up in the hospital from the chalk dust. At dinner that night, Holling's dad accuses Holling of sabotaging the cream puffs and yells at Holling's sister, Heather, that being a flower child is stupid. The next day, Mrs. Baker promises another cream puff. This incenses Holling's classmates, particularly Mai Thi, Meryl Lee, and Danny, who threaten death if Holling doesn't bring in cream puffs.

The following Wednesday, Mrs. Baker tells Holling that they'll read Shakespeare after he cleans out the cage of her pet rats, Sycorax and Caliban. Holling does as he's told, even though he (and everyone else) is terrified of the rats. He thinks that Shakespeare is a plot to bore him, and when Mrs. Baker says, unprompted, that Shakespeare isn't meant to bore students, Holling incredulously turns his attention away from the rats.

Sycorax and Caliban escape, and even the custodian, Mr. Vendleri, isn't able to catch them. Despite Mrs. Baker's plot to bore him, Holling finds *The Merchant of Venice* thrilling.

In November, Holling's mother discovers a leak in the ceiling of the living room, and Mrs. Baker assigns *The Tempest*. Holling greatly enjoys the curses in the play and takes it upon himself to memorize them. He goes to school early one morning to practice and discovers that, despite his belief that Mrs. Baker wouldn't have assigned the play had she read it herself, she has indeed read it. Holling feels good as he walks home from school until he walks past the bakery and remembers that he owes his classmates cream puffs. He offers to work for the baker, Mr. Goldman, in exchange for cream puffs, but Mr. Goldman insists he needs a boy who knows Shakespeare, not one to work. Thus, Holling lands a part in a production of *The Tempest*, and Mr. Goldman gives him a box of cream puffs. When Holling takes them to school, Sycorax and Caliban spoil the plan by getting into the box during recess. Holling's week gets even worse: his dad refuses to give him an advance on his allowance, and he only has enough money to bring in five cream puffs later that week. Mrs. Baker, however, surprises Holling by buying cream puffs for the class. That afternoon, Mrs. Bigio comes into the room, crying. Holling discovers that her husband died in Vietnam.

As the holiday season approaches, all the teachers except for Mrs. Baker decorate their rooms. Holling isn't feeling the holiday spirit much, as he's going to play Ariel in the Holiday Extravaganza—and Ariel is a fairy with an embarrassing costume. Things start to look up when Mrs. Baker says that the Yankees player Mickey Mantle will be signing balls at the Baker Sporting Emporium, though Holling's excitement disappears when she offers the class extra credit if they also go see Holling in *The Tempest*. After the performance, Holling is shocked to see Danny, Mai Thi, and Meryl Lee crying in the front row. When it's time for Holling to leave to go to the Baker Sporting Emporium, the dressing room is locked, and Holling's dad doesn't show up. A kind bus driver drives Holling across town, still in costume, and even gives Holling a new ball. When Holling approaches Mantle, the player says he doesn't sign balls for boys in yellow tights. Holling is crushed, and Danny, who saw this exchange, abandons his signed ball. Over the next three days, Mrs. Bigio is cruel to Mai Thi, and Mrs. Baker keeps her students working hard. On the last day before break, Mrs. Baker gives Danny, Doug, and Holling new mitts and balls and sends them to the gym. There, they find the Yankees players Joe Pepitone and Horace Clarke. The players give the boys tickets to the Opening Day game. After this, Doug throws out the prank he was planning for Mrs. Baker.

A photo of Holling in *The Tempest* makes the front page of the local paper, and Holling is mortified to find that Doug Swietek's brother pasted hundreds of the photos around school. That night, he suggests to his dad that he switch to a

military academy. Later, Heather says military school is ridiculous because then Holling would be guaranteed to go to Vietnam. When Mrs. Baker insists that the embarrassment will blow over, Holling whines that she has nothing to worry about. He realizes his mistake: her husband, Lieutenant Baker, is fighting in Vietnam. Two days later, despite a power outage and inclement weather, Holling returns to school to take Achievement Tests. That afternoon, Holling heroically saves his sister from an out-of-control bus sliding on the icy roads. Mrs. Baker and Mr. Guareschi drive him to the emergency room, and Holling's family refuses to show up.

On the day that Holling's family prepares for Holling's dad to accept the Chamber of Commerce Businessman of 1967 award, the ceiling of the Perfect Living Room falls in. At school, Holling is disgusted with [Romeo and Juliet](#), though he recognizes that Mrs. Baker and his classmate Meryl Lee love it and uses this to his advantage: he asks Meryl Lee to go out with him on Valentine's Day. He learns at dinner one night that Meryl Lee's father, also an architect, is going out of business. When Holling tells Mrs. Baker that he can't afford to take Meryl Lee somewhere nice, Holling receives tickets to a production of [Romeo and Juliet](#) from Mrs. Bigio. After the play, Holling draws her a picture of his dad's plan for the junior high school renovation. The next week, Holling's dad takes him to the meeting between the school board, Hoodhood and Associates, and Kowalski and Associates. Holling realizes that Meryl Lee duped him: Mr. Kowalski's design copies Mr. Hoodhood's design. Holling shuns Meryl Lee for days, but soon realizes Meryl Lee didn't betray him on purpose. He buys her a rose, and when his dad later gloats that he got the job, he wonders if his dad ever got the chance to choose who he wanted to be. The following week, Mrs. Baker receives news that her husband is missing in action.

As spring arrives, Holling reads [Julius Caesar](#) and realizes that bad things are going to happen on the Ides of March: the school board is going to observe Mrs. Baker, and Coach Quatrini is holding cross-country tryouts. Holling spends his weekends running to escape the brewing conflict between his dad and sister. He's skeptical when Mrs. Baker decides to coach him, but he discovers that he runs faster with her help. Later, she shows him a medal from the Olympics that she won in 1956. Holling realizes he thought she'd always been a teacher. On the Ides of March, the observation goes reasonably well until Sycorax and Caliban fall out of the ceiling onto Mrs. Sidman's lap. She and Mai Thi are the only ones who don't flee the rats. Later, during cross-country tryouts, the rats escape and chase Holling, who sets a local record. The rats get hit by a bus, and students begin to tease Mai Thi for standing up to the rats. Mrs. Bigio cooks a Vietnamese dessert and apologizes to Mai Thi.

After her heroism, Mrs. Sidman becomes the principal. Holling makes the varsity cross-country team, and he fears his eighth grade teammates. One afternoon, as Holling and Meryl Lee do

homework together, they learn that Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. The next day is Opening Day at the Yankee Stadium. Even though Holling reminds his dad of his promise to drive him to the game, Holling's dad doesn't show up the next day. Mrs. Baker offers to take Holling, and Holling has an exceptional time at Opening Day. After spring break, Holling's dad informs Heather that she won't be going to college, as it's too dangerous. They don't attend Holling's first cross-country meet, where Holling, with Meryl Lee and Mrs. Baker's support, wins his race and a \$100 savings bond.

Throughout May, Holling's school practices atomic bomb drills. The tension between Holling's dad and sister intensifies until finally, she runs away to California. One Wednesday, Holling asks Mrs. Baker to call him by his first name so it doesn't sound like she's talking to his dad. She suggests that architecture isn't a bad profession, and she drives him around and tells him about the history of buildings. They go into the Catholic church, and Holling asks if hiding under desks will actually do anything if a bomb drops. Mrs. Baker says it won't, but it gives people comfort to be prepared. That night, Heather calls from Minneapolis, broke and alone. He tells her to go to a Western Union. The next day, Holling cashes his bond and wires it to his sister. Holling's parents refuse to pick her up at the station in New York, so Holling gets a ride into the city with Mr. Kowalski. The following week, Mrs. Baker learns that her husband is alive and will be coming home.

As June arrives, Holling watches his parents fall out of love. When Bobby Kennedy is assassinated, Holling and Heather go to the Catholic church to light candles and grieve with others. The next week, Mrs. Baker takes her class camping. Holling is tasked with carrying a pack of utensils and chili up the hill to the campsite, and Mrs. Sidman discovers later that he dropped all the utensils. Despite the cold, the students have a grand time until late that night, when it starts to pour. The next day dawns bright and warm, so they spend most of the day swimming. Holling believes Mrs. Baker wants to swim too. Mrs. Bigio arrives that evening with utensils, and she makes a Vietnamese dish for dinner. Later, she invites Mai Thi to come live with her. A week later, Holling and his family attend Danny's bar mitzvah. Holling feels as though he's watching Danny become a man, and he argues with his father over what becoming a man truly means. Finally, several weeks later, all of Mrs. Baker's class is there on the tarmac when Lieutenant Baker arrives home.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Holling Hoodhood** – Holling Hoodhood is the thirteen-year-old protagonist of the novel. At the beginning of the novel, he wants nothing more than to make it through the school year unscathed, and he fears that everyone is out to get

him—especially his teacher, Mrs. Baker, and the hulking eighth-grade bad boy, Doug Swieteck's brother. However, Holling's perspective is warped because of his self-absorption; he's prone to believing that he's a victim and a target and seldom stands up for himself in meaningful ways. He sees this as the easiest way to survive, especially in his family. Holling's dad regularly tells Holling he's dumb and incompetent and informs Holling that he must behave in order to give the family architecture firm, Hoodhood and Associates, a good name. Over the course of the school year, Mrs. Baker introduces Holling to Shakespeare, which Holling initially believes is a plot to bore him to death. This "plot," however, fails miserably, as Holling thinks that Shakespeare's plays are fantastic and even acts in a holiday production of [The Tempest](#). By reading Shakespeare, Holling begins to think more critically about the world around him. As spring rolls around, Holling finally begins to stand up for himself and for what he believes in. When his sister, Heather, runs away, Holling stands up to his dad and helps his sister get home safely. He also begins to integrate more into his community. At the end of the school year, at Danny Hupfer's bar mitzvah, Holling feels as though he's part of something bigger than himself and challenges his dad's assertions that such a symbolic coming of age is meaningless.

**Mrs. Baker** – Mrs. Baker is Holling's seventh grade teacher at Camillo Junior High School. As a teacher, she's demanding and, according to her students, soulless: she refuses to allow her students to decorate the classroom for the holidays, and she regularly either refuses or delays treats for her class. Holling believes that Mrs. Baker hates him because he's the only Presbyterian student and therefore, he spends his Wednesday afternoons with her alone instead of attending religious study like his Jewish and Catholic classmates. Mrs. Baker is an ardent lover of Shakespeare and other classic literature; she believes that Shakespeare wrote about the human condition in a way rivaled by no other writer. During her Wednesday afternoons with Holling, Mrs. Baker manages to pass on her love of Shakespeare to him. Over time, Mrs. Baker demonstrates that she doesn't hate Holling at all and, in fact, eventually becomes a parental figure for him. Though she does care deeply about academics, she also understands the importance of connecting with her students through things that are important to them, which leads her to arrange for Doug, Holling, and Danny to play baseball with the Yankees players Joe Pepitone and Horace Clarke. Mrs. Baker's husband, Lieutenant Tybalt Baker, is in Vietnam for much of the novel. Mrs. Baker clearly loves and cares for her husband; Holling watches her anxiously scan news footage of soldiers in Vietnam looking for her husband, and he watches her emotionally receive telegrams informing her first that Lieutenant Baker is lost and, later, found again. With this, Holling learns to truly humanize Mrs. Baker and see her as a teacher, personal mentor, and friend.

**Meryl Lee Kowalski** – Meryl Lee is one of Holling's classmates.

According to Holling, she's in love with him and has been since the third grade. In reality, she makes mean jokes about hurting Holling and joins Danny Hupfer in making death threats if Holling doesn't bring the class **cream puffs**. She does, however, act as a voice of reason when Holling is paranoid that Mrs. Baker is out to get him. Though Holling is mostly unaware, Meryl Lee's father owns Kowalski and Associates, an architecture firm that is Hoodhood and Associates' direct competitor. This rivalry explains much of Meryl Lee's behavior that Holling finds confusing: Kowalski and Associates is, for much of the novel, not doing well because they keep losing business to Hoodhood and Associates. This means that there's a very real chance that Meryl Lee's family will suffer financial hardship or have to move. Despite this, Meryl Lee accepts Holling's invitation for dinner and a night at the theater for Valentine's Day. She loves Shakespeare and is thrilled to see [Romeo and Juliet](#) with him, and they spend a long time talking over Cokes at Woolworth's afterwards. The next week, she's extremely upset when she realizes that her father used Holling's drawing of his own dad's plan for the remodeled junior high school to revise his proposal. She finds herself caught between familial loyalty and her affection for Holling, who shuns her and calls her a traitor. After he finally forgives her, he and Meryl Lee start spending more time together and are partners on many of their school projects.

**Danny Hupfer** – Danny Hupfer is one of Holling's classmates and friends. He's excitable and prone to exaggeration: he's one of the most ardent believers that Mr. Guareschi wants to be a dictator of a small country. At the beginning of the school year, Danny is one of the students who bullies Holling into buying the class cream puffs, and he makes a number of death threats towards Holling if he doesn't comply. However, Danny does turn out to be a good, loyal friend. When Danny witnesses Mickey Mantle refuse to sign Holling's baseball because of Holling's tights from the play, Danny gives Mantle back his freshly signed ball and leaves the room with Holling. Danny and his parents also drive Holling around town when Holling's parents won't on a fairly regular basis. Both Holling and Danny are on the cross-country team (though on the Varsity and Junior Varsity teams, respectively), and Danny and his family cheer loudly for Holling at his races. Danny has a crush on Mai Thi, and he takes her to an expensive restaurant for Valentine's Day. Near the end of the school year, as Danny prepares for his bar mitzvah, Holling, Mai Thi, and Meryl Lee listen to him recite his Hebrew readings to help him prepare. As Holling watches Danny speak at his bar mitzvah, he feels as though he's watching Danny truly become a man.

**Holling's Dad** – Holling's dad, Mr. Hoodhood, is a self-important architect who is extremely concerned with reputations and appearances. According to his worldview, his family exists to make his architecture firm, Hoodhood and Associates, look good. Further, he expects Holling to take over

the firm when he's old enough. His pride and joy is the Hoodhood home, called the **Perfect House**, which he keeps painted bright white and beautifully landscaped. He fills the home with expensive furniture (covered in plastic) and maintains the Perfect Sitting Room to impress visitors. Holling's dad thinks Holling is ridiculous and dumb, and as a conservative, he thinks Heather's liberal politics are also ridiculous. He cares more for his job, his reputation, or the television than any of his family members, including Holling's mother, who is afraid of her husband. When Holling's sister runs away, Holling's dad refuses to help her, and he works instead of fulfilling his promise to take Holling to the Opening Day Yankees baseball game. Despite his cruelty, Holling's dad does seem to care about his family in some ways: he doesn't want Heather to attend Columbia University in part because it's the center of the student resistance to the Vietnam War, which in his mind means it's dangerous, and he wants her to stay safe. Holling also wonders if his dad actually wanted to be so cruel and callous, or if he only became what was expected of him.

**Heather Hoodhood (Holling's Sister)** – For most of the novel, Holling refers to his sister only as "my sister." She's sixteen years old and is constantly fighting with Holling and Holling's dad. She thinks Holling is gutless and naïve, and she regularly fights with her conservative father over her liberal politics. She desperately wants to be a flower child and protest the Vietnam War and other injustices at home, which her father laughs at and deems stupid. When she joins presidential candidate Bobby Kennedy's campaign, her father is incensed and tries to employ her as his secretary instead. He also tries to forbid her from applying to Columbia University. She eventually runs away with her boyfriend, Chit, to California to "find herself." During the few weeks she's gone, Holling realizes he truly misses her and wants her to be happy. Holling wires her money for a bus ticket when she calls home, alone and broke, from Minneapolis. Holling's spiteful father and fearful mother both refuse to help Heather, so Holling is forced to pick her up from the bus station in New York himself. After this, Holling begins referring to Heather by name, and the two become closer.

**Doug Swieteck** – Doug Swieteck is one of Holling's classmates. Like Doug Swieteck's brother, Doug is a prankster: in sixth grade, he made a list of 410 ways to make a teacher hate you, and he carried out one of them on the unsuspecting Mrs. Sidman. As far as Holling is concerned, this means that he should avoid Doug at all costs. Holling doesn't find Doug particularly smart, and Doug is observably greedy at times. For much of the year, he preps "Number 166" in the Coat Room, though he abandons this plot after Mrs. Baker arranges for him, Holling, and Danny to play baseball with the Yankees players Joe Pepitone and Horace Clarke. After this, Doug becomes a loyal friend to Holling, and even stands up to his brother when he orchestrates a plot to humiliate Holling.

**Mrs. Sidman** – Prior to the start of the novel, Mrs. Sidman was just another teacher at Camillo Junior High School. However, after Doug Swieteck played a prank on her that dyed her face the color of a mango, she became jumpy and terrified of students and left teaching to work in the school's main office. After heroically rescuing Mrs. Baker's class from the rats Sycorax and Caliban, she takes over from Mr. Guareschi as principal. As principal, Mrs. Sidman truly comes into herself and her power. Holling notes that she masters the "principal look" quickly, and she's a much more competent principal than Mr. Guareschi ever was.

**Mrs. Bigio** – Mrs. Bigio is the school cook at Camillo Junior High School. Though her lunches leave a lot to be desired, she's a skilled pastry chef and all the students covet her cupcakes. Her husband, a soldier in Vietnam, dies in November. Holling witnesses Mrs. Bigio's grief when she seeks out Mrs. Baker on a Wednesday afternoon, and he declares he'll never forget the sounds of her sadness. Mrs. Bigio struggles with her grief for months. Her cooking suffers, and she becomes sharp and cruel to all the students but especially Mai Thi, whom Mrs. Bigio treats like a scapegoat. Holling, however, notices that when Mrs. Bigio is cruel to Mai Thi, both Mai Thi and Mrs. Bigio cry. Finally, after she notices other students beginning to bully Mai Thi, Mrs. Bigio apologizes and begins to cook Vietnamese treats and food, and even tries her best to pronounce the Vietnamese words properly. When she joins Mrs. Baker's class on their final camping trip, she invites Mai Thi to come live with her.

**Mai Thi** – Mai Thi is Holling's Vietnamese classmate. She came to America the summer before seventh grade thanks to sponsorship from the Catholic Relief Agency. Because of this, on Wednesday afternoons, Mai Thi attends Catechism, even though she's not Catholic. Though Mai Thi struggles to communicate as she learns English, she still manages to make friends with Danny, Meryl Lee, and Holling, and she gives disturbing "advice" to Holling on several occasions. After Mrs. Bigio's husband dies, Mrs. Bigio treats Mai Thi very cruelly, telling her that she doesn't deserve to live in the United States while American soldiers die in Vietnam. Over the next several months, Mai Thi remains very quiet and withdrawn until Mrs. Bigio apologizes and begins cooking Vietnamese food and treats. During Mrs. Baker's end of the year camping trip, Mrs. Bigio invites Mai Thi to come live with her. Mai Thi happily and gratefully accepts.

**Sycorax and Caliban** – Sycorax and Caliban are Mrs. Baker's pet rats, given to her by Lieutenant Baker back when the rats were babies and still cute. In the present, they're huge, scabby, and have yellow teeth. Holling thinks they look possessed, and everyone is terrified to go near them. The rats escape in October and spend much of the school year living in the walls and the ceiling of Mrs. Baker's classroom. After several months, the exterminator is called to get rid of the rats, but even he is

afraid of them. Finally, after chasing Holling across the tennis courts, the rats are hit by a bus.

**Holling's Mother** – Holling's mother is a quiet, timid woman who seems afraid of her husband, Holling's dad. She chain-smokes in secret, though both Holling and Heather are aware of her habit. She shows her love through food, and when Heather runs away, Holling's mother finally begins to take a stand against her husband by not cooking lima beans. However, this is as far as her rebellion goes. She refuses to drive Holling to New York to pick up Heather, though she does give him money for food and train tickets to bring Heather back home.

**Doug Swietek's Brother** – Doug Swietek's brother is, according to Holling, part of "the penitentiary crowd." An eighth grader, Doug's brother has already been arrested several times and spent a night in jail. He hates school and does whatever he can to get out of going, including pretending to be insane following a concussion. Holling finds him malicious and terrifying, which has to do as much with Doug's brother's size as it does with the fact that he does, at times, target Holling maliciously. Holling never divulges Doug Swietek's brother's real name.

**Mr. Kowalski** – Mr. Kowalski is Meryl Lee's dad and the lead architect at Kowalski and Associates, the rival firm to Hoodhood and Associates. He seems to be a sad and insecure man and even copies Holling's dad's plan for the junior high school remodeling project. However, he does so because landing that job would mean being able to support his family and remain in town. Though Mr. Kowalski does pull his proposal out of the running, Mrs. Baker later helps land Mr. Kowalski a lucrative three-year contract to remodel the Yankee Stadium. This puts Mr. Kowalski in the running for Chamber of Commerce Businessman of 1968, much to Holling's dad's chagrin.

**Mr. Guareschi** – Mr. Guareschi is the principal at Camillo Junior High School. According to the students, Mr. Guareschi's goal in life is to someday be the dictator of a small country. Holling notices that Mr. Guareschi uses several "dictator" techniques when he deals with students, such as using guilt-trips and insisting that he never makes mistakes. When he leaves the school for unknown reasons, Mrs. Sidman takes over.

**Mr. Petrelli** – Mr. Petrelli is Holling's Geography and Social Studies teacher at Camillo Junior High School. He's a fan of "Data Collection Worksheets" and assigning projects titled "(Important Historical Event) and Me." Holling thinks this is silly, given that he doesn't have any personal stake in any of the events his class learns about.

**Mr. Goldman** – Mr. Goldman is the owner of Goldman's Best Bakery and an avid fan of Shakespeare. He recruits Holling to play Ariel in his production of *The Tempest* during the Holiday Extravaganza, and he regularly dismisses Holling's requests to wear something other than yellow tights with white feathers on

the butt. Mr. Goldman insists that playing a role in a Shakespeare play is a privilege that he never had as a junior high student—he was too busy working to feed his family to even go to school.

**Lieutenant Tybalt Baker** – Mrs. Baker's husband, Lieutenant Tybalt Baker, is a soldier with the 101st Airborne Division fighting in Vietnam. When his airplane goes down, Lieutenant Baker is missing for months, but he is found and rescued in June and comes home at the end of the novel. His telegram to Mrs. Baker shows that he's a romantic and a poet. He bought Mrs. Baker the pet rats Sycorax and Caliban as a gift when they were still cute babies.

**Horace Clarke** – Horace Clarke is a Yankee player who Holling looks up to. To make up for what happened to Holling when he asked Mickey Mantle to sign his ball, Mrs. Baker arranges for Holling, Danny, and Doug to play baseball with Horace Clarke and his teammate Joe Pepitone. Unlike Mantle, these players are kind and generous to the boys.

**Mickey Mantle** – Mickey Mantle is a baseball player for the Yankees and is one of Holling's heroes. Around Christmas, he comes to the Baker Sporting Emporium to sign baseballs. Having just come from the play, Holling shows up in his Ariel costume, and Mantle disgustedly says he doesn't sign balls for boys in yellow tights. Both Holling and Danny, who witnessed this interaction, are crushed to realize that their so-called hero is mean to his fans.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Joe Pepitone** – Joe Pepitone is a Yankee player who plays catch with Holling, Danny, and Doug. Unlike Mickey Mantle, Joe Pepitone and his teammate Horace Clarke are kind to the boys.

**Coach Quatrini** – Coach Quatrini is Holling's gym teacher and cross-country coach at Camillo Junior High School. He's an abrasive man and regularly insults and belittles his students.

**Mr. Vendleri** – Mr. Vendleri is the custodian at Camillo Junior High School. Like everyone else, he's afraid of the rats Sycorax and Caliban.

**Mr. Hupfer** – Mr. Hupfer is Danny Hupfer's dad. He often supports Holling by driving him places and cheering for him.

**Chit** – Chit is Heather's short-term boyfriend. He has long hair and is extremely tall, though he drives a tiny yellow VW Bug. He and Heather run away to California to "find themselves," though he leaves her in Minneapolis.

**Charles** – A fifth grader with exceptionally beautiful handwriting.



## 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.



## COMING OF AGE

*The Wednesday Wars* follows thirteen-year-old Holling Hoodhood, a student at Camillo Junior High School, through the entirety of his seventh grade year. At thirteen, Holling is just beginning to think of himself as a person in the world, and most importantly, think about the world beyond him. For Holling, much of his coming of age happens as he begins to question his preconceptions about the world and about the people in it, finally coming to an understanding by the end of the novel that other people lead rich internal lives, just like he does. In this way, the novel suggests that one of the most important elements of coming of age is developing this ability to empathize with others and treat them as fully formed people, not just one-dimensional caricatures.

The novel illustrates this transformation from self-absorbed child to reasonably empathetic teenager mostly through Holling's narration. Holling is an unreliable narrator; the first-person narration means that everything Holling shares with the reader is necessarily filtered through his often-limited perspective. The fact that Holling's perspective is so limited is most evident in how he speaks about his sister, Heather, and Doug Swieteck's brother—both of whom are, for most of the novel, referred to only as "my sister" and "Doug Swieteck's brother." These characters certainly have names (and Holling does finally begin referring to his sister by name late in the novel), so the fact that Holling refers to them in this way indicates that he is simply uninterested in sharing their names with the reader. For him, it's just not necessary to his narration to ever use their names. Holling finally uses Heather's name after spending the few weeks that she's absent thinking hard about who she actually is as a person, what she believes in, and what role she really played in the family when she was at home. These thoughts, which had never occurred to him before, show that Holling is starting to think of Heather as a full, rounded person. In this way, the novel offers a very tangible turning point in Holling's coming of age.

More gradual is the transformation Holling goes through in his relationship with his teacher, Mrs. Baker. On his first day of seventh grade, Holling decides that Mrs. Baker must hate him, given that she rolled her eyes when she realized that as the only Presbyterian student in her class, Holling will spend Wednesday afternoons in class with her, rather than at catechism or Hebrew school like her Catholic and Jewish students. That any teacher would outright hate a student for this reason, especially on the first day of school, is absurd. Both Holling's mother and father point out that Mrs. Baker barely

knows Holling, and further, that it's unlikely she would hate him without reason. When Holling refuses to listen to his parents and insists that they're not truly listening to him on account of a "parent gene," it reinforces how limited Holling's perspective truly is—he flattens Mrs. Baker and his parents to caricatures simply performing a prescribed role.

Over the course of their Wednesday afternoon lessons, Holling gradually begins to understand that Mrs. Baker is much more than a hateful and conniving teacher—though often, he makes important realizations only after he makes extremely misguided assumptions. He learns that she was an Olympic runner only after he questions what she knows about proper running form, and his belief that she's hateful is completely dashed when he watches her comfort Mrs. Bigio, the school cook, after she receives word that her husband died. Essentially, over the ten months of the novel, Holling realizes that Mrs. Baker isn't just a teacher; she doesn't sleep under her desk, and she doesn't live for torturing students. Rather, he learns that she's a married woman who deeply loves her husband and fears for his life while he fights in Vietnam; she's a loyal friend to both her coworkers and her students; and most importantly for Holling, she steps in and performs a parental role when Holling's parents are absent—clear proof that she doesn't hate him at all.

Though Holling makes these leaps to seeing his teachers and sisters as full humans, it's important to note that he is still at the beginning of his process of coming of age. Doug Swieteck's brother remains unnamed, and even if Holling does recognize that Mrs. Baker is more than a teacher, he still feels as though it's a strange to speak to her outside of an educational setting. However, by the end of the novel, the realizations that Holling has made allow him to feel like an integrated part of his community and to know where he exists within it. This suggests, finally, that recognizing the other people's humanity is a crucial part of coming of age and successfully finding one's place in the world.



## FAMILY

Though Holling Hoodhood suggests that his family has always been somewhat dysfunctional, this dysfunction comes to the forefront over the course of Holling's seventh grade year as a result of the dramas of small town life and business competition between Holling's dad and other rival architecture firms. By exploring some of this dysfunction and, specifically, the ways in which Holling's parents are absent from his life in meaningful ways, the novel questions the consequences of this kind of neglect. The novel ultimately shows how, in the absence of loyal family members, others can fill in as chosen family.

The reader's first introduction to Holling's family comes in the form of an introduction to the **Perfect House**, the beautiful Colonial-style house where the Hoodhood family lives.

Holling's dad keeps the exterior painted perfectly white, the flowers are well watered, and the house is exactly in the middle of town. This last quality, per Holling's understanding, means that the house—and his family by extension—exists on an island of sorts. This is reinforced by the fact that Holling's family is Presbyterian, while much of the rest of the town and Holling's classmates in particular are either Jewish or Catholic. In turn, this magnifies Holling's sense of loneliness in school and at home, as he is truly different from his other classmates.

Though the Perfect House looks flawless from the outside, Holling exposes a world inside that is decidedly not perfect. His dad is self-important, mean, and controlling, and he does whatever he can to control his children, wife, and the house to create the appearance of a "perfect" family. He openly mocks Holling's sister, Heather, for her liberal politics and desire to be a hippie, and he regularly tells Holling that his thoughts and feelings are stupid. Holling's mother, on the other hand, secretly chain-smokes and appears scared of her husband, even to the point where she won't help her children for fear of her husband's reaction. This puts Holling and his sister in a position where they must look both outside the family and to each other to find the love and support they need and desire. Most notably, when Heather runs away and gets stranded in Minneapolis, Holling is the one who saves her—something that neither of their parents would do, either out of spite or fear. After this experience, Holling and Heather begin to reevaluate their previously contentious relationship, particularly as the world seems to collapse around them with the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. Even more telling is that following these deaths, they light candles in the local Catholic church—a clear indicator that they must look outside even their own Presbyterian church family for a sense of community.

This idea of chosen family expands to Holling's experiences at school as well, both in terms of his personal relationships and the relationships he watches his classmates form with other adults at the school. Though Holling begins the school year believing that Mrs. Baker and even the rest of his classmates are out to get him, he comes to realize that they're the ones that support him when Holling's parents are absent. Mrs. Baker takes Holling to the emergency room when he gets hit by a bus, and Holling is shocked to see Danny, Meryl Lee, and Mai Thi in the front row for his performance in *The Tempest*—and most surprisingly, they're crying in awe, not laughing at him like he expected. With this, Holling learns that these other individuals can fill in the gaps where his family falls short, and in many ways, he comes to realize that these people are often kinder and more reliable than his own parents. Holling watches a similar relationship and sense of trust develop between Mai Thi, a Vietnamese refugee in his class, and Mrs. Bigio, the school cook. Though Mrs. Bigio is unspeakably cruel to Mai Thi after her husband dies in Vietnam, over the last few months of

school, Mrs. Bigio and Mai Thi begin to regard each other with interest and understanding, especially after Mrs. Bigio apologizes for her cruel words and racism. This culminates in Mrs. Bigio asking Mai Thi if she'd like to move in with her and out of the refugee house, an offer that would make Mrs. Bigio and Mai Thi truly chosen family. When Mai Thi accepts, it stands as a testament to the power of generosity and understanding, and most importantly, being able to humbly admit that one has been wrong before—something that Holling's dad is never able or willing to do, which in turn keeps him from understanding his own children or wife in a way that would allow him to have strong, trusting relationships with them.

Taken together, the many different relationships shown in *The Wednesday Wars* present a number of different forms that family can take, from Danny Hupfer's huge extended family to the much smaller, chosen family that Mrs. Bigio and Mai Thi form. In all cases, however, the novel makes it clear that though it's impossible to choose one's own blood family, people still have the power to choose who they call family—and those chosen family members can be the most loyal and supportive of all.



## THE VIETNAM WAR AND POLITICAL UNREST

*The Wednesday Wars* is set against the backdrop of the political turmoil of 1967 and 1968: at this time, the United States was expanding its involvement in the Vietnam War, while the Cold War with Russia caused Americans to fear an atomic bomb attack. Students at Columbia University were protesting the war and rallying for the presidential run of Bobby Kennedy, while Martin Luther King, Jr. led his March on Washington—and both were assassinated early in 1968. Though Holling is too self-absorbed and ignorant at the beginning of the novel to think he's truly affected by these major political events of the era, this doesn't mean that he's insulated from them. He watches them affect everyone around him, from his conservative father to his teacher, Mrs. Baker, whose husband is fighting in Vietnam. In this way, the novel examines how major events like these affect someone—particularly a young person—who doesn't necessarily see themselves as affected, and in a more overarching way, explores how these major events can lead to a greater sense of community for those impacted.

As Holling comes of age over the course of the novel, he gradually begins to think of the war as something concrete and, most importantly, something that has major consequences for those around him—regardless of what small-scale tragedies befall him. These tragedies, as far as Holling is concerned, are both constant and the end of his life as he knows it, as when Doug Swieteck's brother humiliates him when Camillo Junior High returns from their Christmas break. Doug Swieteck's



brother was the first to discover a photo of Holling in his role as Ariel from [The Tempest](#) on the front page of the local paper and subsequently stole every front page to then paste them up around the school. This is, of course, a major source of embarrassment for Holling, which in turn makes him even more self-centered than usual. To escape the humiliation, Holling suggests to his family that he transfer to a military academy. Later, when Mrs. Baker assures him that the uproar will pass, he insists offhandedly that she doesn't understand, as she doesn't have much to worry about. In the case of his comment to Mrs. Baker, Holling realizes almost immediately how self-centered he was: her husband, Lieutenant Baker, is fighting in Vietnam. This begins to put in perspective for him that though the war might seem far-off to him, it is a major source of anxiety and worry for many people around him. After Holling mentions switching to the military academy, his sister, Heather, becomes uncharacteristically emotional. She tells Holling that the next step after graduation would absolutely be Vietnam, and offers statistics on how many soldiers are "being sent home in body bags." She insists that she couldn't stand if that happened to Holling, impressing upon him that the war isn't just something that affects people like Mrs. Baker. Even if the war doesn't mean much to Holling now, it has the potential to affect him just as deeply.

Because Holling spends Wednesday afternoons at the school alone with Mrs. Baker, he ends up being privy to a great deal of information about his teachers' personal experiences of the war. He watches Mrs. Baker and Mrs. Bigio receive telegrams containing information about their husbands in Vietnam and sees both women experience extreme, unguarded grief. These moments underscore the human cost of the Vietnam War and prepare Holling for the grief he experiences when Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. are assassinated. All of these experiences lead Holling to seek out companionship from those around him. Holling and Heather's visit to the local Catholic church to light candles after Bobby Kennedy dies, as well as the visceral descriptions of Mrs. Baker and Mrs. Bigio's moments of grief, create the undeniable sense that the upheaval and uncertainty of the time period impact everyone, even Holling.

The experience that completes Holling's realization that the war does indeed impact him specifically comes when Mrs. Baker pulls Holling out of a Wednesday afternoon atomic bomb drill to look at points of local architectural interest. As they drive through the town, Holling feels fully entrenched in the history of his community and comes to the shocking realization that should a bomb drop, everything that he knows—including himself—will be gone. Mrs. Baker explains that even though sitting under a desk won't do anything if an actual bomb drops, practicing and feeling prepared for events like this offers people a sense of comfort. When Holling lights a candle afterwards and prays for the wellbeing of his friends, family,

and Mrs. Baker's husband, it shows that he finally recognizes the impact the conflicts around him can and do have on him—and that the only way to cope with the impact is to reach out, form community, and both lean on and provide support for others.



## READING AND LEARNING

*The Wednesday Wars* deals with texts of all sorts, from the classic literature of Shakespeare, to local sports legends and the evening news broadcast. As

Holling develops over the course of the school year and engages with these different kinds of texts, he learns to think critically and apply what he learns, primarily from literature, to the rest of his life. By showing how Holling makes these connections and what he does with them, the novel shows how reading and learning help Holling find a greater sense of richness and meaning in his life.

The novel makes literature's importance evident on a structural level: several characters, including Mrs. Baker's pet rats and her husband, are named after characters from Shakespeare's works, and Shakespeare is one of the most important through-lines of the novel. By showing these connections outright, the novel encourages the reader to look for these inter-textual connections and derive greater meaning about these characters from what the reader knows about their Shakespearean namesakes. This, for example, suggests that Mrs. Baker's pet rats, Sycorax and Caliban (who are named after the monster figures in [The Tempest](#)) are possibly more than terrifying monsters, even though that's what everyone—Mrs. Baker included—thinks of them. During their discussion of the play, Mrs. Baker suggests to Holling that Caliban possibly deserved to "grow beyond what Prospero thought of him," essentially suggesting to Holling that everyone, no matter how monstrous, is deserving of consideration. Indeed, even if the rats are objectively horrifying, they were a gift from Lieutenant Baker—therefore, they represent a token of his love and affection for his wife, and so the rats cannot be seen as entirely monstrous. Further, the fact that many members in Lieutenant Baker's family are named after characters from [Romeo and Juliet](#) (his first name is Tybalt, while his brother's name is Mercutio) offers another, more emotional explanation for why Mrs. Baker loves [Romeo and Juliet](#).

As the school year progresses and Holling reads [The Merchant of Venice](#), [Hamlet](#), and [Much Ado About Nothing](#), he uses the "big ideas" that he and Mrs. Baker extract from the plays to gain a better understanding of his own life and the people around him. This helps Holling on his journey towards becoming more empathetic and aware of other people's inner lives, particularly that of his dad. Though Holling's dad remains a fairly one-dimensional "bad guy" throughout the novel, Holling compares him to the character Shylock from [The Merchant of Venice](#). Shylock is cast as the play's villain because of his greed and

desire for money, though Mrs. Baker makes it clear that Shylock was never given any reason to be anything *but* greedy and selfish. This causes Holling to wonder if his dad actively chose his path or if, like Shylock, his dad became only what was expected of him.

As Holling learns to think more critically through his afternoons with Mrs. Baker, these lessons in critical thinking translate to how he engages with other texts and media he comes into contact with. This is most notable in Holling's interpretation of the nightly newscast and the other news of the war. As Holling watches the news with his dad, he notes that even though the White House insists that the United States war effort is strong, noble, and going well, Holling recognizes that the footage the news shows tells a different story. The images of bloody Marines are, as far as Holling is concerned, pretty clear proof that the war effort isn't going well. This shows Holling beginning to understand that not everything he hears or reads is true—rather, he must be prepared to evaluate what he reads and come to his own conclusions, something Mrs. Baker is insistent he do over the course of their study of Shakespeare. In this way, the novel suggests that through the study of literature, a person can develop the skills to become an engaged and informed citizen.

Ultimately, the novel asserts that literature, especially classic literature like Shakespeare, has the unique power to shed light on life hundreds of years after its original publication. Shakespeare teaches Holling to humanize his parents and peers, and he finds a great deal of satisfaction when his lived experiences mirror the fictional experiences of Shakespeare's characters. By showing how Holling interacts with literature, the novel encourages readers to emulate Holling and be active, questioning participants in their lives, while also suggesting that the fantastical worlds enclosed in novels and plays can teach valuable lessons about the human experience and life in the real world.



## SYMBOLS

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



### THE PERFECT HOUSE

The Perfect House, the pure white Colonial-style house where Holling lives, symbolizes the Hoodhood family's dysfunctional dynamic. Holling's father, who nicknamed the house, does everything in his power to make the home appear perfect—even going so far as to keep the furniture, especially in the formal "Perfect Living Room," covered in plastic. However, the Perfect House, like the Hoodhood family itself, only appears perfect to outsiders. Although the Hoodhood family seems ideal, Holling's dad is

cruel and selfish, while Holling's mother is scared and unwilling to stand up to her husband. As the novel progresses, the house gradually changes to reflect this dysfunction. For example, on the night that Mr. Hoodhood is going to be named Chamber of Commerce Businessman of 1967, the ceiling of the Perfect Living Room collapses, exposing mold and disgusting, permanent damage that had been invisible from the outside.





## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Houghton Mifflin edition of *The Wednesday Wars* published in 2007.

### September Quotes

●● How do parents get to where they can say things like this? There must be some gene that switches on at the birth of the firstborn child, and suddenly stuff like that starts to come out of their mouths.

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood (speaker), Holling's Dad, Holling's Mother

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 7


### Explanation and Analysis

Holling has just told his parents that his teacher, Mrs. Baker, hates him, but he's disappointed to discover that his parents don't even believe him. By attributing their disbelief to a "parent gene," Holling discredits his parents' perspective entirely and avoids acknowledging that they are probably right. Holling's thought process is a product of his youth, immaturity, and self-centeredness. It hasn't occurred to him yet that other people have valid opinions, and that his beliefs aren't the only ones that matter.

However, by attributing his parents' dismissive behavior to "some gene that switches on," he points to the way that his parents don't engage meaningfully with him or give weight to his emotions. This neglect pervades throughout the novel, which sets Holling up to find community, support, and empathy from people other than his parents.

●● "So, Holling, what did you do that might make Mrs. Baker hate your guts, which will make other Baker family members hate the name of Hoodhood, which will lead the Baker Sporting Emporium to choose another architect, which will kill the deal for Hoodhood and Associates [...]"

**Related Characters:** Holling's Dad (speaker), Mrs. Baker, Holling Hoodhood

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 8



### Explanation and Analysis

When Holling tells his parents that he thinks his teacher, Mrs. Baker, hates him, Holling's dad reacts unsympathetically. Flippantly disregarding his son's anxiety, Holling's dad instead makes the situation about himself and the family business. Though Holling is certainly incorrect that Mrs. Baker hates him, when his dad doesn't take his emotions seriously, it shows how little Holling's dad thinks of his son. As far as Mr. Hoodhood is concerned, Holling exists to make his family and, by extension, the family business, look good. Any of Holling's thoughts that exist outside of or in opposition to that goal are simply irrelevant to his father and therefore don't exist. This is one of the many ways that Holling's dad neglects his family and refuses to acknowledge their humanity.

## November Quotes

☝ I was amazed that Mrs. Baker was letting me read this. It's got to be censored all over the place. I figured that she hadn't read it herself, otherwise she would never have let me at it.

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood (speaker), Mrs. Baker

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 50

### Explanation and Analysis

Upon reading *The Tempest*, Holling discovers that the play is full of cursing, drunkenness, and other debauchery that would normally be censored for a thirteen-year-old audience. In this passage, Holling concludes that Mrs. Baker hasn't read the play or else she wouldn't have assigned it. However, as an avid lover of Shakespeare, it's unlikely that Mrs. Baker hasn't read *The Tempest*. This emphasizes Holling's narrow view of Mrs. Baker and the world, given that it simply never occurs to him that Mrs. Baker would assign him such a play, questionable content and all. However, Holling's fixation on the questionable content of the play also illustrates his youth in another way: until prompted later, Holling doesn't necessarily engage with the

bigger ideas at work in *The Tempest* that make the play a literary classic in the first place. Later, as he does engage with those ideas and apply them to his own life, it demonstrates that he's growing up and gaining maturity.

☝ "Must all history center around your own personal experience, Hoodhood?" Mr. Petrelli asked.

**Related Characters:** Mr. Petrelli (speaker), Holling Hoodhood

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 58

### Explanation and Analysis

Holling takes offense when Mr. Petrelli assigns a project titled "The Mississippi River and You," given that Holling has no interest in the Mississippi River and has never been there. In this passage, Mr. Petrelli chides Holling for his self-centered perspective of the world. This illustrates again that Holling is extremely self-absorbed in all aspects of his life—he believes everyone is out to get him, and the fact that Mr. Petrelli asks this question in the first place suggests that Holling does indeed think that history should take his experiences into account. Ironically, the project's title, "The Mississippi River and You," makes Holling think that the project is about him as much as it is about the Mississippi River. It seems that Mr. Petrelli wants to make the projects relevant to the students so that they identify with and engage with the material, but in this case, the project only reinforces Holling's self-centered worldview.

☝ Everyone—except for Caliban—is happy, and everyone is forgiven, and everyone is fine, and they all sail away on calm seas. Happy endings.

That's how it is in Shakespeare.

But Shakespeare was wrong.

Sometimes there isn't a Prospero to make everything fine again.

And sometimes the quality of mercy is strained.

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood (speaker), Mrs. Baker, Mai Thi, Mrs. Bigio

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 50


### Explanation and Analysis

Following the death of Mrs. Bigio's husband in Vietnam, vandals spray-paint "GO HOME VIET CONG" on the Catholic Relief Agency building where Mai Thi lives. Holling sees this event as proof that Shakespeare is wrong, and happy endings don't happen in the real world. Despite being fatalist and simplistic, this attitude shows that Holling is beginning to actually apply what he's learned from Shakespeare to his own life, which means that he is broadening his limited understanding of the world. As he begins to think critically about the plays that he reads with Mrs. Baker, Holling also begins to use critical thinking in considering the world around him. As the novel unfolds, Holling will come to understand that literature is much more relevant to the real world than he previously assumed.

not be interested in watching a television celebration of a holiday they don't celebrate. Since this never crosses Holling's mind, it shows that even though he recognizes he's on a religious island of sorts as the only Presbyterian in his class, he doesn't always remember that his classmates have different experiences and beliefs than he does.

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

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood (speaker), Mickey Mantle, Danny Hupfer

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 93

### Explanation and Analysis

After Mickey Mantle refuses to sign Holling's baseball because of Holling's yellow tights, Holling must cope with discovering that someone he once idolized is actually rude, callous, and mean. By likening Mickey Mantle to a god, it suggests that Holling thinks of him as a legend or a story. Since Holling is learning to think critically about literature, he must also think critically about his favorite sports legend. Given the new evidence, Holling must painfully evaluate everything he ever knew about Mickey Mantle and come to a new understanding about him based on his new information. Being able to do this, as painful as it is, is a mark of Holling's growing maturity.

☝☝ "Pick it up and be glad you're getting it. You shouldn't even be here, sitting like a queen in a refugee home while American boys are sitting in swamps on Christmas Day. They're the ones who should be here. Not you."



Mai Thi took her Something. She looked down, and kept going. She probably didn't see that Mrs. Bigio was pulling her hairnet down lower over her face, because she was almost crying.

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood (speaker), Mai Thi, Mrs. Bigio

## December Quotes

☝☝ I guess it didn't matter to them that the Bing Crosby Christmas Special was on television tonight, the way it mattered to my parents, who would never, ever miss it. I guess the Hupfers thought that a Shakespeare debut was a whole lot more important than hearing "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas" one more time—even though Mr. Hupfer was loosening his tie and holding his hand over a yawn.

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood (speaker), Holling's Mother, Holling's Dad, Mr. Hupfer, Danny Hupfer



**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 85

### Explanation and Analysis

At Holling's debut as Ariel in holiday production of *The Tempest*, he's shocked to see his classmates' parents in the audience. His surprise that his classmates' parents aren't at home watching television implies that Holling's home life is far more dysfunctional than he'd previously let on—it's no surprise to him that his parents didn't come to see him perform. This begins to show Holling that not all parents are dysfunctional and detached; some of them are actively supportive of their own children and of other children in the community.

Though it never occurs to Holling, it's also likely that Danny's parents don't care about the Bing Crosby Christmas Special because they're Jewish, and they might

**Related Themes:**  



**Page Number:** 95

### Explanation and Analysis

Because of her unspeakable grief following her husband's death in the Vietnam War, Mrs. Bigio begins lashing out at students, especially at Mai Thi, who is Vietnamese. It is significant that Holling actually notices this interaction, as it shows that he has momentarily disengaged from his own world to think of others and their experiences. Mai Thi and Mrs. Bigio are both emotionally overwhelmed in this moment, highlighting the deep, painful emotional impacts of the war. In addition, the food being called "a Something" indicates that it's probably unsavory and even unidentifiable. While Mrs. Bigio's food is never described as being particularly delicious, the fact that it's now unrecognizable reflects the extent of her grief.

☞ But Doug went on in, and he came back out carrying the cardboard box for Number 166 from the Coat Room. He looked at us, shrugged, and hauled it away down the hall, staggering under its clumsy weight.

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood (speaker), Horace Clarke, Joe Pepitone, Mrs. Baker, Doug Swieteck, Danny Hupfer

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 99



### Explanation and Analysis

After Mrs. Baker arranges for Holling, Danny, and Doug to throw baseballs with the Yankees players Joe Pepitone and Horace Clark, Doug decides to throw out a mean prank he's spent the whole school year prepping. This shows that Mrs. Baker treating her students as though they're actual people, with important thoughts, concerns, and passions. When she shows Doug that she cares about his love of baseball, he in turn agrees to think of her as more than an authority figure that he can torment for entertainment. This is a turning point in Doug's coming of age, as well as a turning point for Holling. Prior to this passage, Holling described Doug only as a troublemaker and associated him with his troublesome older brother. After this point, Holling begins to think of Doug as a real friend and person.

## January Quotes

☞ Doug wouldn't tell us what he said when he saw the pictures and the can of yellow paint. All I know is that he wouldn't help, and so took a black eye [...] Whatever it means to be a friend, taking a black eye for someone has to be in it.

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood (speaker), Doug Swieteck's Brother, Doug Swieteck

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 103



### Explanation and Analysis

When Doug returns to school after the holiday break with a black eye, he explains that his brother tried to rope him into helping him paint the photos of Holling as Ariel in *The Tempest*. Doug standing up for Holling is a turning point in both boys' development. It reinforces that Doug realizes and accepts that Holling is also a person worthy of caring for, and standing up to his bully of a brother shows him asserting his independence at great personal risk. Meanwhile, Holling now truly thinks of Doug as friend and as part of his extended "chosen family." Doug stands up for Holling in a way that Holling's blood family can't even match at this point, suggesting that Holling will get more help from these outside "family" members than he will at home.

☞ "It's not a ridiculous idea because of why Dad thinks it's a ridiculous idea. It's a ridiculous idea because it's military school, and because the next stop after military school is Saigon."

"So?"

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood, Heather Hoodhood (Holling's Sister) (speaker), Holling's Dad

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 108


### Explanation and Analysis

In order to escape the embarrassment of the Ariel photos that Doug's brother posted around school, Holling suggests he transfer to a military academy. Both Holling's dad and sister deem this idea ridiculous. Holling's sister shows here that despite the tense relationship the two have, she does care for her brother—she wants to see him safe, not at risk of dying in Vietnam like so many other young men. Holling's

reply to her indicates that he doesn't yet understand that the war is something that can actually impact him. As far as he's concerned, military school is just a way to get out of the embarrassment that awaits him at Camillo Junior High, and he's apparently not considered the consequences like his sister has. Holling's perspective is still limited and ignorant, especially when it comes to the war.

☞ When Mrs. Baker came back, her face was set and hard. "Your father has spoken over the phone with the nurse at the front desk. He has given approval for any necessary procedure, and says that, since everything seems under control, he will be along as soon as may be convenient."

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Baker (speaker), Mr. Guareschi, Holling's Dad, Holling Hoodhood

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 126

### Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Guareschi and Mrs. Baker take Holling to the emergency room after a bus hits him, and Holling's parents refuse to come to the hospital. In this passage, Mrs. Baker's "set and hard" face indicates that she takes major issue with the Hoodhoods' neglectful parenting. This is one of the ways that Mrs. Baker begins to learn about Holling's dysfunctional family life at home. In response, she begins to act more and more like Holling's parent figure to fill in the gaps where his own parents fall short.


Further, Holling's dad shows again here how he thinks about his family: unless something is a threat to the name of Hoodhood or the family business, it's not a real crisis. He's also more than willing to force other adults into assuming his own parental role, thereby excusing himself from his fatherly duties.

## February Quotes

☞ [...] right then a whole series of low chords sounded from the piano in the Perfect Living Room below us, followed by a roar and crash as the entire newly plastered ceiling fell, smashing down on top of the baby grand piano, ripping the plastic seat cushions, flattening the fake tropical flowers, tearing the gleaming mirror from the wall, and spreading its glittering shards onto the floor, where they mixed with the dank, wet plaster that immediately began to settle into the carpet to stain it forever.

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood (speaker), Heather Hoodhood (Holling's Sister), Holling's Mother, Holling's Dad

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 131

### Explanation and Analysis

When the ceiling of the Perfect Living Room collapses, it symbolizes Hoodhood family's own impending collapse and destruction. Holling's dad has curated his home and his family to look a certain way for the sake of his own reputation and that of the family business. However, in doing so, he's unable or unwilling to acknowledge that there's structural damage in both his house and his family. His wife and son both appear to be scared of him, and his daughter seems to despise him. Ultimately, Holling's dad's neglect of his family will have disastrous consequences, as the collapsed ceiling foreshadows the heartbreak to come.

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

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood (speaker), Holling's Dad

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 154

### Explanation and Analysis

After Holling's dad gets the job to remodel the junior high school, gloats about it, and badmouths Kowalski and Associates, Holling begins to think more critically about his dad and who he is as a person. In this passage, Holling recognizes, for what seems like the first time, that his dad was once young and coming of age as well, and maybe he was forced to grow up and become a cutthroat architect. Holling is able to do consider this possibility after having several months to think about and digest *The Merchant of Venice*, which shows that he's beginning to apply more of what he learns from the plays to his everyday, lived experience. In forging a connection between his father and

Shylock, Holling is using the critical thinking skills he develops as a result of Mrs. Baker's lessons to think about things that initially seem unrelated.

## March Quotes

☝ You know things are bad when the United States Marine Corps is using stethoscopes and divining rods.

Still, the White House announced that the enemy offensive was running out of steam, that casualties at Khesanh were light, that we would never give up the marine base there.

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood (speaker), Heather Hoodhood (Holling's Sister), Holling's Dad

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 156

### Explanation and Analysis

As the conflict in Vietnam appears to get worse, Holling's entire family watches the news every night. Here, Holling thinks that the news footage from Vietnam is in direct contradiction to what he hears the White House saying. This shows that Holling's lessons with Mrs. Baker can also be transposed to help him think more critically about politics and current events. In this case, Holling recognizes that not everything he hears, even somewhere as official as the news, is true. Learning to question authority like this is a major part of Holling's coming of age, as he does this both with the news and with his own father.

The fact that Holling is even watching the news suggests that he's beginning to accept that the Vietnam War does have an impact on his life, even if it doesn't impact him directly. By this point, he's watched Mrs. Bigio grieve for her husband and Mrs. Baker fear that her husband is gone. This makes it clear to him that the war deeply affects those around him, and by extension, affects him as well.

☝ It also didn't help that Mrs. Baker kept wiping at her eyes during her grading. She'd told us that she had a terrible cold, but she hardly needed to tell us. Her eyes were mostly red all the time, and the way she blew her nose could be pretty impressive. Sometimes while sitting at her desk, she'd just stop doing whatever she was doing and look somewhere far away, like she wasn't even in the classroom anymore.

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood (speaker),

Lieutenant Tybalt Baker, Mrs. Baker

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 161



### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Holling describes Mrs. Baker's cold, which is probably not a cold whatsoever. Even though Holling has come very far in his process of coming of age by this point, this bit of narration suggests that he is still struggling to consistently empathize with people and consider their inner lives. The way that Holling describes Mrs. Baker in this passage suggests that she doesn't actually have a cold—instead, she's drowning in grief and fear for her husband, who has just been declared missing in action in the Vietnam War. The fact that Holling can observe evidence of this and relate it to the reader without truly understanding what he's seeing is evidence of his youth and immaturity.

☝ I was glad he was running for president.

And so maybe, after all, I had done something to make my father mad. Just not out loud.

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood (speaker), Holling's Dad, Heather Hoodhood (Holling's Sister)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 166

### Explanation and Analysis

Previous to this passage, Holling explains that his dad and his sister are locked in a battle over whether Bobby Kennedy should run for president. Here, Holling wonders if his silent support for Bobby Kennedy means that Holling is partially to blame for his dad's anger. This continues to develop the dysfunction at work in Holling's family. Holling is so afraid of his dad, that he believes that even thinking something that wouldn't please Mr. Hoodhood is enough to anger him. This also reinforces the amount of power Holling's dad has within the family, given that he can make his silent, relatively well-behaved son feel guilty and at fault for doing nothing but thinking.

☝ "It was for the women's four-by-one hundred relay. Don't look so surprised. You didn't think I'd spent my whole life behind this desk, did you?"

And I suddenly realized that, well, I guess I had. Weren't all teachers born behind their desks, fully grown, with a red pen in their hand and ready to grade?

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood, Mrs. Baker (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 161

### Explanation and Analysis

After Holling questions Mrs. Baker's authority as a running coach, she shows him her medal from the 1956 Olympics. When he's confronted with this information, Holling begins to understand how truly narrow his understanding of Mrs. Baker was: as far as he was concerned, she was nothing more than a teacher, despite other evidence (such as the fact that she has a husband) that suggested otherwise. This is clear, undeniable proof that Mrs. Baker had an extraordinary life before teaching and is a complex human being. When Holling makes this connection, it's a major step in his own coming of age, given that a majority of his maturity comes as he recognizes that other people have rich inner lives much like his own. This in turn sets Holling up to engage with Mrs. Baker more as friends or even family members rather than in the clearly delineated roles of teacher and student.

## April Quotes

☝ "The whole world is going crazy," my father said, "and no place is crazier than college. You'll stay at your job and be safe."

**Related Characters:** Holling's Dad (speaker), Holling Hoodhood, Heather Hoodhood (Holling's Sister)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 201

### Explanation and Analysis


When Holling's sister insists on attending Columbia University in the wake of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death, Holling's dad insists that she will stay at home and work. Though Holling's dad is trying to preserve his family's perfect, wholesome, and conservative image, it's also important to notice that he wants, first and foremost, to

protect his daughter. This adds another layer to Holling's dad, who is, for a majority of the novel, a one-dimensional bad guy. It indicates that for all his neglect and callousness, he truly does care for the safety and wellbeing of his family. Though Holling doesn't really do anything with this information aside from relay it to the reader, the fact that he even narrates it suggests that he considers it to be important and worth considering. It, in essence, opens the door for Holling to continue to think more critically about his dad in the future, even though he doesn't take that step now.

## May Quotes

☝ For supper, my mother set only three places. She did not cook lima beans. She did not say anything while my father swore up and down [...] Didn't she realize that this didn't help his business reputation or his chances for the Chamber of Commerce Businessman of 1968, which that creep Kowalski was trying to steal from him?

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood (speaker), Holling's Mother, Holling's Dad, Heather Hoodhood (Holling's Sister)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 214



### Explanation and Analysis

After Heather runs away to California to "find herself," Holling's parents deal with their anger and grief in different ways. As seen in this passage, Holling's mother shows her displeasure with her husband by not cooking lima beans anymore. This act is subtle, which aligns with her quiet, timid nature. Holling's dad, on the other hand, is only concerned with how Heather's actions reflect on him—he does not seem concerned for his daughter's safety after all. In this way, the novel suggests that even Holling's dad has some growing up to do, as recognizing that others have internal lives separate and different from his own is such a major part of Holling's own coming of age.

☝ "Would you mind not calling me 'Mr. Hoodhood'? It sounds like you're talking to my father."

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood (speaker), Holling's Dad, Mrs. Baker



**Related Themes:**  



**Page Number:** 219

### Explanation and Analysis

As Holling crouches under his desk during a bomb drill one Wednesday afternoon, he asks Mrs. Baker to call him "Holling" instead of "Mr. Hoodhood." In doing so, Holling asserts his independence from his father for the first time in a tangible way. This shows that Holling is developing self-confidence and the belief that he can truly dictate his own future, given that he's actively choosing to not be like his father. Further, though Holling describes his father using very delicate language for much of the novel, this is a clear indicator that Holling doesn't like his dad, and given his choice, doesn't want anything to do with him. In this way, it shows Holling also turning away from his blood family and towards his chosen family and greater community, including Mrs. Baker.

☝ That's when I knew for the first time that I really did love my sister. But I didn't know if I wanted more for her to come back or for her to find whatever it was that she was trying to find.

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood (speaker), Heather Hoodhood (Holling's Sister)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 226

### Explanation and Analysis

As Holling mulls over how different the house is without his sister around, he realizes that he does love her, even though their relationship feels strained sometimes. However, Holling's uncertainty as to whether he wants her to return or stay away is even more indicative of his coming of age, as it shows that he understands that his sister is different and separate from himself. It recognizes that though he does want her at home for his sake, her desires matter just as much if not more, which is something that Holling's dad never understands. In this way, the novel also suggests that Holling is, in some ways, becoming more mature and well-rounded than his father, who only thinks of people in terms of what they can do for him—either make him look good or make him look bad.

## June Quotes

☝ I could tell that Mrs. Baker was wanting to try it. It was probably getting hot on the open rocks above the falls, with the sun coming straight down now [...]

It's got to be hard to be a teacher all the time and not jump into a pool of clear water and come up laughing and snorting with water up your nose.

**Related Characters:** Holling Hoodhood (speaker), Mrs. Baker

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 253

### Explanation and Analysis

On the end-of-year camping trip, Holling watches Mrs. Baker's face as she supervises her students swimming. He believes that she wants to try it and feels bad that she can't. Here, Holling uses empathy to interpret Mrs. Baker's facial expressions, which is a sharp contrast from the way he read her facial expressions at the beginning of the novel—most of his early interpretations limited her motives to assassinations and booby traps. Now that he actually recognizes that Mrs. Baker is human and probably uncomfortably warm in the hot sun, it illustrates that Holling has finally come of age and recognizes that Mrs. Baker is more than a plotting teacher.

☝ "You think that's how you become a man, by chanting a few prayers?"

"You think you become a man by getting a job as an architect?"

**Related Characters:** Holling's Dad, Holling Hoodhood (speaker), Heather Hoodhood (Holling's Sister), Holling's Mother, Danny Hupfer

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 253

### Explanation and Analysis

After Danny Hupfer's bar mitzvah, Holling and his dad argue about how a boy becomes a man and enters adulthood. Holling's father considers having a job and supporting a family to be indicative of manhood, while Holling thinks that a symbolic and religious coming of age, such as a bar mitzvah, is an appropriate way to enter into adulthood. This provides some evidence as to why Holling's dad is arrogant and obsessed with his job: he sees his family

and his job as evidence that he's a contributing, adult member of society who is dutifully providing for his family. This moment is also one of the most significant moments in

Holling's coming of age, given that it's the first time he actually argues with his father and confidently stands up for what he believes in.



## 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.

## SEPTEMBER

Holling Hoodhood tells the reader that his teacher, Mrs. Baker, hates him with a burning passion—for absolutely no reason. He says it would've made sense if she'd hated Doug Swieteck, as he once made a list of 410 ways to get a teacher to hate you. The year before, Doug tried “Number 6” on Mrs. Sidman, and stained her face the color of a mango for days. Doug was suspended for two weeks, and Mrs. Sidman switched jobs to work in the main office. She became wary and withdrawn and stayed as far away from students as she could. Holling says he did nothing to provoke Mrs. Baker and even tries to stay as far away from Doug as possible so he won't suffer the blame for anything Doug does.

On the first day of seventh grade, Mrs. Baker calls roll. From the names, you can tell where everyone lives: Jewish last names means a student lives on the north side of town, while Italian last names mean a student lives in the south. Holling, however, lives in the exact middle of town in what his dad calls the **Perfect House**, and he's Presbyterian. This situation, he declares, is a disaster: his two Presbyterian friends moved away last summer, which means that on Wednesday afternoons, Holling will be the only one who remains with Mrs. Baker while the Jewish students are at Hebrew school and the Catholic students are at catechism.

When Mrs. Baker calls Holling's name during roll, he thinks her tone is hopeful when she asks if he attends Temple Beth-El or Saint Adelbert's. When they both ascertain that he'll be spending Wednesdays with her, Holling thinks Mrs. Baker's face looks as though the sun won't shine again until the end of the school year, and Holling feels as though he's going to throw up the omelet his mother made him for breakfast.

When Holling walks home that afternoon, he notices, as usual, that the sidewalk squares become perfectly white and uncracked as he approaches the **Perfect House**. The azalea bushes outside are perfect, and the symmetrical windows make the house look neat. When Holling gets inside, he thinks about a sugary snack and walks past the Perfect Living Room, where the furniture is covered in plastic, and a baby grand piano that nobody in the Hoodhood family can play sits by the window. It's supposed to impress people, as Mr. Hoodhood is an architect.

*From the beginning, Holling shows that he thinks of people as being one-dimensional: Mrs. Baker is nothing more than a hateful teacher, and Doug is just a troublemaker. This simple-mindedness emphasizes Holling's youth. In addition, Holling seems to caricature people when they pose a threat to him, highlighting his self-absorption and possibly insecurity.*



*Holling implies that the Perfect House, designed and nicknamed by his father, isn't actually perfect at all, which suggests that Holling and his father perhaps don't see eye-to-eye. The name Perfect House also indicates that Holling's dad is preoccupied with keeping up appearances and making his family look a certain way.*



*It's worth considering here whether Holling's assessment is accurate, or if what he "sees" in Mrs. Baker's face is actually a reflection of what he feels. This also reinforces the fact that Holling is an unreliable narrator.*



*The outward perfection of the Perfect House is undeniable, which shows that someone—likely Holling's dad—puts a lot of time and effort into maintaining the pristine home. However, Holling's assertion that the piano is intended only to impress people and serves no other purpose suggests that Holling's dad is obsessed with how he and his family appear to other people.*



Holling finds his mother in the kitchen and informs her that Mrs. Baker hates him. She assures him that Mrs. Baker doesn't hate him, as she barely knows him. Holling wonders if a gene switches on when a parent has their first child that makes them say stuff like this.

After supper, Holling tells his dad that Mrs. Baker hates him. He shushes Holling, as he's in the middle of watching Walter Cronkite's newscast. Holling watches until a commercial break and then repeats his statement. His dad says that nobody hates someone without reason, and asks if Mrs. Baker is Mrs. Betty Baker of the Baker family that owns the Baker Sporting Emporium. Holling's dad tells Holling that the Baker Sporting Emporium is considering Hoodhood and Associates to remodel its building. Because of this, Holling should not do anything to make Mrs. Baker hate him—if he does, there will be no architecture firm for Holling to inherit. Holling feels like he is going to vomit again.

Finally, Holling finds his sixteen-year-old sister (later revealed as Heather) to ask her for help. She's in her room, listening to the Monkees, and is dismissive when Holling tells her of his plight. She does sympathize about their dad's reaction, but she suggests he either escape to California or get some guts for Mrs. Baker to hate. That night, Holling reads his favorite novel, [Treasure Island](#). He reads the part where a character is victorious only because of dumb luck, and he decides that he doesn't want to have to count on dumb luck, too.

On Tuesday, Mrs. Baker eyes Holling in the morning when he comes out of the Coat Room. Holling has an epiphany: Mrs. Baker booby-trapped his desk. He inspects it carefully and sees nothing amiss, but asks Meryl Lee Kowalski, who is in love with him, to open the desk in case there's something inside. He insists there might be a surprise for her inside. Meryl Lee complies, but when she finds nothing but textbooks, she drops the desktop and apologizes for not dropping it on Holling's fingers.

Holling is afraid to go outside for recess, as it's likely that Mrs. Baker recruited an eighth grader to torment him. He fears she might have roped in Doug Swietek's brother, who has already been arrested several times. Holling tries to read in the classroom, but Mrs. Baker, with "criminal intent" in her eyes, shoos him outside. He sticks close to Mrs. Sidman, but his plan to keep a ten-foot distance between himself and other students is thwarted almost immediately when Doug Swietek's brother invites Holling to play soccer. Mrs. Sidman encourages Holling to play, and Holling feels he has no choice but to accept.

*When Holling mentions the parent gene, it's a way for him to explain away a perspective that challenges his own, thereby reinforcing his own version of events in his mind.*



*Holling's dad dismisses Holling's concerns and instead emphasizes the towering importance of protecting the family business's reputation. This shows that Holling's dad cares more about his business (and by extension, his own image) than he does about his son's feelings. In addition, Holling's dad does little to show Holling that he may be misjudging the situation with Mrs. Baker, which only perpetuates Holling's distorted view of his teacher.*



*Heather's suggestion, though harshly worded, suggests that she is aware that Holling is self-conscious and insecure. Holling reads Robert Louis Stevenson's [Treasure Island](#), which follows a young boy named Jim Hawkin as he embarks on a quest to find buried treasure. Since [Treasure Island](#) is Holling's favorite book, perhaps he longs for adventures of his own.*



*The idea that a teacher would booby-trap a student's desk is silly, and the fact that Holling believes it's a real possibility shows his immaturity. Holling also assumes that Mrs. Baker's facial expression has something to do with him—he fails to understand that Mrs. Baker could be dealing with all sorts of things that have nothing to do with Holling. Further, Holling's certainty that Meryl Lee loves him also shows his self-absorption, while Meryl Lee's insult suggests that she does not, in fact, love him.*



*Again, the possibility that Mrs. Baker would rope in older students to harass Holling is absurd and points to his own self-centeredness and paranoia. While Holling sees "criminal intent" in her eyes, it's more likely Mrs. Baker is just wants a few moments to herself during lunchtime.*



Holling takes his position on the field, and Doug Swieteck's brother explains that Holling will play defense, which means he has to try to stop him. Holling thinks he might be able to stop Doug's brother with a tank and grenade launchers but he agrees to play anyway. Doug's brother laughs, and Holling imagines Mrs. Baker inside her classroom, laughing too. He figures he'll just kick the ball away if it comes towards him. This plan, however, proves impossible: Doug's brother comes right at Holling, yelling and slobbering. Danny Hupfer, the goalie, yells at Holling to get in front. Holling steps towards the sideline, and Doug's brother seems to follow him.

Holling remembers his characters from [Treasure Island](#) and remembers that he should have guts. He runs towards the goal, and when Doug Swieteck's brother is nearly on top of him, he steps away and trips him. Doug's brother's head clunks against a goal post. When Holling opens his eyes, Doug's brother is wobbling, and Mrs. Sidman is running towards them. Doug's brother vomits on her, and Danny congratulates Holling. Doug Swieteck does too, as does Meryl Lee. Holling is confused and admits that he didn't mean to take out Doug Swieteck's brother or make him look like an idiot, which enrages Meryl Lee: she insists that Holling tried to make *her* look like an idiot earlier, when he asked her to open his desk.

Mrs. Baker's face looks pinched when the class returns after recess, which Holling figures is the "disappointment of a failed assassination plot." The PA system announces that Doug Swieteck's brother will be back after ten days. Mrs. Baker teaches her students how to diagram sentences that afternoon. Holling's classmates diagram easy sentences on the board, while she asks Holling to diagram what he deems an impossible sentence. As she begins to coach him through it, the PA system calls Holling to the office.

Holling is thrilled to get to escape, but he sees that Mrs. Baker looks victorious. He decides she probably called the police on him for tripping Doug Swieteck's brother. Holling walks to Mr. Guareschi's office. The general belief among students at the school is that Mr. Guareschi wants to be the dictator of a small country. Finally, Mr. Guareschi calls Holling into his office. Mr. Guareschi calls him "Holling Hood," and insists that forms are never wrong when Holling tries to correct his name. Finally, Mr. Guareschi explains that Mrs. Baker is concerned with Holling's below-average but passing grade in sixth grade math and has asked if Holling could sit in on a sixth grade math class on Wednesday afternoons.

*The soccer game suggests that Holling isn't wrong about everything—Doug's brother following Holling is probably somewhat true, though he's probably not as animalistic and slobbery as Holling insists he is. Holling's comment about the tank and grenade launchers is one of the first references to the Vietnam War, which takes place during the story.*



*When Holling uses [Treasure Island](#) to influence his actions during the soccer game, it shows how he relies on literature to guide the way he moves through the world. Meryl Lee's rage that Holling humiliated her earlier adds more evidence that Holling is unreasonably paranoid about Mrs. Baker. Despite this, Danny, Meryl Lee, and Doug's praise of Holling suggests that Doug's brother is truly a bully, given the amount of support for this comeuppance.*



*Holling's interpretation of Mrs. Baker's face is only an indication to his own paranoid beliefs; it's far more likely that she's concerned for the wellbeing of a student. Even though Holling feels as though the "impossible sentence" is punishment, it's far more likely that Mrs. Baker wants to push him, not punish him.*



*Here, Mr. Guareschi seems similar to Holling's dad in that he doesn't allow any differing perspectives to threaten what he believes. This is also how Holling thinks at this point, so Mr. Guareschi's mindset is only offensive to Holling because it contradicts Holling's understanding of the world.*



Mr. Guareschi thinks for a moment, but decides that a passing grade is a passing grade. He warns Holling that he might still have to retake sixth grade math, but for now, he'll remain in seventh grade math. Mr. Guareschi writes a note to Mrs. Baker and seals it in an envelope before handing it to Holling. He informs Holling that he will check and make sure that Mrs. Baker received a sealed envelope.

Holling does as he's told and delivers the sealed envelope to Mrs. Baker. Mrs. Baker reads the note, puts it in her desk, and says, "regrettable." Holling watches her carefully for the rest of the day but cannot find any clues that give away her "murderous intentions." Her face doesn't even change when the PA announces that her husband, Lieutenant Tybalt Baker, will be deployed to Vietnam soon, and all the students should wish both Lieutenant and Mrs. Baker well. Holling reasons that this is just how people who are plotting something act.

## OCTOBER

All the Wednesdays of September and into October, Mrs. Baker has Holling wash chalkboards, clean erasers, put up bulletin boards, and clean out the Coat Room. This is something that Holling hates, especially since Doug Swieteck has a stash of disgusting food items stored in there to use for "Number 166" on his list of how to make teachers hate you. Holling cleans the rest of the room but doesn't touch the box. He doesn't complain, especially since in early October, his dad becomes one of two candidates for the Baker Sporting Emporium remodel, and he reminds Holling nightly to not make Mrs. Baker hate him.

By this time, Doug Swieteck's brother still isn't in school. Doug shares why: his brother enjoyed his ten days of medical observation so much, that he decided he didn't want to come back to school. One evening, when Doug's brother returned to school with his mother to meet with the teacher, he took erasers and pounded them against his head before sticking chalk in his mouth and racing around the school, roaring and slobbering. It was pure chance that poor Mrs. Sidman was there, clearing out her desk after deciding to leave her position in the office. Apparently, you could hear her screams echoing in the hallways until dawn. For this stunt, Doug Swieteck's brother got four more weeks of medical observation.

*When Mr. Guareschi mentions checking with Mrs. Baker about the sealed envelope, it shows that he doesn't trust any of his students. This seems to echo Holling's distrust of Mrs. Baker.*



*Mrs. Baker likely just wanted an afternoon to herself once per week, so her annoyance that Holling has to stick around is understandable. Notice too that although Holling hears that Mrs. Baker's husband is being deployed, Holling doesn't actually engage with the news. Holling is oblivious to the possibility that Mrs. Baker may be feeling scared and anxious about her husband's impending deployment. Once again, Holling only thinks about himself.*



*Holling takes his father's warnings seriously, which shows that he is either terrified of disappointing his dad or has an exceptionally strong sense of familial loyalty. Given how imposing a figure Holling's dad is, the first is far more likely, but the second is also a possibility given how isolated Holling insists his family is. He never mentions his parents' friends or a church community, unlike all the other characters in the novel.*



*Holling is hearing this story secondhand from someone he's already suggested isn't necessarily trustworthy. This implies that the story Holling relays likely isn't entirely true, even if the results are the same (Mrs. Sidman still leaves her position; Doug's brother still gets out of school). In addition, Holling only ever refers to Doug Swieteck's brother as Doug Swieteck's brother. This shows that as far as Holling is concerned, Doug's brother's name isn't important to his narrative, thereby reinforcing Holling's limited perspective.*



The day after this all comes to light, Mrs. Baker glares at the class, and Holling decides she must believe the whole thing is his fault. However, suspiciously, Mrs. Baker stops glaring when the class heads to Mr. Petrelli's classroom for geography. Holling thinks Mrs. Baker looks like an evil genius when she smiles at him, and he is still mulling over this fact when Mr. Petrelli hands out Study Question Data Sheets to fill out in pairs. Meryl Lee approaches Holling to be partners and assures him that Mrs. Baker doesn't look like an evil genius. They argue about the answers on the Data Sheets, and Holling continues to wonder what Mrs. Baker has in store for him.

Holling explains that recess became much safer after Mrs. Baker's "failed assassination plot," as the "would-be assassins" now leave him alone after what happened to Doug Swietek's brother. As Holling runs out the door, Mrs. Baker calls him back in and asks him to run down to the kitchen to fetch trays of pastries. She insists that they're not for the class; they're for the Wives of Vietnam Soldiers' gathering later in the afternoon. She tells him to not look so suspicious and sends him off.

Holling enters the kitchen on the first floor, prepared for the usual "fumes" of Mrs. Bigio's questionable food, but the kitchen smells like buttery pastries. He looks in awe at the trays of cream puffs, and Mrs. Bigio gruffly tells him to start carrying out the trays. Holling sadly reasons that he won't be thanked for his hard work with one of the cream puffs. Mrs. Bigio makes him carry the trays one at a time. This means twelve trips up three flights of stairs, which takes the entirety of recess. Holling arranges the trays under the open windows so the cream puffs can cool. When the rest of Holling's classmates returns from recess, they're excited to see all the cream puffs and somewhat distraught when Mrs. Baker sends them right off to math class.

Holling and his classmates spend the entirety of math class thinking about the cream puffs. When the Jewish students leave at 1:45 P.M., Danny threatens to kill Holling if he gets a cream puff, and ten minutes later, Meryl Lee promises to "do Number 408" to Holling if he gets a cream puff. Holling thinks he's safe, as he reasons it's more likely the President will show up than Mrs. Baker will give him a cream puff.

*It will later be revealed that Mrs. Baker and Mrs. Sidman are reasonably good friends, which may explain Mrs. Baker's glare—though it's also worth noting that her husband was just deployed, meaning that she has several reasons to look like she's in a bad mood. Again, Holling's interpretation that her look is that of an evil genius reflects his paranoia and limited perspective. He assumes her sour facial expression has something to do with him, and he is unable to consider any other possibilities.*



*The "would-be assassins" (the eighth graders) probably aren't as interested in picking on people while their ringleader is out of school, so the idea that the older kids truly fear Holling is humorous and shows that he has an overblown sense of his own importance in the school. The mention of the Wives of Vietnam Soldiers group is the first mention of Mrs. Baker's life outside of teaching.*



*It will soon come to Holling's attention that Mrs. Bigio's husband is also currently in Vietnam, which casts these cream puffs as an act of love and support for both her husband and the other women who are in her same situation. This is probably why she makes Holling carefully carry the trays one at a time.*



*Danny and Meryl Lee's threats suggest that Holling is surrounded by bullying. The threats are overblown but paint a realistic picture of the middle school landscape.*



A fifth grader named Charles comes into the room carrying a box and assures Mrs. Baker that he got "them" all. He puts the box on Mrs. Baker's desk and looks sadly at Holling before he leaves. Mrs. Baker turns to Holling and explains that the box contains all the erasers from the school for him to clean. Holling wants to complain, but he thinks of the future of Hoodhood and Associates. Mrs. Baker suggests that if they both finish their afternoon tasks on time, Holling can have a cream puff. Holling feels as though this must be a dream, but he carries the box outside into the beautiful October afternoon and gets to work.

As Holling pounds the erasers against the wall, the chalk dust fills his lungs and wafts to the closed windows of the first floor. Holling thinks of the beautiful **cream puffs** as the chalk dust continues to drift—up to the open third floor windows. Frantically, Holling gathers the erasers and races upstairs. He discovers he's too late: the chalk dust already settled over the cream puffs like powdered sugar. Mrs. Baker instructs him to choose a cream puff and then help her carry the rest to her car. Holling's cream puff feels gritty, and he tosses it into the Coat Room.

The "story of the cream puffs" spreads quickly through the town: all the Wives of Vietnam Soldiers choked on the puffs (which Holling believes is an exaggeration), they quickly realized that Mrs. Baker would *never* play a practical joke, and they settled for demoting Mrs. Bigio from her position as the Official Cook of the Wives of Vietnam Soldiers. In tears, Mrs. Bigio shoved a whole cream puff in her mouth and refused to let herself cough, which landed her in the hospital. Holling's dad turns on Holling at dinner on Thursday night and begins asking if he did anything to the cream puffs. Holling is saved from lying when his sister, Heather, sits down at the table with a yellow flower painted on her cheek.

Holling's dad asks Holling's mother to tell Heather that she has a flower painted on her cheek. Heather assures her family she's aware, and the reason is obvious. Holling's dad says it's not obvious unless she wants them to think she's a flower child. After a moment of silence, Holling's dad tells her that she can't be a flower child. She argues that flower children are beautiful, believe in peace and helping each other, and will change the world. Holling's dad insists that flower children are just hippies who can't change their socks. When she mentions the flower children protesting the war at the Pentagon, Holling's dad snaps that he's a candidate for the Chamber of Commerce Businessman of 1967, an honor he won't receive if his daughter is a flower child. He sends her to wash her face. She complies, and Holling's dad asks for the lima beans.

*The fact that Holling's first thought is of the family business shows that his father largely influences the way Holling thinks about the world and behaves. Holling's dad is training his son to believe that family and the business come first, and the way to support both is through unwavering loyalty—even if it means taking on unpleasant tasks.*



*Though Holling feels a great deal of responsibility to keep the cream puffs safe, his fear and self-conscious nature keep him from speaking up when the cream puffs become covered in chalk dust. This shows that although Holling has a reasonable sense of integrity, he hasn't yet developed the confidence to speak up.*



*The fact that Holling's dad immediately blames Holling for the cream puff incident provides some evidence for why Holling tends to believe that people are out to get him, or that it's his fault when bad things happen. Holling's dad encourages this reading of the world, even when there's little evidence that Holling did anything. In this way, it seems that Holling's father is inhibiting his son's coming of age and sense of self by sowing self-doubt instead.*



*By opposing the flower children (the hippies of the 1960s), Holling's dad implies that he's politically conservative and possibly even supports the war in Vietnam. He also believes that associating with liberal politics is in direct opposition with his leadership and business goals, which suggests that the powerful elite in the area are also likely conservative. Heather, on the other hand, is just old enough to be a part of the major youth movements and protests that bubble up around this time, especially in the spring of 1968.*





Later that night, Heather comes into his room, angry that he didn't support her in standing up to their dad. She insists that they have to believe in something bigger than themselves, and says that it's time for Holling to grow up to be the person he's supposed to be, not just "the son who is going to inherit Hoodhood and Associates." She asks why he lets their dad bully him, and he insists it never works when she stands up to him. She touches her cheek and goes to her room to play the Monkees.

The next morning, Mrs. Baker finds Holling and explains that they need to make some changes to their Wednesday afternoon routines, though he must perform one more chore—possibly for one more cream puff. When Mrs. Baker walks away, Meryl Lee, Danny, and Mai Thi descend on Holling to find out if he truly got a cream puff. They don't believe him when he says he didn't eat it, and they tell Holling that he owes them all cream puffs. Holling stops at Goldman's Best Bakery the next day and discovers that it'll take three weeks' worth of allowance money to buy the cream puffs, so he tells his classmates on Monday that he needs three weeks.

On Wednesday afternoon, Mrs. Baker informs Holling that they're going to be reading Shakespeare on Wednesdays. Holling thinks this is the worst strategy ever, as teachers only ever invoke Shakespeare to torture students. Before they can start, however, she asks Holling to clean Sycorax and Caliban's cage. Sycorax and Caliban are pet rats. They were cute babies when Lieutenant Tybalt Baker bought them for Mrs. Baker, but they soon got big and scabby, with clacking yellow teeth. Nobody, Mrs. Baker included, likes to go near them.

Mrs. Baker tells Holling to dig out a small cage, transfer Sycorax and Caliban to it using food as a lure, and then clean out their large one. Her strategy for transferring the rats works surprisingly well, and Holling takes the cage outside to clean it. He brings it back up, spreads fresh sawdust, and positions the cage doors next to each other to move the rats back. As the rats start to clamber through, Mrs. Baker says that teachers don't teach Shakespeare just to bore their students. Holling is stunned to realize that Mrs. Baker knew what he was thinking, and he lets go of the cages and turns around to look at her.

*Holling's apathy suggests that at this point, he's is willing to take the path of least resistance and become an architect, just as his dad wants. His sister, on the other hand, isn't bound up in loyalty to the family business—probably because her dad believes she can't or shouldn't inherit it, since she's female. This gives her the freedom to rebel as she sees fit.*



*Holling responds to his classmates here in the same way he responded to his dad and sister: he sees that doing what his classmates want is the path of least resistance, even if he doesn't actually want to do it, and it will cost him nearly a month's worth of allowance. The fact that Meryl Lee, Danny, and Mai Thi make a big deal out of this reinforces the fact that they're just children who aren't above using bullying and peer pressure to get what they want—they all have growing up to do.*



*It's worth noting that Holling's preconceived notions about Shakespeare aren't unique to just him, something that will be important to remember soon. The rats are named after monster figures in Shakespeare's [The Tempest](#), though the fact that Lieutenant Baker bought them as a gift for Mrs. Baker suggests that they're more than monsters—they're a token of his love and affection.*



*Mrs. Baker is certainly not a mind reader, though she's aware of students' preconceived notions about Shakespeare. Again, the fact that Holling's first thought is that Mrs. Baker is a mind reader illustrates his immaturity and his warped understanding of Mrs. Baker's "power for evil."*



The rats immediately begin pushing out between the cages, snarling and clacking their teeth. Holling thinks they look demonic, and he tries to shove the cages back together. Mrs. Baker shrieks, Sycorax leaps at Holling's thumb, and Holling jumps away. Mrs. Baker jumps onto a desk as the rats run into the Coat Room. In a strained voice, Mrs. Baker tells Holling to go fetch Mr. Vendleri. Holling leaves the room, jumping from desk to desk, and only explains to Mr. Vendleri what Mrs. Baker needs him to do when he arrives back at the Coat Room.

Mr. Vendleri gets two brooms and a shovel so that Holling and Mrs. Baker can flush the rats out, while he'll catch them with the shovel. Holling is stunned that he's being asked to get so close to the rats, and he notes that all three of them look scared stiff as they go into the Coat Room. The rats prove uncatchable: they snarl and howl and retreat into the radiators, right after Sycorax abandons her found cream puff. Before long, Mr. Vendleri, Mrs. Baker, and Holling hear the rats climb up the walls and skitter across the ceiling tiles.

Mr. Vendleri decides he should tell Mr. Guareschi, and from the safety of her desk, Mrs. Baker agrees that this is a good idea. When the two men return, Mr. Guareschi decides that nobody should know about the escaped rats and swears everyone to silence. Holling addresses the reader and amends his narration: he and his teachers cursed while they were chasing the rats.

When Mrs. Baker and Holling are alone again, Mrs. Baker remarks that Holling only pretended to eat his cream puff. She declares this a wise choice and tells him to sit down. Slowly, Mrs. Baker climbs down from her desk and pulls out a massive, smelly black book for Holling. She tells him to open to [The Merchant of Venice](#). Holling thinks the pictures are ridiculous and the text is insanely tiny, but Mrs. Baker's strategy of boring him isn't working: the play is pretty okay. Parts of it even give him shivers, and he's thrilled to have spoiled her plot.

That night, Holling dreams that Doug Swieteck's brother is Shylock, and they're in a courtroom with their other classmates. Mrs. Baker is the judge. Holling and Mrs. Baker take two more days to read [The Merchant of Venice](#), and when they're done, they discuss the character of Shylock. Holling suggests that he's not a true villain; he just wants to become who he's supposed to be. When Mrs. Baker asks why Shylock *couldn't* do that, Holling answers that the other characters decided that Shylock had to be a certain way, and it trapped him. Mrs. Baker declares that this is why the play is a tragedy.

*Holling's paranoia has major consequences here, as it causes the rats to escape. Mrs. Baker's fear of the rats suggests that she only kept them as a reminder of her husband's love, an indicator to the reader that love can take many forms and different kinds of sacrifices.*



*This is the first time anyone truly asks Holling to face his fears in the story, and it's notable that he does so in the company of teachers at school, and specifically Mrs. Baker. This suggests that his teachers, not his parents, will be the ones to guide Holling towards adulthood and a more mature perspective on life.*



*When Holling amends his narration, it makes it clear that he is, at times, hiding things from the reader. This makes his narration even less reliable, but it also sets Holling up with a starting point from which to grow and become more confident in his own story.*



*Holling's paranoia and distrust of Mrs. Baker means he never considers the possibility that she's actually just trying to introduce him to Shakespeare, not bore him. Regardless, Holling likes the play and seems excited enough to want to read more, which means that he will likely use what he reads in Shakespeare to think about his life, just as he did already with [Treasure Island](#).*



*Holling's assessment of Shylock's character suggests that not all villains are evil; some are simply at the mercy of what the world has forced them to be. This kind of nuanced reading gives Holling the tools—in the safe, confined space of literature—to practice making these kinds of assessments and thinking critically about people and about the world.*



## NOVEMBER

November arrives with gray skies and rain. Holling and his dad prep the **Perfect House** for winter, and Holling's mother discovers a leak in the ceiling of the Perfect Living Room. When Holling's dad touches the ceiling to inspect it, part of the ceiling falls down on his face. Holling figures that all the rain is what inspires Mrs. Baker to assign [The Tempest](#) next, but he says that her plot to bore him failed spectacularly. [The Tempest](#) is almost as good as [Treasure Island](#) since it has storms, witches, revolutions, drunkenness, and a monster named Caliban. Holling figures that Mrs. Baker likely hasn't read it herself, because if she had, she'd never let him read it.

Holling is especially taken with Caliban's curses, which are fantastic. Holling decides to learn them all by heart, so he practices them in his bedroom every night after supper. By the second week of practicing, Holling feels he's perfected several curses. On Tuesday night, Holling's dad and mother knock on the door, but both leave when he says he's practicing a speech for Mrs. Baker. When Heather knocks on the door, Holling uses one of Caliban's curses on her. She throws the door open and tells him to be quiet. Holling decides to go to school early the next day so he can practice.

When Holling gets to the third floor the next day at school, he finds Mr. Vendleri holding a ladder with Mr. Guareschi on it, placing traps in the ceiling. As Mr. Guareschi sets the trap, it springs onto his fingers and he falls off the ladder, cursing. Holling suggests he try, "the red plague rid you!" or, "scurvy patch," but his suggestions are met with blank stares. Mr. Guareschi sends Holling to class and climbs back up the ladder.

Holling and Mrs. Baker listen to the rats scuttle in the ceiling for a moment, and Mrs. Baker swears Holling to secrecy. Holling sits at his desk and whispers curses into his lap. Mrs. Baker insists he share what he's been whispering, and finally, Holling admits that he was whispering, "strange stuff, the dropsy drown you." Mrs. Baker points out that the line doesn't appear that way in the play, and Holling admits he liked the rhythm of it. Mrs. Baker says that she does too and turns back to her grading. Holling is shocked that Mrs. Baker recognized the curses—this is proof she's read the play, which means her plot is quite devious.

*The leak in the living room mirrors the Hoodhood family's dysfunction: it's hidden from view most of the time under the pretense of perfection, but it will eventually come to light and have negative repercussions. Meanwhile, it's a comical thought that Mrs. Baker hasn't read [The Tempest](#), which shows that Holling still thinks he's still more important and more clever than he actually is.*



*The fact that Holling is willing to bend the truth here to keep doing what he wants to do (practicing Caliban's curses) shows that he's already starting to give weight to his own desires rather than immediately bending over backwards for other people. This shows that Holling is beginning to grow up and value his own thoughts, opinions, and passions.*



*Holling is entirely unaware that suggesting Shakespearean curses is somewhat strange, which underscores his naivety: nobody else cares about these curses, no matter how much they might matter to him.*



*In Mrs. Baker's eyes, the fact that Holling is so interested in Shakespearean curses is probably a good thing—it means he'll be more receptive to her lessons, continue to enjoy what they're reading, and hopefully decide that she might even be trustworthy. The fact that he's coming up with his own Shakespearean-style insults also shows that he's beginning to synthesize what he's learning and make it his own.*



Holling decides to slip Caliban curses more naturally into conversation. He curses at his sad lunch, Doug Swieteck's brother, and the smell of the boys' restroom. In Geography, Mr. Petrelli introduces a project called "The Mississippi River and You." Holling insists he's never been to the Mississippi, and when Mr. Petrelli asks if history has to center on Holling, Holling curses to himself. In Chorus, Miss Violet asks Holling to sing a soprano part. Holling curses at both Danny and Meryl Lee as he moves forward, and Meryl Lee takes great offense. She grabs Holling's arm and demands he repeat himself, but he sings as though his life depends on it. Finally, Miss Violet tells Meryl Lee that she didn't move Holling so she could flirt with him. Meryl Lee grinds her foot into the top of Holling's.

Holling's foot is very painful when he goes to Gym. As Coach Quatrini berates the students to run faster, Holling calls him a "pied ninny" under his breath. Doug Swieteck's brother hears and asks Holling what it means. Holling fumbles before saying that it means someone was stupid and ate a bunch of pies. Doug's brother thanks Holling and runs off.

In the afternoon, Mrs. Baker gives Holling a 150-question test on [The Tempest](#). Holling listens to Sycorax and Caliban in the ceiling as he works and hands his test in with five minutes to spare. When he's finished, Mrs. Baker grades it. The first few questions are wrong, but after that, most are right. When she's finished grading, Mrs. Baker tells Holling to read the play again and review what he missed on the test. As he walks home, Holling thinks that despite this disappointment, he's had an okay Wednesday.

However, as Holling limps past Goldman's Best Bakery, he notices cream puffs in the window and remembers that he owes his class cream puffs. He decides to ask for an advance on his allowance. Holling feels he has a fighting chance when he learns his dad got the Baker Sporting Emporium contract. As his dad dances around the house, Holling asks—and his dad says no. That night, Holling dreams that Caliban is sitting on his bed and threatening him, so Holling decides that he'll stop by the bakery after school and see what he can do about getting cream puffs.

*By assigning the "Mississippi River and You" project, Mr. Petrelli wants his students to feel as though these places and historical events actually mean something to them, rather than just existing in a vacuum or a textbook. However, the title "The Mississippi River and You" also reinforces Holling's self-centeredness and overblown sense of importance.*



*"Pied ninny" actually just means a fool. The fact that Holling doesn't actually know what the curses mean shows that even though he does find them fascinating, he's more interested in using the curses for his own entertainment than actually learning about them.*



*When Holling does well on the test, it tells both him and Mrs. Baker that even if he focused mostly on the curses, he did actually learn something and pay attention to the play as a whole. Further, Holling's positive assessment of his day shows that his perspective on reading Shakespeare is shifting, and it's no longer a boring chore.*



*Holling's dad's refusal to give Holling an advance on his allowance shows that he doesn't care about the things that are important to Holling. The fact that Holling even dreams about following through on his word shows that he has a very strong sense of responsibility to his promises, even if the promises themselves are misguided.*



At Goldman's Best Bakery, Holling puts \$2.45 on the counter and asks to buy 22 cream puffs. When Mr. Goldman reminds him he needs almost \$3 more to buy that many cream puffs, Holling offers to work to make the additional money. Mr. Goldman says he can work himself, but he really needs a boy who knows Shakespeare. Holling is shocked and shares that he knows Shakespeare. Grandly, Holling recites some lines from [The Tempest](#), and Mr. Goldman is thrilled. With this, Holling gets roped into being part of the Long Island Shakespeare Company's Holiday Extravaganza and gets 24 cream puffs for half price.

On Monday morning, Holling walks to school with a box of fresh cream puffs. Mrs. Baker says nothing, but she and the rest of the class look at the cream puffs all day. When lunch arrives, everyone eats quickly. Danny gets up and approaches the cream puffs, but Mrs. Baker insists that everyone must go outside for recess and come in early to eat the cream puffs. The class shuffles outside.

With seven minutes left in recess, everyone heads back inside. When they get to the door of the classroom, they stop: Sycorax and Caliban are in the cream puff box, covered in powdered sugar and vanilla filling. Mrs. Baker stops behind the class and screams Shakespearean curses, and the rats race into the radiators and back into the walls. Meryl Lee, Mai Thi, and Danny tell Holling he has ten days to get more cream puffs, and Mrs. Baker makes him clean up the mess.

The week before Thanksgiving is an awful week for Holling. His classmates whisper about him after the cream puff incident, and when he goes to pick up his script and costume for [The Tempest](#), he learns he's going to play Ariel. Ariel is a fairy, and the costume includes yellow tights with white feathers in an unmentionable place. Holling tries to refuse the part, but Mr. Goldman insists. Later, when Holling tries to ask his dad for an advance on his allowance, his dad says that no son of his would ask for something so ridiculous.

The next day, when Holling complains to Meryl Lee that his dad is being a cheapskate, especially since he just got the Baker Sporting Emporium contract, she starts crying and runs away. To make matters worse, Mr. Guareschi comes into Mrs. Baker's room and asks what "pied ninny" means, since Doug Swietek's brother is in his office after calling a teacher a pied ninny. On Wednesday, Holling's classmates are murderous when he brings in only five cream puffs. However, when the class returns from recess, there's a box from Goldman's Best Bakery filled with two dozen cream puffs. Mrs. Baker explains that Holling was playing a joke on everyone.

*The serendipitous nature of Holling's exchange with Mr. Goldman feels very theatrical, which introduces the motif of Shakespearean moments happening in Holling's real life. This will begin to impress upon Holling that literature does indeed have a place in the real world, and it can provide meaning to these real-world events.*



*Mrs. Baker's insistence on making her students wait for their treat is obnoxious for the students, but it reinforces her commitment to imparting lessons and a sense of discipline wherever she can.*



*The fact that Holling just can't catch a break reinforces, in his eyes, that the world is out to get him. It adds to his sense of loneliness that he feels he experiences because of his religion (being the only Protestant in school) and the Perfect House, showing how the dysfunction and sadness of his home life seeps into his school life as well.*



*Holling's mortification at learning he'll play a fairy is indicative of his youth and desire to fit in with his classmates: being a fairy and wearing tights would not help his already precarious social standing. Further, his unwillingness to share where the feathers are shows that he's filtering his narration for the reader, reinforcing his unreliability as a narrator.*



*Though Holling is unaware at this point, Meryl Lee's dad owns the rival architecture firm in town, and the fact that Holling's dad won this contract means that Meryl Lee's dad lost the contract. Meryl Lee's reaction suggests that this is detrimental for her family, and Holling's self-centeredness keeps him from inquiring further and being a good friend. However, Mrs. Baker's heroism here shows that she certainly doesn't hate Holling.*



That afternoon, Mrs. Baker asks Holling if he thinks the ending of *The Tempest* is happy or not. Holling says it is, but when Mrs. Baker asks if Caliban deserves a happy ending, Holling declares he doesn't—he's a monster, so he must be defeated. Mrs. Baker wonders if it might've been possible for Caliban to get some sort of redemption, since he represents just how awful humans can be, and sometimes, that awful, defeated part can grow and become better. Holling says that defeat is just defeat; it doesn't help anyone grow. Mrs. Baker mentions that NASA is testing rockets months after losing three astronauts and puts her book away.

Holling thanks Mrs. Baker for the cream puffs, and she smiles at him. Suddenly, Mrs. Bigio enters the classroom. She leans on the doorway, trembling. Mrs. Baker asks if they found "him," and Mrs. Bigio nods and begins sobbing. Holling says he can't explain what it sounded like. Mrs. Baker embraces Mrs. Bigio and sends Holling home. The next day, Holling learns that Mrs. Bigio's husband died in Vietnam. Three weeks later, a photo of Mrs. Bigio accepting a flag at his funeral graces the front page of the *Home Town Chronicle*, and two days later, the paper runs a photo of the Catholic Relief Agency, where Mai Thi lives, with "GO HOME VIET CONG" spray-painted on it.

Holling explains the ending of *The Tempest*: everyone except for Caliban gets a happy ending, and everyone is forgiven. He says that Shakespeare is wrong, and sometimes there isn't someone like Prospero to fix things. Sometimes there is no mercy.

*Holling's assessment of Caliban shows that Holling thinks of people as being very black and white—one is either a monster or a hero; there's no middle ground. This offers the reader a starting point to track Holling's maturation, as this is a very simplistic and childish view. In contrast, Mrs. Baker's suggestions represent a more adult and nuanced view of the world. Further, Mrs. Baker can apply what she learned from the play to the real world, which is something that Holling hasn't yet done.*



*When Holling thanks Mrs. Baker for the cream puffs, he begins to humanize her and think of her as more than a mean teacher. Seeing Mrs. Bigio's overwhelming grief shows Holling that there are true human costs to the Vietnam War, even if they don't mean anything to him personally right now. However, the war does affect his classmates, as evidenced by the racist, hateful graffiti at Mai Thi's home.*



*With this assessment, Holling shows that he believes the real world isn't reflected in Shakespeare's plays. Over the course of the novel, however, Holling's perspective will shift.*



## DECEMBER

The first week of December, Mr. Guareschi announces that every student in school will be taking the New York State Standardized Achievement Tests and should take practice tests over the break, as to not embarrass the school with poor results. Mrs. Baker rolls her eyes. Mr. Guareschi reads a note from Mrs. Sidman as well, wishing everyone a happy holiday season. Holling explains that the student body was already pretty happy, as teachers and students had begun decorating the hallways with Christmas trees and menorahs. A fifth grader named Charles, who can write calligraphy, writes holiday greetings and puts them up in the halls.

*Although the war has dire consequences for many people Holling knows, Mr. Guareschi's mention of these tests shows that life on the home front will still go on as usual. Holling's descriptions of the students decorating the hallways suggests that there's a strong sense of community among the student body of all grade levels, but Holling just needs to look for it.*



All the teachers except for Mrs. Baker decorate their rooms. She takes down the menorah the first graders put on her door and refuses a crock of apple cider from a second grade teacher. Holling explains that he isn't in much of a holiday spirit either, given that he cannot get out of playing Ariel in the Holiday Extravaganza. Mr. Goldman insists that the part is an honor. Finally, Holling shows his yellow tights to his mother. She insists the feathers will be cute, and nobody from Camillo Junior High will be there. Holling's dad has much the same reaction, though he mentions that Mr. Goldman, of Goldman's Best Bakery, might someday need an architect to remodel his bakery—thus, Holling must wear the tights.

Heather is the only one who expresses concern, though she's mostly concerned about news of the tights getting to the high school and ruining her reputation. On the night of the first dress rehearsal, Holling is mortified when the entire cast applauds when they see the tights. Holling knows they actually want to laugh at his feathers but don't want to scare him off by laughing, since nobody else can play Ariel the Fairy.

After the applause, Holling tries to tell Mr. Goldman again that he can't wear the tights because he looks like a fairy. Mr. Goldman reminds Holling that that's exactly the point, and his classmates will be thrilled to see him in a Shakespeare play. Mr. Goldman also says that he never attended school because he was too busy working in the fields, so Holling should be thrilled to get this honor. Holling backs down, and he finally admits to the reader that the feathers are on his butt.

The awfulness of December lifts one day when Mrs. Baker announces that Mickey Mantle, a famous Yankees baseball player, will be in town to sign baseballs at the Baker Sporting Emporium. After the cheers die down, Mrs. Baker says there's more: Holling will be playing a part in the Long Island Shakespeare Company's Holiday Extravaganza on the same night that Mr. Mantle will be signing baseballs. Mrs. Baker promises extra credit for anyone who brings in their ticket stub from the play, and she smiles at Holling. Holling thinks her smile looks just the same way it did before the Doug Swietek's brother assassination attempt.

After lunch, Meryl Lee, Mai Thi, and Danny corner Holling to ask about the part in [The Tempest](#). When Holling admits he's playing Ariel, Meryl Lee insists that's a girl's name. Holling insists that Ariel is a warrior, and Danny suggests he might come. Before they enter the classroom, Mai Thi stops Holling, looks at him, and says that it's not good to be a warrior. Holling asks Mr. Goldman at the next rehearsal if Ariel could wear armor since he's a warrior, but Mr. Goldman refuses.

*Again, Holling's dad's chief concern is the reputation of the family business, showing that in his mind, his family is obligated to support Hoodood and Associates no matter what. Holling's dad isn't particularly proud of his son's role in the play or empathetic to his concerns about wearing yellow tights. Instead, Holling's dad makes the situation about himself.*



*As different as Heather is from their dad, her concern for her reputation mirrors her dad's concern for the business's reputation. Even though Heather rejects everything her father stands for, he still has a major influence on how she looks at the world.*



*The fact that Holling didn't want to tell the readers where the feathers are reinforces his embarrassment about the costume, which in turn reinforces his youthfulness. He doesn't see this costume or role as an honor in the least; he just feels as though he has no choice at this point.*



*When Holling associates Mrs. Baker's "assassination smile" with her smile here, it shows that he is once again misinterpreting her intentions and reading his own insecurities into her expression. She is probably just proud to have a student performing Shakespeare. Mickey Mantle functions as a legend in the novel: he's thought of as a hallowed hero, which sets Holling up to learn to think critically about him.*



*When Holling tries to reinterpret Ariel's part and divorce him from being a fairy, it's humorous, but it also shows Holling learning to think more critically about the part. Mai Thi's cautioning about warriors, which Holling largely ignores, emphasizes the emotional impacts of the war and the way she's been targeted as a Vietnamese refugee.*



The next Wednesday, Mrs. Baker tells Holling that Mr. Goldman said that Holling is doing well, but needs to work on interpreting the lines. She tells him to open his book so they can run lines, and immediately corrects Holling's reading: she says that he must stay "on a knife's edge." This suggestion works, and Holling feels the freedom that he thinks Ariel feels at the end of the play. Later at rehearsal, Mr. Goldman is thrilled with the results. Holling spends the next week telling his classmates that the play will run very long, and nobody will be able to both see the play and see Mickey Mantle.

On Saturday night, Holling puts on his tights, grabs a new baseball, and his dad drops him off at the theater. Holling lurks backstage and scans the audience for faces he knows. He finds Mrs. Baker, Mrs. Bigio, and Danny Hupfer's parents. This is shocking: Holling reasons that the Hupfers must not care about Bing Crosby's Christmas special on TV like his own parents do, which is why they're not in the audience. He doesn't see anyone from school, though he can't see the front row.

This belief that none of his classmates are in the audience makes Holling's entrance, in yellow tights with waving feathers, much easier. He stays "on the knife's edge" and feels as though he wants Ariel's freedom as much as he wants Mickey Mantle's autograph. Finally, the curtain call arrives and Holling walks onstage. He looks out at the audience and notices Danny, Meryl Lee, and Mai Thi in the front row—crying. Holling watches a look come over Danny's face and knows that he remembered Mickey Mantle. Danny rushes his parents away.

When the curtain falls, Holling runs backstage to the dressing room and finds it locked. Mr. Goldman is still onstage, though Holling finds Prospero's blue floral cape in the wings. Holling grabs it and races for the entrance, where his dad is supposed to pick him up. Holling waits for five minutes in the freezing cold. Finally, Holling hears the crosstown bus come around the corner, and Holling sprints across the street to catch it. The driver stops a ways after the bus stop and takes his time opening the doors for Holling. Holling realizes he has no money, but the driver agrees to take him to the Baker Sporting Emporium anyway.

The driver drives slowly and arrives at the Sporting Emporium at 9:37. Holling races off the bus but halfway down the steps, the driver asks if he has a ball somewhere in his cape. Holling stops dead: his ball is back at the theater. He almost starts to cry, but the bus driver reaches under the dashboard and pulls out a brand new baseball. He hands Holling the baseball and wishes him a Merry Christmas.

*Holling's emotional reaction to changing how he says his lines tells the reader that even if Holling doesn't want to admit it, he does like performing and feels a connection to the play. However, this personal revelation isn't enough to take away his embarrassment, hence lying to his classmates about the runtime of the play. Essentially, he's trying to give more weight to the legend of Mickey Mantle than to Shakespeare, playing into his classmates' preexisting biases.*



*When Holling is shocked to see parents in the audience, rather than at home watching television, it suggests that he considers his parents' neglect as something normal and expected of all parents. Here, it seems that Mrs. Baker is starting to take on a motherly role for Holling, as she supports him when his own parents do not.*



*When Holling realizes his friends are not going to laugh at him, it shows him that he likely underestimated their loyalty and capacity to act mature and kind. Further, the fact that they're at the play suggests that Holling's friends are far more loyal to him than Holling's blood family is.*



*When Holling's dad apparently forgets him, it reinforces again that his dad doesn't care about anything that doesn't include either the TV (in the form of Walter Cronkite or Bing Crosby) or the family business. Going to his son's play and getting his son a signed baseball from a Yankees player are apparently unimportant to him. A stranger (the bus driver) seems to show Holling more kindness and love than his own father does.*



*Here, the bus driver's kindness shows Holling that other people in the world have an amazing capacity for kindness and care—unlike his own father. This begins to develop Holling's sense of being part of a community that's greater even than his school community.*





Holling sprints inside and comes face to face with Mickey Mantle. Mantle is sitting at a table with Mercutio Baker, Mrs. Baker's brother-in-law. Holling thinks that Mantle looks huge as he watches him sign Danny's baseball. Holling approaches the table, holds out his ball, and in a whisper, asks Mantle to sign his ball. Mantle takes the ball, looks at Holling, and asks what he's supposed to be, since he looks like a fairy. Holling explains he's Ariel the warrior, and Mickey Mantle declares he doesn't sign baseballs for kids in yellow tights. With this, he tosses the baseball onto the floor.

Holling feels as though his world is splitting in two. Danny, who saw the entire situation, steps up, puts his signed ball on the table, and says he doesn't need it. He calls Mickey Mantle a pied ninny. Holling gives Danny his clean ball, and the boys leave. Holling muses that when gods die, it's the most painful thing in the world—and worst of all, it makes a person unwilling to let another god in.

The Hupfers drive Holling back to the theater. Holling goes to retrieve his clothes and feels unable to tell Mr. Goldman where he's been and what just transpired. He leaves his tights in a locker and the Hupfers drive Holling home. His parents are still watching Bing Cosby's Christmas special, and his dad comments that Holling is done early. He makes Holling assure him that Mr. Goldman was happy with Holling's performance. Holling goes upstairs to feel sorry for himself in peace.

On Monday, there are only three more days before the holiday break. Classes are, according to Holling, supposed to be easy, and lunch should be special. Lunch, however, is even worse than usual, but Holling doesn't complain. He remembers Mrs. Bigio's grief and says nothing when she snaps at students who stop to inspect their meals. On the last day before break, Mrs. Bigio tells Mai Thi to be glad she's even getting food, since the American soldiers should be in America for Christmas, not her. Mai Thi keeps her head down, and Holling notices Mrs. Bigio trying not to cry. He sees Mai Thi doing the same thing, and he wonders if gods are dying in both of them.

In class, Mrs. Baker keeps her students on their toes. They diagram sentences and work on projects all the way until Wednesday afternoon. As the Jewish and Catholic students get ready to leave, Mrs. Baker calls to Danny and Doug to stay at school. When the rest of the class is gone, Mrs. Baker pulls three brand new baseballs and three brand new mitts out of her drawer and hands them to Danny, Doug, and Holling. She explains that they're a gift from the Baker Sporting Emporium, and she's arranged for them to break the mitts in down in the gym.

*Here, Holling is forced to reevaluate his idolization of Mickey Mantle, as he's clearly not the hero Holling thought he was. It's notable that the only person to be mean to Holling because of his costume is an adult figure whom Holling previously idolized—even Holling's school friends, who often tease and insult him, don't make fun of his costume. This implies that Holling will have to reevaluate who he trusts and looks to for help and guidance.*



*When Danny gives up on idolizing Mickey Mantle in order to support Holling, Holling learns that his friends are some of the most loyal "family" he has. Holling's musings about dying gods shows that he is thinking about the situation as though it's a literary work to be considered using critical thinking.*



*Holling's dad offers no indication that he even remembers he was supposed to take Holling to the Baker Sporting Emporium. When contrasted with the kindness of the Hupfer family, the bus driver, and Danny, this shows just how cruel, selfish, and careless Holling's dad is. He cares only that Holling didn't embarrass the family, not that Holling just got his heart broken by his idol.*



*Here, Mrs. Bigio's cooking symbolizes her overwhelming grief over the loss of her husband, and the fact that Holling connects the two shows that he's beginning to think of her as a human with thoughts and emotions. When he watches Mrs. Bigio be cruel to Mai Thi, he humanizes both of them (but notably, doesn't stand up to Mrs. Bigio, which is indicative of his fear and lack of self-confidence) and understands that this is a consequence of the war.*



*This gift from Mrs. Baker is proof that she doesn't hate any of her students, even Doug Swietek. This in turn brings Holling's assertion that Doug is a one-dimensional troublemaker into question, as Mrs. Baker evidently sees that there is more to Doug. In addition, Mrs. Baker's kindness shows that she understands the power of connecting with her students on their level and seeing them as full humans.*



Danny, Doug, and Holling gleefully walk to the gym, where they find Joe Pepitone and Horace Clarke, two amazing Yankees players, waiting for them. They all throw the balls with each other and then go outside to the baseball diamond, where they practice pitching and hitting. Afterwards, Joe Pepitone and Horace Clark sign the balls and the mitts and give each boy two tickets for Opening Day in April. They give Danny and Doug their caps, and Joe Pepitone gives Holling his jacket. Holling feels as though a place inside of him is filled again.

*Just as the Hupfers and the bus driver were so kind to Holling, the kindness that Joe Pepitone and Horace Clarke show the boys reinforces the idea that kindness and community can be found in unexpected places outside of one's blood family. This experience also shows Holling feeling better about letting go of his idolization of Mickey Mantle, now that he has new and far more worthy "gods" to look up to.*



Holling, Doug, and Danny run upstairs to find Mrs. Baker, but they find only a note on the door telling Holling to read [Macbeth](#) for the first Wednesday in January. Doug goes into the classroom anyway and comes back out with the box for "Number 166." Holling never sees it again. The next day, President Johnson declares a Christmas ceasefire in Vietnam, and the happy holidays begin.

*When Doug throws out the Number 166 box, it represents a turning point in his relationship to teachers in general and Mrs. Baker specifically. He now understands that they're capable of kindness and are deserving of kindness as well.*



## JANUARY

The New Year's Day edition of the *Home Town Chronicle* features local citizens who made contributions to the town in the last year. Most are people like Mr. Guareschi and Holling's dad, but Holling himself wakes up to find an action shot of him as Ariel on the front page. He looks as though he's flying, and the story notes that the tights are yellow with white feathers on the butt. Holling is mortified, but his mother insists nobody will see it.

*Holling's mother's soothing seems misguided—this photo is in the newspaper, so many subscribers will see it. However, the fact that she soothes Holling anyway suggests that she does love her son and wants to protect him from embarrassment, even if her method of doing so is ineffective.*



When Holling returns to school, he discovers his mother was wrong: Doug Swietek's brother saw it and, apparently, experienced a "flash of inspiration and ambition," just like Macbeth did before he murdered Duncan. Doug himself comes back to school with a black eye and finally explains, after threats from Danny and the promise of a cream puff, that early on New Year's Day, his brother stole the front page off of every stoop, cut Ariel out of each of them, and then tried to bully Doug into helping him paint the tights yellow. Doug refused and ended up with a black eye. This didn't stop his brother though. On the first day back, Holling finds these painted photos of himself taped up everywhere in the school, from the restrooms to the trophy cases.

*When Doug stood up to his brother to try to protect Holling, it suggests that Doug's home life might be not all that different from Holling's. Doug also seems to feel far more loyalty and connection to his friends at school than his blood family at home. Connecting this situation to [Macbeth](#) shows Holling using the play to make sense of his reality.*



Holling figures this will be his last day at Camillo Junior High, and considers switching to a military institute. He asks the reader to imagine walking into school, where everyone grins at you and *not* because they're happy to see you. Holling insists the reader cannot possibly imagine it, and to add insult to injury, Mrs. Baker gives him a 150-question test on [Macbeth](#). Mr. Vendleri tears most of the photos down by the next morning, but Doug Swietek's brother has a seemingly unending supply. When Holling gets home on Tuesday, Heather nabs him at the front door with one of the photos. She explains that she found it taped to her locker, and it's his fault that the photo migrated to the high school to embarrass her.

Holling decides to suggest the military institute to his dad at supper. His dad announces that the town decided to build a new junior high school, and they asked Hoodhood and Associates to submit a proposal. He continues that it's a big plus that he has a child at school, as it makes it seem as though he's already very invested. Holling interjects that he's thinking of military school, but his dad continues talking and says that he's not sure Kowalski and Associates will even bid. Holling says again that he's thinking of military school. His dad tells Holling he doesn't need to say ridiculous things twice.

Heather asks why military school is ridiculous, and their dad says that the Mets just decided to pay a player who can't hit a ball out of the infield \$18,000 per year, and Holling's suggestion is almost as ridiculous. Holling's sister insists that it's no more ridiculous than the dress code at the high school: students can't wear skirts that are too short, sweaters that are too tight, or jeans that are too blue, or turtlenecks for some unknown reason—all of which is ridiculous when there's a war going on. Holling's dad says that those clothing items are banned because the students aren't hippies, and that a principal can absolutely make up rules for no reason.

Later, Heather comes into his room and says again that military school is ridiculous because he'd be shipped to Saigon, and soldiers come home in body bags. She starts to say that she couldn't stand it, but leaves before finishing.

*It's impossible to tell whether Holling's assessment of his peers' smiles is accurate or not. It's likely he's experiencing a great deal of teasing about the photo, but given his prior incompetence at interpreting other people's facial expressions, it's likely that he's not correct about this. At home, Heather is cruel to Holling for embarrassing her—even though she claims to be a flower child who seeks to spread peace, love, and understanding.*



*Holling's dad makes it very clear that he doesn't think much of anything Holling has to say. He even flat out ignores Holling in order to continue talking about himself and his business. Holling is unaware or emotionless about his dad mentioning Kowalski and Associates, which is Meryl Lee's dad's firm. Holling is clearly ignorant about how the obvious competition between the two firms could affect his friendship with Meryl Lee.*



*Holling is completely excluded from this conversation, which shows how his family does not give him a voice to stand up for himself or argue for what he believes in. Again, this stems from the fact that Holling stands to inherit the family business, not his sister, which gives her more power and freedom to push back without consequences.*



*For Holling's sister, the war is a very real thing that absolutely affects the people around her. The fact that Holling didn't consider this shows how disconnected he still is from the war and its impact.*



The next afternoon, Mrs. Baker returns Holling's test. She reminds him that several characters aren't actually the same, even if their names do share the same first consonant. Holling insists that Shakespeare isn't easy to read, but Mrs. Baker says that's exactly the point: Shakespeare wrote to express ideas about being human. Holling asks what Shakespeare tried to say in [Macbeth](#), and Mrs. Baker softly says that humans are made for more than power or desire, that pride and stubbornness can lead to disaster, and malice is small and petty compared to love. Holling notes that what Doug Swietek's brother did isn't small or petty, but Mrs. Baker insists it's just a wonderful photo of Holling playing a great part. She assures him people will soon forget about it.

Holling sighs and says that it's easier to say that than to see your own face in the pictures, and then says that it's not Mrs. Baker's photo, and she doesn't have much to worry about. Her face turns white and she sends him away to correct his exam. Holling feels extremely dumb, and the feeling doesn't lift as he walks home under cold, gray clouds.

In bed that night, Holling listens to the rain, which by morning, turns to ice that covers the town. When Holling walks to school, he discovers that he can slide on the ice and "ski," especially since there are no cars out. As Holling approaches the school, he sees Doug Swietek's brother waiting for buses so he can grab the bumper and let the buses pull him around on the ice. Holling explains that the buses were on the roads because according to Mr. Petrelli, Mr. Guareschi insisted that all students would take the Achievement Tests, even if atomic bombs started falling.

Because of the ice, buses trickle in all morning, which makes Mrs. Baker mad. To make matters worse, the school and much of the town have no power, so the students huddle in their coats using the light from the windows. Holling hears Sycorax and Caliban in the walls and wonders if they're going to attack. Mrs. Baker and the other teachers drill their students all morning in preparation for the tests until lunchtime, when Mrs. Bigio enters the room with a tray filled with cups of hot chocolate. Mrs. Bigio walks through the desks allowing the students to each take one. Mai Thi doesn't take one or even look at Mrs. Bigio, and Mrs. Bigio doesn't pause. Mrs. Baker calls the class back to attention, and Holling wonders if anyone else saw her put her own cup on Mai Thi's desk.

*Holling's attitude here and his unwillingness to think more critically about what [Macbeth](#) might mean recalls the way that he initially discredited Shakespeare as boring. Now that his life seems far more dramatic than even [Macbeth](#), it's simply not worth his time to seriously consider the play. Again, Mrs. Baker is able to look at the bigger picture: she knows that what Doug's brother did is, in fact, small and petty, and it won't last forever, even if it seems like a death sentence right now to Holling.*



*Holling's shame comes from the split-second realization that Mrs. Baker has plenty to worry about: her husband is in Vietnam. The fact that Holling didn't think of this shows how little he's thinking about the war at all and how self-centered he still is.*



*When Mr. Petrelli relays what Mr. Guareschi said, it sounds like an exaggeration. However, the reader can probably trust Mr. Petrelli to relay Mr. Guareschi's comment accurately. As an adult and a voice of reason in the novel, Mr. Petrelli has far more clout and is far more reliable than Holling. This, however, does reinforce Holling's reading of Mr. Guareschi as single-minded and power hungry, given how much he evidently cares about these tests.*



*When Mrs. Baker gives Mai Thi her own hot chocolate, it's a way for her to tell Mai Thi that she cares about her and doesn't support or approve of Mrs. Bigio's cruelty. The fact that Holling notices these silent exchanges suggests that he's more observant at times than his narration gives him credit for, which shows that he's beginning to grow up and consider the world around him.*



By afternoon, the clouds are full and heavy with snow, and it finally begins to snow as school gets out. Mrs. Baker reads the class a memo from Mr. Guareschi before she releases them. It says that all students should plan on attending school for the Achievement Tests the next day, no matter the weather. As Holling leaves school, he realizes that Mrs. Baker didn't say a word to him all day, and he feels dumb and ashamed.

That night, the power outage continues. Holling's mother chain-smokes out a window; his dad furiously sits at the phone fielding calls from people asking if the firm will be closed the next day; and his sister wallows in her misery since she's missing the Beatles' television special *and* will have to walk home at the same time as Holling the next day, since the Achievement Tests take an hour longer at the high school. In the morning, Holling's family hears on the radio that school is still open, and he starts his walk to school early, dressed in layers of thermal underwear and socks.

Holling sees Doug Swietek's brother riding the bus bumpers again. Something snaps in Holling as he watches, and when he sees Doug's brother coming by again, Holling prepares a snowball. When the bus passes, Holling's snowball meets Doug's brother's face perfectly, and Holling is safe in his classroom before Doug's brother even gets the snow out of his eyes. Holling happily takes his test all morning.

At lunch, the power comes back on. The radiators soon warm the classroom, and Holling begins taking off his outer layers an hour later. By the last sections of the test, Holling feels as though his fingernails are sweating, and he asks to go to the restroom so he can take off his soaked thermal underwear. Mrs. Baker informs him that students cannot leave the test except for health emergencies, which Holling feels is excessive but doesn't fight.

Finally, at 2:30 P.M., the students hand in their tests. Holling races to the bathroom to escape his soggy underwear, but upon entering the bathroom, he finds Doug Swietek's brother and other eighth grade boys smoking. One says, "that's him," and Doug's brother asks Holling if he threw the snowball. Holling lies, but Doug's brother tells Holling he's dead. Holling backs out of the bathroom and returns to Mrs. Baker's classroom, still wearing his soggy underwear.

*Though what Holling said to Mrs. Baker was insensitive, it's very likely that he's focusing on the interaction far more than Mrs. Baker is, if she is at all. She has 22 students to deal with, which makes it seem much less dire or suspicious that she didn't speak to Holling all day.*



*Here, Heather again behaves a whole lot like her father, given how torn up she is about missing a television show and the possibility of Holling embarrassing her. However, the fact that she's missing the Beatles' special brings her liberal politics back to the forefront; much of their music criticized the war and the conservatism of the period.*



*This snowball is one of the first times that Holling stands up for himself, which shows him beginning to grow up. However, the sneaky nature of this attack does make it clear that Holling isn't truly self-confident yet, since he still feels the need to hide himself.*



*It's entirely possible to argue that this is a health emergency, given Holling's descriptions of how hot he is. However, it's worth keeping in mind that this could all be exaggeration as well, given how prone Holling is to overstating how things affect him.*



*The eighth grade boys' cigarettes reinforce just how bad they are—smoking in the bathroom is a fairly common bad boy trope. This begins to bring more literary elements into Holling's life, whether he realizes it or not.*



Outside, it's snowing, but the snow turns to ice as soon as it hits the ground. Mrs. Baker teaches "strong verb systems" in the afternoon and doesn't call on Holling, even when he raises his hand. When school ends, Holling suspiciously looks around for Doug Swietek's brother and enjoys the cold air. He heads out past the buses, which are struggling to drive on the ice, and notices that the penitentiary crowd isn't there either. Holling also notices a photographer taking photos of the spinning buses.

Holling barely knows what happens next due to the snow falling so hard. When he reaches the corner, he finds Doug Swietek's brother and the penitentiary crowd, all holding huge yellow snowballs. Suddenly, a school bus struggling for traction slides across the intersection towards Holling and Doug's brother. As Holling turns back towards Doug's brother, he notices Heather crossing the street, directly in the line of the bus. Holling races towards her, pushes her away, and flies through the air as the bus hits him. He opens his eyes to see his sister, Mr. Guareschi, and Mrs. Baker looking down at him. Mrs. Baker tells Heather to hold Holling's head while Mrs. Baker gets her car to drive to the emergency room. She snaps at the penitentiary crowd, who miraculously reappear, to help her get Holling into the car.

When Holling is settled, Mrs. Baker heads for the hospital. She drops Heather off at the **Perfect House** to inform Holling's parents of what happened, and she ushers Holling into the emergency room at the hospital. The nurse there is somewhat shocked to see a child brought in by a teacher and a principal instead of parents and insists she'll need to speak to Holling's parents first. Mrs. Baker calls Holling's dad and returns with an angry look on her face. She informs Holling that his dad approved any necessary procedure, but sees no need to come since Mrs. Baker evidently has things under control.

Holling, Mrs. Baker, and Mr. Guareschi wait for hours. When a nurse turns on the television, Holling notices Mrs. Baker anxiously watching the images of soldiers in Vietnam, looking for a sign of Lieutenant Baker. Soon after, a nurse X-rays Holling's hips and proclaims him fine but bruised. Mrs. Baker drives Holling to the **Perfect House**, where Holling's mother thanks her for bringing him home. Holling finds the late edition of the *Home Town Chronicle* on the counter, which features a photo of him, leaping through the air to save Heather—whose buttocks is the only part of her visible in the photo.

The next day, Holling is sore but happy when he gets to school. Someone taped up photos of his heroic photo, and everyone smiles at him.

*For the reader, the absence of Doug Swietek's brother and his friends is a red flag that something is going to happen, and that Holling's suspicion is probably warranted. This suggests that Holling's self-absorption isn't always a bad thing necessarily, and he's not always wrong to feel that someone is out to get him.*



*When Holling saves his sister without even a second thought for his own safety, it suggests that there's more camaraderie and loyalty between the siblings than Holling has let on thus far: he must truly care for her to risk his life to save her like this. Mrs. Baker and Mrs. Guareschi demonstrate how much they care about their students' wellbeing, given that they lead Holling's transport to the emergency room. Mrs. Baker's power is also evident when she makes even the penitentiary crowd help her move Holling.*



*With Holling's dad refusal to come to the hospital, Mrs. Baker once again must act like a parent for Holling. Mrs. Baker's anger shows that she has a problem with Holling's parents' neglect and has other ideas of how family should function.*



*When Holling observes Mrs. Baker watching the TV for signs of her husband, it emphasizes the fact that the war deeply impacts her since her husband is involved and in danger. While the nightly newscast is insignificant for Holling, for Mrs. Baker, it always holds the possibility of learning that her husband is alive or dead.*



*Again, it's impossible to know, but it's likely that Holling feeling like a hero himself causes him to read his classmates' smiles like this.*



## FEBRUARY

On the first Friday of February, Holling and his family prepare to attend the formal presentation of the Chamber of Commerce Businessman of 1967 award. Holling and Heather gripe about having to wear flowers, and Holling's dad sneers at Heather that this is her chance to be a flower child. When Holling and his sister go upstairs and argue about flushing their flowers down the toilet, they hear a sudden crash from the Perfect Living Room. The ceiling has fallen in, crushing the piano and the furniture and staining the carpet with moldy plaster. Cursing, Holling's dad shreds his white carnation. Finally they leave the mess, and Holling gives his dad his own carnation when they arrive at the Kiwanis Club.

Heather excuses herself to the bathroom when they get inside and flushes her flower, grinning triumphantly at Holling. Holling sits uncomfortably through dinner and then watches his dad accept the award, still red in the face with anger. When the Hoodhood family gets home that night, Holling's dad calls the workmen who fixed the ceiling the first time and insists they return to fix their shoddy work the next day, even if it's a Saturday. His threats are effective; they show up the next morning. At school, the ceiling in Mrs. Baker's classroom has problems as well: it now sags and bulges in places as a result of housing Sycorax and Caliban, who are still at large.

Mrs. Baker assigns [Romeo and Juliet](#) to Holling. Holling finds the entire play ridiculous and thinks that both Romeo and Juliet are stupid. Mrs. Baker finds it "tragic and beautiful and lovely," and suggests that Holling's reading is naïve and simplistic. Meryl Lee is reading the play on her own, and she agrees with Mrs. Baker's assessment when she and Holling talk about it. As Meryl Lee talks about how romantic the play is, Holling asks her to go out with him for Valentine's Day. Meryl Lee refuses and cites Holling's rudeness to her as a reason. Holling quotes a Shakespeare line, and Meryl Lee gives in.

That night at supper, Holling asks his family where he can take a girl with only \$3.78 to his name. His dad asks Holling who he's taking, and when he ascertains that Meryl Lee is Meryl Lee Kowalski of Kowalski and Associates, he tells Holling to hurry—Kowalski and Associates will go under when Hoodhood and Associates inevitably gets the contract to remodel the junior high school. Heather says to take Meryl Lee to Woolworth's so she learns quickly that Holling is a cheapskate. Holling explains that his dad is more arrogant than normal because he's busy working on his scale model of the junior high school remodel, which is extremely modern and full of glass.

*When the Perfect House begins to decay from the inside, it symbolizes how Holling's family is undergoing a similar process of decay. Holling's father continues to be rude to Heather and belittle her beliefs, and as he shreds his carnation in anger, it shows just how caught up he is in preserving the look of his family and of his home.*



*The fact that the workmen heed Mr. Hoodhood's threats and show up on a Saturday is a clear indicator of how much power Holling's father has in the community, not just over his own family. In addition, his demand that the workmen prioritize the Hoodhood family emphasizes that he is selfish and self-important.*



*It's worth noting that Mrs. Baker may have other reasons to like [Romeo and Juliet](#) so much, given that her husband's name is Tybalt and her brother-in-law's name is Mercutio—both names from the play. Regardless, Holling's reading is relatively simplistic, as [Romeo and Juliet](#) is also about familial loyalty and difficult choices.*



*Holling's dad's arrogance and utter lack of empathy for other people—including his own son—reinforces his obsession with his work and himself. He openly mocks his children and frequently turns the conversation back to himself and his accomplishments, underscoring his failure as a father figure.*



At school the next day, Holling learns that Danny is taking Mai Thi to Milleridge Inn and then to see *Camelot* for Valentine's Day. This is an expensive proposition; Holling guesses it'll cost Danny \$17. On Wednesday, Holling and Mrs. Baker read the last two acts of *Romeo and Juliet*. She informs him that *Romeo and Juliet* is playing on Valentine's Day, and agrees that there's not much to be done when a person only has \$3.78 to take someone out. She suggests that it doesn't matter how much Holling spends but how much he shares of himself, and she asks him to write an essay on *Romeo and Juliet* for next week.

On Valentine's Day, Mr. Guareschi announces that Mrs. Bigio baked Valentine's Day cupcakes, and class representatives can pick them up at 1 P.M. Mrs. Baker finally sends Holling to the kitchen at 1:18 P.M., where Mrs. Bigio gives Holling an envelope with tickets to *Romeo and Juliet* that she insists she can't use. That night, Holling and Meryl Lee enjoy the play and then walk to Woolworth's to drink Cokes.

As they sit and wait for Mr. Kowalski to pick Meryl Lee up, Meryl Lee imitates her dad's obsessiveness about making the model for the junior high school "classical." Holling explains that his dad is proposing a modern design, and he draws his dad's design on a paper placemat. He notices Meryl Lee's hair is auburn. Finally, Mr. Kowalski arrives to take them home, and Meryl Lee takes the drawing as a souvenir.

The next week, Holling's dad takes Holling to the meeting where the board will decide which architect will remodel the junior high school. Holling sits behind his dad and looks at the two models in the front of the room, both covered in white sheets. Finally, the board invites Mr. Kowalski to present. Mr. Kowalski looks at Holling before he starts, and says that he's made major changes to his initial design and will need more time to present. Holling's dad is angry, but agrees. When Mr. Kowalski uncovers his model, it's still classical—but it has domes and glass and looks very modern inside.

When Mr. Kowalski is finished, Holling's dad turns to Holling, red in the face with anger, and asks what he did. Holling realizes, with a pit in his stomach, that Meryl Lee just baited him at Woolworth's. He begins to bawl and runs out of the conference room, and he never finds out what his dad did or said to Mr. Kowalski. The next day, Holling does his best to avoid Meryl Lee. On Friday, she wears sunglasses to school, and Holling is the only one who doesn't laugh when she tells Mrs. Baker her doctor said she needs to keep them on for the rest of the year.

*Camelot* was an extremely popular film that came out in 1967. Incidentally, it also deals with a love triangle and issues of loyalty, just like *Romeo and Juliet*—reinforcing the novel's assertion that literature and fictional stories are applicable in the real world.



When Holling receives the tickets, it makes Mrs. Baker's delay in sending him make more sense: she likely orchestrated this and doesn't want other students to know. This shows another instance in which Holling's extended community is more helpful and supportive than his own family, and it emphasizes the way that Mrs. Baker has stepped in as a parental figure for Holling.



Meryl Lee's attitude when she imitates her father suggests that she might have more in common with Holling in terms of their family life than Holling thought, as it implies that her dad is similarly obsessed with nothing but the family business.



The addition of the domes and glass is taken directly from Holling's dad's design—Mr. Kowalski clearly copied, but it's unclear if Meryl Lee had a part in this. This begins to show Holling that the adults in his life aren't infallible; they make bad decisions, are desperate, and are insecure just like he is. However, the novel leaves room for the reader to feel empathy for Mr. Kowalski, given Holling's dad's assertion that he'd go out of business without this contract: he needed to do whatever it took to earn the job.



By placing blame on Holling instead of on the person who actually did something wrong (Mr. Kowalski), Holling's dad demonstrates why his family is so fractured: he only cares about himself and his business.





Holling discovers what Shakespeare wanted to express about the human condition from Meryl Lee, and he proposes in his essay that you must be careful whom you trust. Mrs. Baker simply puts his essay in a folder. After school, Holling finds Meryl Lee waiting for him outside the school. She insists that what happened wasn't her fault, and she only showed her dad Holling's drawing because it was good—she never knew her father was going to steal it. Holling tells Meryl Lee to keep the sunglasses so she can keep lying successfully. She throws them at Holling's head, and he notices once they're off her face that she has been crying. She's not in school the next day.

*When Holling learns that Meryl Lee has been crying, it shows him that she's telling the truth and encourages him to reevaluate his original assessment of what happened. This illustrates that Holling's study of Shakespeare is truly beginning to influence how he thinks about the world, as he's learning to think critically about events, given the evidence, and come to logical conclusions instead of simplistic emotional ones.*



Holling rewrites his [Romeo and Juliet](#) essay, proposing that it's hard to care about two things at once. Mrs. Baker throws out his old essay and replaces it with the new one and asks Holling what he's going to do. That night, Holling buys two Cokes and a rose and goes to *Meryl Lee's* house. Mr. Kowalski lets Holling go up to Meryl Lee's room, where she accepts her Coke and the rose.

*By recasting his understanding of [Romeo and Juliet](#) in this light, Holling gains a sense of empathy for Meryl Lee, who was truly caught up in something she had no control or real part in.*



On Thursday, Kowalski and Associates withdraws its bid for the junior high school, and Hoodhood and Associates receives the contract. Holling's dad calls them "chumps," and Holling wonders if his dad is like Shylock and just became the person people expected him to be, or if he ever had a choice in who he became.

*As Holling begins to think more critically about his father, it shows him continuing to develop a sense of empathy for people that initially seem very one-dimensional and easy to understand.*



Holling and Meryl Lee partner up for school projects over the next week. They're at the board together when Mr. Guareschi arrives to give Mrs. Baker a telegram. Mrs. Baker reads the telegram, drops it, and runs out of the room. Meryl Lee and Holling pick up the telegram and read it as they put it on Mrs. Baker's desk. It says that Lieutenant Baker's helicopter went down, and he's missing in action.

*By having the exchange of information happen at school, the novel allows Mrs. Baker's students a unique insight into her personal life, making it clear that she's much more than a teacher.*



## MARCH

The Hoodhood family begins watching the news together nightly. It gets grimmer and grimmer; soldiers are now using stethoscopes and divining rods to find Vietcong tunnels filled with explosives. Despite this, the White House continues to insist that the American effort is going well, and the enemy is running out of steam. Holling's dad just shakes his head, while Heather is silent. Holling keeps an eye out for news of Lieutenant Baker, which he believes the entire town is doing as well.

*Now that Holling is watching the news of his own volition, it's evidence that he believes he now has real and personal reasons to care about the war. This suggests that he's beginning to truly care about Mrs. Baker and her wellbeing, just as she's caring for Holling more and more in return. Holling also recognizes that there's a disconnect between what he sees and what the White House says—evidence he's thinking critically.*



Mrs. Baker continues to conduct class with a business-as-usual attitude, and the class thrives. Mai Thi even becomes the best at diagramming sentences. One Wednesday afternoon, while Holling reads [Julius Caesar](#) under the bulging ceiling tiles, Mr. Vendleri comes in with eight new tiles and a mallet. He tells Mrs. Baker that rats can get huge in five months. Carefully, Mr. Vendleri taps the bulging tile with his mallet, and then asks a terrified Holling to hold the garbage can underneath. When Mr. Vendleri tips the tile, "Shredded Everything" pours out. Most of it misses the can and falls on Holling. Mrs. Baker insists that Mr. Vendleri catch the garbage some other way, so he fetches a tarp, gives Holling the mallet, and tells him to swing at the rats as necessary.

Sycorax and Caliban don't show up, and Mr. Vendleri successfully replaces all the ceiling tiles. Holling, still terrified, wants to read sitting on his desk, and he wonders if Mrs. Baker secretly wants to be sitting on her desk too. He struggles to focus on the play and instead keeps getting distracted by Mrs. Baker's "terrible cold," which persists for more than a week. It makes her voice soggy when she announces on Friday that members of the school board will observe her classroom later that week.

Holling addresses the reader and says it's important to keep in mind the line "beware the ides of March," which is what a soothsayer says in order to tell Caesar that bad things will happen in the play. Mrs. Baker says that the observation will take place in a week—on the Ides of March.

Things get weirder from there: Coach Quatrini announces he's going to form a cross-country team now so that he can have students ready to compete in September. He makes Holling's class run two miles at "race pace," which is unspeakably fast, and he still yells at the students to run faster. It jumps into Holling's head that the official tryouts will certainly be on the Ides of March, and lo and behold, Coach Quatrini says that tryouts will be in a week. Holling wonders if he's a soothsayer.

*By offering this observation about Mai Thi, Holling shows the reader that he's now thinking more about the people around him. Mr. Vendleri's fear of the rats reinforces his humanity, as it shows that he has fears just like everyone else, even if he is an adult authority figure in Holling's eyes. The fact that Holling doesn't protest much being asked to help Mr. Vendleri shows that he's growing up and becoming more confident, even if he is still terrified.*



*Again, wondering if Mrs. Baker is scared of the rats as well shows that Holling is thinking more empathetically about his teacher and the adults around him, though his interpretation of Mrs. Baker's "terrible cold" shows he still has a ways to go: it's easy to read her cold as a cover-up for the grief and fear she surely feels now that her husband is lost in Vietnam.*



*By bringing in the Ides of March (March 15), Holling shows that he's incorporating what he learns from Shakespeare into his understanding of the world—which is especially uncanny here, given that what's coming is possibly bad.*



*Though Holling doesn't give a day of the week for the Ides of March, he later notes that it's a Friday—a perfectly logical day to schedule things like tryouts. When he wonders if he's a soothsayer, it indicates that Holling still has an overblown sense of his own importance, though it's played more for humor here.*



Holling runs over the weekend to stay out of the house, as his dad is extremely mad at Heather. His dad wanted to hire an afternoon and weekend receptionist for cheap, so he decided to hire his daughter. She refused, stating that she already had a job working on Bobby Kennedy's presidential campaign. She insists that he will end discrimination and turn the country around, and her dad grows louder and more indignant. He says that she should just go work for Martin Luther King, who is, according to him, a Communist. The fight escalates, and though Holling stays quiet, he's glad that Bobby Kennedy is running for president, since he wonders if maybe he'll tell the truth about the war. Holling also wonders if he somehow made his dad mad by secretly being happy Bobby Kennedy is running.

*Bobby Kennedy was a Democratic presidential candidate in 1968, which means that conservatives like Holling's dad thought little of him and instead supported Richard Nixon. It's worth noting that Holling's dad's derision about all of this is rooted partially in a fear of change; the way he conducts his family life suggests he'd like to maintain the idyllic, conservative image of the perfect family popular in the 1950s. By this time, that was changing as a result of the youth riots, social justice movements, and opposition to the war.*



Holling struggles through Coach Quatrini's exercises the next few days, and on Wednesday, he tells Mrs. Baker that it'll kill him—especially since tryouts are on the Ides of March. Mrs. Baker insists it's because he runs straight upright and clenches his hands. She pulls out a pair of white sneakers, and when Holling insists he's not worried that Mrs. Baker might be faster than he is, she cautions him to not underestimate people and leads him to the track. She instructs him on how to improve his running form. Even though Holling thinks he looks stupid, the next day, he runs faster than Danny and a bunch of eighth graders.

*The fact that Mrs. Baker can coach Holling effectively is a clear indicator that she does indeed know something about running. When Holling is more concerned with looking stupid than with running fast, it shows that he's still concerned with what people think about him—but they likely only focus on his speed, not what he looks like while he runs.*



That afternoon, Holling thanks Mrs. Baker for helping him with his running and offers her some advice in return for her observation the next day. She asks if he's ever taught seventh grade, and he insists she's never been a track runner and still helped. He suggests she not cross her arms, roll her eyes, or make teacher jokes. He also suggests she praise students when they do something well. She agrees to consider his advice. As Holling turns to leave, she hands him a wooden box. Inside is a silver medal with "XVIth Olympiad—Melbourne—1956" on it. Mrs. Baker explains that it was for the 4x100 meter relay. When Holling looks surprised, she asks if he really thought she'd been a teacher all her life. Holling realizes he did indeed think that.

*Again, Holling reveals that he has no idea that Mrs. Baker had a life before being a teacher, which shows that he didn't think of her as a full human. When she offers him clear proof that she had a life and a passion before teaching, it forces him to think critically about her and amend his previous understanding of her—which is exactly what she's asked him to do with Shakespeare's plays over the course of this year.*



On Friday, the Ides of March, the sky is greenish and cloudy. During a break in class, Holling acts out the scene in which Julius Caesar gets stabbed, complete with sound effects. Mrs. Baker angrily insists that Shakespeare isn't just about stabbings and asks for the book. As Holling is handing Mrs. Baker the book, the door opens, and Mr. Guareschi and three school board members walk in. One of them is Mrs. Sidman.

*The greenish sky suggests the possibility that the day will be just as ominous as Holling predicted—it's another common trope and signifier of bad things to come. Mrs. Sidman's return in this position of power suggest that she's undergone her own transformation while away.*



One school board member asks Mrs. Baker what book she's giving Holling, and is relieved to learn that the expensive-looking volume is Mrs. Baker's personal copy. He suggests that Holling might like to memorize some passages, and seems surprised that Holling has already memorized some and performed in a play. The board member even pats Holling's head. When the board member asks to hear Holling recite some Shakespeare, Mrs. Baker fixes Holling with a look, and Holling can't tell if it's a death threat look or if he's just getting used to her expressions. He recites a passage from [Julius Caesar](#), and everyone claps. Mrs. Baker quietly praises Holling.

Mrs. Baker puts a Shakespearean curse on the board for the class to diagram. She follows all of Holling's suggestions, and even lets him act out the stabbing scene from [Julius Caesar](#) near the end of the hour. At the most dramatic part, Sycorax and Caliban drop out of the ceiling tiles and right onto Mrs. Sidman's lap. Everyone, including the school board, clamber onto desks—except for Mrs. Sidman and Mai Thi, who takes off a shoe and brandishes it at the rats. Mrs. Sidman grabs the rats by the scruff of their necks. The rats' screams attract Mr. Vendleri, who leads her to the basement to put the rats in a cage. Holling wishes everyone could've seen how heroic Mrs. Sidman looked.

By the time cross-country tryouts roll around that afternoon, the entire school has heard about Sycorax and Caliban. Instead of canceling tryouts, Coach Quatrini insists that the students' fear of the rats will be excellent motivation to run fast. He lays out the course around the school and past the parking lot where the rats are in a cage, waiting for the exterminator. He blows his whistle, and everyone takes off. Holling feels like he's drowning but remembers his form. He feels much better when he sees Meryl Lee waving a dried rose at him. Holling passes students on his fourth lap, and as he runs around the parking lot, he sees the exterminator preparing to take the rats.

After Holling passes the parking lot, he hears a scream and the sound of the cage dropping. He looks back and sees Sycorax and Caliban, murder in their eyes, racing towards him. Holling runs faster as the rats pursue him, racing into the tennis courts and slamming the gate shut behind him. The rats climb the fence, but Holling is already out the other side by the time they scale the fence. They continue to pursue Holling. Danny grabs Holling as he runs past, so Holling misses what happens next: the rats race into the parking lot, where a bus squashes them. The sky opens and it pours for a moment before morphing into a beautiful spring day.

*When Holling can't even interpret Mrs. Baker's expression, it shows that he is beginning to think of her as a real person and reevaluate her "assassination attempt" face. Her evaluation here depends on Holling successfully doing what he's been asked to do: recite Shakespeare by memory. The fact that Holling is able to do this is a testament to Mrs. Baker's abilities as a teacher.*



*When Mrs. Baker even takes Holling's advice into question, it illustrates that teaching and learning go both ways, and that Mrs. Baker is willing to acknowledge her students' humanity. This sets her apart from many other adults in the novel, as most of them, like Holling's dad, don't seem to think of children as real people with thoughts, feelings, or emotions.*



*Just as Mrs. Baker took Holling's advice during her observation, Holling now takes all of Mrs. Baker's running advice and uses it to do very well during the tryouts. The fact that Meryl Lee is here to watch tells Holling that she's a loyal friend who can provide him with more support and encouragement than his family can.*



*The fact that others see and verify that the rats chase Holling like this means that it's possible to actually believe his narration of what happened, even though it's extremely far-fetched. It is worth noting, however, that his assertion that the rats had murder in their eyes is probably incorrect; they were likely just scared. When Danny grabs Holling and "saves" him from the rats, it again reinforces that friends like this will be Holling's greatest allies going forward.*



Holling's mad dash from Sycorax and Caliban sets a record, and he makes the varsity team. The story of the rats expands, and Mrs. Sidman becomes a school hero. Students draw pictures of her holding the rats. Mai Thi, on the other hand, fares horribly after standing her ground. Students begin to whisper that she wanted to eat them, as they believe Vietnamese people eat rats. This continues until one day at lunch, when Mrs. Bigio hands Mai Thi her **lunch**. A penitentiary eighth grader asks loudly if Mrs. Bigio has "Rat Surprise" for Mai Thi, and Mai Thi begins to cry. Danny dumps his tray over the eighth grader and punches him in the nose.

Danny is suspended for four days, and his parents take him to Washington, D.C. because they're so proud. The day he returns, Mrs. Baker and Mrs. Bigio come into Mrs. Baker's class with nuoc mau, a Vietnamese dessert of fried bananas. When Mrs. Bigio puts a plate down in front of Mai Thi, she apologizes for her cruelty. Mai Thi teaches the class a Vietnamese song about bananas, and Mrs. Bigio and Mai Thi embrace afterwards. That night on the news, Holling learns that the situation in Vietnam is getting worse.

## APRIL

The following week, Mrs. Sidman announces the members of the varsity cross-country team and congratulates Holling specifically for coming in with the fastest time. Holling is afraid of being alone with his teammates, and his classmates loudly berate him for running so fast only because he was trying to escape rats. Holling's classmates all throw wadded paper at him, and Holling explains that this happened because Mrs. Baker was in the office, learning that American troops have begun Operation Pegasus, an operation to find missing soldiers like Lieutenant Baker.

Holling also notes that Mrs. Sidman has replaced Mr. Guareschi as principal for unknown reasons. On her first day, she greets all the students and even stares down Doug Swietek's brother. At the same time, President Johnson announces that he's not going to seek another term in office. Holling listens to his dad and his sister argue over who will win, Bobby Kennedy or Richard Nixon. After the news that night, Holling learns too that Kowalski and Associates is going under, leaving Hoodhood and Associates to rule the town. When Holling asks what will happen to the Kowalski family, his dad shrugs and says that architecture is a blood sport.

*The students' bullying of Mai Thi follows the quickly diminishing support for the war around this time, as American deaths in Vietnam reached an all-time high in 1968. Here, when Danny stands up for Mai Thi, it shows that Holling isn't the only one forming a strong and connected community, and that Danny is an overwhelmingly loyal and moral person in general.*



*Mrs. Bigio and Mai Thi are able to make up because Mrs. Bigio apologizes and admit she was wrong for being cruel and racist. This shows that critical thinking, and the willingness to alter one's understanding of another person, is essential to building community—and is, notably, something that Holling's dad won't do.*



*When even good friends like Danny tease and are mean to Holling, it indicates that even Holling's chosen family isn't without faults. In turn, this suggests that no family, chosen or otherwise, can ever be truly perfect. Notice, however, the difference in understanding between Holling and Mrs. Sidman: she's trying to raise him up and elevate his standing in the school, which actually does the exact opposite.*



*Again, when Holling's dad expresses little or no emotion about someone else's misfortune, it reinforces his callousness and selfishness—the Kowalskis' bad luck doesn't matter because the Hoodhoods are doing fine. When Holling has the wherewithal to ask about the Kowalskis, it shows him becoming more empathetic and caring for those around him as this year progresses and he comes of age.*



At lunch recess the next day, Meryl Lee announces that she might be moving. Holling doesn't know what to say, so he says nothing but "toads, beetles, bats." They decide to pretend that she's not moving, and there are moments when Holling thinks they both know what the other is thinking, which he reasons is probably how Romeo and Juliet felt.

Holling continues to run cross-country every day. He gets faster, though he learns the hard way that it's dangerous to run in front of angry eighth graders: they pulled his pants down when he tried. Mrs. Baker doesn't understand why Holling won't run in front and takes the month of April to coach Holling on his running. Because Holling is running all the time, Meryl Lee is annoyed that he's not around to work on their "California Gold Rush and You" project.

One afternoon, while Holling and Meryl Lee work on their project at her house, Mr. Kowalski comes home and says that he heard that Martin Luther King, Jr. was just shot and killed. Meryl Lee and Holling watch Walter Cronkite announce it on the news. That night, Heather doesn't come down for dinner, and the next day, riots break out in major cities. On Tuesday, all of Holling's school watches Martin Luther King's funeral on television.

Before Holling goes to bed, he reminds his dad the next day is Opening Day at the Yankee Stadium, and that he promised to drive them there and write a note to get him out of track practice. Holling ends up writing a note himself and asking his dad to sign it. Coach Quatrini barely agrees to excuse Holling, and Mrs. Baker assigns Holling his full day's work in the morning. At 12:11 P.M., eleven minutes after Holling's dad was supposed to pick him up, Holling calls Hoodhood and Associates. The secretary explains that Mr. Hoodhood has other things that are more important on his calendar for the afternoon than a baseball game.

Holling returns to Mrs. Baker's classroom, humiliated beyond belief as his classmates trickle in after recess and realize what happened. At 1:55 P.M., when the rest of the students are at Temple Beth-El or Saint Adelbert's, Mrs. Baker suggests that she could take Holling to the game, assuming his mother is okay with it. Holling ends up asking his sister, who doesn't care, so he and Mrs. Baker drive to the city. They reach the stadium at the bottom of the third inning and find their seats with Danny, Mr. Hupfer, Doug, and his dad.

*It's especially pleasing for Holling to relate his feelings for Meryl Lee to literature, which shows that he's integrating his understanding of literature into his daily life. Further, this also suggests he's reevaluated his thoughts on [Romeo and Juliet](#), indicating that he's also maturing intellectually.*



*Mrs. Baker somewhat resembles Holling's sister, as Mrs. Baker wants Holling to stand up for himself and not just fold to the pressure of others. She sees his unwillingness to do so as a moral failing.*



*The fact that the entirety of Camillo Junior High watches King's funeral shows that the adults in charge of the school know that these events are important for students to witness.*



*Holling's dad's betrayal reinforces how little he cares for his son and shows again that his promises mean nothing when there's nothing at stake for him.*



*When Mrs. Baker offers to take Holling, she again steps into a more parental role—and further, this act is one that suggests that she's forgiven or forgotten Holling's callous comments about her not having much to worry about. Similarly, by taking him to the game, Mrs. Baker recognizes that this is something important to Holling. Unlike Holling's father, Mrs. Baker respects Holling's interests.*



Holling loves every bit of the game. Horace Clarke tosses balls to the boys, and Mr. Hupfer buys everyone hot dogs. After the game, Joe Pepitone and Horace Clark call up to Holling, Danny, and Doug to come down. As the boys scramble over the fence, Joe Pepitone notices Mrs. Baker and asks if she's "that dame" who ran in Melbourne. Mrs. Baker admits she is, and Joe Pepitone calls over other players who saw that race and admire Mrs. Baker.

Mrs. Baker asks the players to show them around the stadium, and they agree. When they finish the tour, Holling happily throws balls with the players and runs around the outfield. Mrs. Baker asks what the scaffolding is for, and Joe Pepitone that the stadium needs repairs, and their boss is on the lookout for a classical architect. Mrs. Baker asks to meet the boss, and Joe says he'll introduce her to him if she can hit one of his fastballs. Mrs. Baker stays at the stadium that night, while Mr. Hupfer drives Holling home.

Two days later, a photo of Mrs. Baker, Danny, Doug, and Holling with the Yankees graces the front page of the *Home Town Chronicle*. When spring break rolls around, Holling, Danny, Mai Thi, and Meryl Lee hang out every afternoon at Woolworth's. Heather hangs out with a guy named Chit, who drives a yellow VW bug.

When Holling returns to school, Coach Quatrini announces that the varsity team must run three miles 35 seconds faster than Holling's tryout time. The eighth graders spit to the side so that it flies back and hits Holling, but he runs carefully to avoid their abuses. Afterwards, Coach Quatrini announces that they'll all be running at a meet on Saturday, and the winner will receive a \$100 savings bond. Holling's family seems reasonably supportive at dinner, though Heather declares he'll die.

Holling asks how long until Heather goes to college, and his dad states that she won't be going to college. She insists she'll be going to Columbia University. As Holling's dad crushes a lima bean, he says that there aren't even any classes going on—the entire school is on strike. He insists that college is the craziest place in a crazy world right now, and she'll stay home and be safe. Holling's mother says nothing.

*When Holling has the opportunity to see Mrs. Baker outside of an educational setting and specifically, in one where she's known as a track star, not as a teacher, it expands his conception of her and helps him think of her as more of a full person.*



*The novel implies that Mrs. Baker is going to try to connect Kowalski and Associates with the Yankees, something she does out of care and concern for Meryl Lee and her family. This shows that Mrs. Baker is loyal and supportive of all her students and is willing to do what she can to ensure their wellbeing.*



*Woolworth's is, apparently, not the damning place Holling's sister insisted it was. Holling frequents it every day with Danny, Mai Thi, and Meryl Lee, illustrating that he has now formed a loyal community.*



*By this point, it's worth questioning if Holling's family's "support" means anything, given that they've shown time and again that they won't actually show up to support their son if it isn't convenient. This in turn shows both the reader and Holling learning that he cannot trust his family's support.*



*Columbia University was the epicenter of student protests in the spring of 1968. Even though Holling's dad is denying his daughter something she desperately wants, notice that he wants to keep her safe—he does actually care about her to some extent.*



Holling's family is still asleep when he heads for school on Saturday morning. Holling feels mostly asleep as he walks through the fog and boards the bus. When Danny's race starts, Holling cheers with the Hupfer family and Meryl Lee. Danny pulls to the front of the large pack, and he's in the lead at the end of his fourth lap. Holling and the crowd watch for Danny when the group comes around again, but they don't see Danny until most of the runners have already passed. Finally, they see Danny limping with bloody knees. Holling knows the eighth graders tripped him. Danny finishes almost last, and his parents comfort him.

*As expected, Holling's family doesn't show—but the Hupfer family and Meryl Lee demonstrate that Holling can count on them for support, even if his own family isn't here. Similarly, when Holling cheers for Danny despite their rivalry, it shows that he's also behaving in such a way as to support this small chosen family.*



Holling lines up for the varsity race behind all the eighth graders. Mr. Hupfer finds him and gives him a note from Danny: "beat the pied ninnies." He tells Holling to run the others into the ground. When the race starts, Holling manages to get to the front of the pack, and he trails the eighth graders from Camillo. As Holling comes around for his first lap, he sees Danny up and cheering, Meryl Lee with a rose, and Mrs. Baker standing next to her. He continues to trail the eighth graders lap after lap. On his last lap, Mrs. Baker tells Holling to pass the eighth graders. He waits for his chance and does as he's told. When he wins, Mrs. Baker picks him up, and Meryl Lee kisses him.

*When Mrs. Baker shows up to cheer on Holling, she again steps into a more parental role so she can offer him the support he lacks from his own parents. However, she still has a great deal of power as an authority figure and a teacher, chosen family member or not: Holling's tone implies that he wouldn't dream of doing anything but following her directions when she tells him to pass the eighth graders. Holling and Meryl Lee's first kiss is a coming of age moment for both of them, as it heralds their coming sexual maturity.*



## MAY

May is Atomic Bomb Awareness Month. During the morning announcements, Mrs. Sidman notes that since they live very close to New York City, which would be a major target for a bomb, students must follow drill procedures exactly. The siren goes off on many afternoons, and Mrs. Baker instructs the students to sit hunched under their desks quietly in the dark for 18 minutes. Holling notes that after 18 minutes, in the event of a bomb, most of the truly toxic and dangerous stuff would've passed by, burning everything but the carefully scrunched students.

*Holling's tone is very clearly sarcastic when he describes what would happen in the event of a bomb. This suggests that he's aware that the drills are pointless—in the event of a bomb, being under a desk won't do anything—but he's willing to do as he's told in the name of preserving his classmates' sense of comfort.*



When Mrs. Sidman praises Mrs. Baker's class, Holling thinks it's kind of comforting. He notes that the eighth grade cross-country runners certainly need comfort, as they're still upset over Holling's win. They put shaving cream in his locker and hang his clothes from the ceiling. Holling wonders if eighth graders have a gene that switches on when they get to that grade that makes them jerks, and thinks that Hamlet is very similar to them. Hamlet, according to Holling, wasn't smart enough to listen to the ghost's warning.

*When Holling wonders about the eighth grade gene, it indicates that he still thinks of some people as being one-dimensional. Thinking of the eighth graders as having a gene that makes them mean, rather than thinking of them as jealous or insecure human beings, is a way for Holling to ignore that they do have feelings and are people as well.*





On May 3, Holling's dad opens up the *Home Town Chronicle* to discover that Kowalski and Associates is going to renovate the Yankee Stadium, a multi-million, three-year job. His dad concentrates on his lima beans during dinner. When Heather points out that lima beans have killed lab rats, his dad remarks that she's obviously learning more than enough at home and doesn't need to attend Columbia. He declares that she'll go to Columbia when lima beans fly, so she promptly throws one.

Holling's dad buys a new Ford Mustang the next day. Holling thinks he bought it to comfort himself. Every night after the news, he takes Holling's mother for a drive, and leaves it parked in the driveway so Chit can't park his VW bug there during the day. Holling wonders if the car was actually any comfort, though, when Heather leaves for California to "find herself." Supper that night is quiet, and Holling's mother doesn't cook lima beans. His dad rages that he'll never help Holling's sister, and running away isn't helping his reputation or his chance to get Chamber of Commerce Businessman of 1968. That night, Holling's parents don't go for a drive. Holling wonders what it's like for his sister.

The **Perfect House** becomes quiet, and Holling's dad stops watering the azaleas. His mother stops cooking lima beans, and they all stop talking. Holling describes the silence as being very similar to what happens in *Hamlet*. Holling finds *Hamlet* boring and slow, so he starts skipping over the boring monologues. Meryl Lee finds this a questionable strategy, but Holling is so convinced of his genius he even admits his reading strategy to Mrs. Baker. She insists there are no boring parts in Shakespeare and tells him to read it again.

The next afternoon, a bomb siren goes off again. As everyone scrunches under their desks, Danny snippily asks Mrs. Baker why *she* isn't under her desk. Holling explains that Danny's attitude is actually pure terror regarding his upcoming bar mitzvah. He's inconsolable about it and insists that his family will shun him if he messes up even one word. Meryl Lee, Mai Thi, and Holling decide to help Danny by spending every lunch recess listening to him practice his readings, even though they don't understand the Hebrew.

*It seems that Mrs. Baker succeeded in her quest to help the Kowalski family secure the Yankee Stadium job. In this way, Mrs. Baker also gets back at Holling's dad for his cruelty to Holling and the Kowalski family.*



*For Holling's dad, the Mustang is a symbol that he has it all: perfect family, perfect house, perfect car, while Chit's VW bug is seen as a symbol for the liberal youth movements of the era and must therefore not be seen in his driveway. Notice too that Holling's dad seems more upset that his daughter's running away will hurt his own reputation more than anything else. When Holling's mother doesn't make lima beans, it's one way for her to stand up to her husband and express her displeasure.*



*It's telling that Holling's dad begins to neglect the house in his daughter's absence; it suggests that she was a necessary part of the perfect family image—and now that she's gone, it's not worth trying. Holling's selective reading strategy is one that privileges his own perception and doesn't give him the whole story, and essentially represents his youth still.*



*The bar mitzvah (or bat mitzvah for girls) is a coming of age ceremony in Judaism, which means that Danny is preparing to symbolically become an adult in his religious community. The presence of these coming of age rituals indicates that growing up is a societal concern.*



The bomb sirens go off again one Wednesday afternoon. Holling folds himself up under his desk, and Mrs. Baker declares that this is ridiculous. Holling asks Mrs. Baker if she'd call him "Holling" rather than "Mr. Hoodhood," as it sounds like she's talking to his dad. Mrs. Baker sits down at Danny's desk, and Holling explains that he doesn't want to become his dad yet. Mrs. Baker says she saw Holling's drawing and declares he has "the soul of an architect." She suggests that Holling is afraid he won't get the chance to decide for himself whether he even wants to be an architect.

Mrs. Baker declares the bomb drill ridiculous again. She heads to the Coat Room and Holling suddenly hears a crash: the crock of cider from Thanksgiving, which has been fermenting since then, falls and splatters everywhere. Mrs. Baker sends Holling to fetch Mr. Vendleri, who cries that they can't stay in a classroom that smells like a brewery. Mrs. Baker insists that they must go on a field trip then to survey "points of architectural interest."

Mrs. Baker drives to the north side of town, where she points out a Quaker meetinghouse from 1676 that was later used as a station on the Underground Railroad. She points out the first jail on Long Island and a clapboard building where British soldiers stayed during the American Revolution. At Temple Emmanuel, she explains that the temple is the fourth built on the same site, and the ark holding the Torah survived every fire that destroyed the temples. Finally, she points out the first abolitionist school, which helped end slavery through education. At that, Holling marvels that he didn't know buildings could hold so much in them. He feels as though he's seeing his town for the first time, and he feels the weight of the history around him.

When they pass Saint Adelbert's, Holling suggests they go in. He's never been in a Catholic church before, and he's struck by the fact that people have been praying here for a hundred years. He asks Mrs. Baker if she orchestrated Kowalski and Associates getting the Yankees Stadium job. She refuses to answer. Holling asks if an atomic bomb drops, if everything will be gone. Mrs. Baker pauses and says that's true, and she agrees when Holling says that it doesn't matter if they're under their desks or not. He asks why they even practice then, and Mrs. Baker says that it gives people comfort to feel prepared, especially when it feels like there's little else to do.

*Earlier in the novel, Holling wondered if his dad, like Shylock, only became the way he is because he felt like he had no other choice. When Holling asks Mrs. Baker to call him by his first name, it's a relatively small but meaningful first step that will allow Holling to make choices about who he wants to be and avoid what he believes happened with his dad.*



*Mrs. Baker's proposed field trip suggests that she's going to teach Holling to "read" architecture in much the same way she's taught him to read Shakespeare: essentially, that there's more to it than what it might seem at first glance. This shows too that Mrs. Baker has much more to her than even just being a teacher and a track star.*



*Just as Holling learns that Shakespeare is relevant to him, almost 400 years after the plays were first published, he now learns that these buildings are still relevant hundreds of years after they were built. They hold his town's history, and now that Holling is aware of said history, he can feel like a more integrated member of the local community. Holling is learning to read these buildings as more than just four walls to shelter people.*



*Mrs. Baker recognizes that creating meaning out of a seemingly meaningless, nonsensical situation like a war is extremely important to maintain a sense of purpose. She also understands that humans desperately want to cling to comfort, as seen by the way the administration makes the children practice atomic bomb drills by hiding under the desks.*



Holling and Mrs. Baker light candles. He prays that bombs don't drop on his town and that Lieutenant Baker, Danny, and Heather are safe. When he gets home that afternoon, everyone else is gone. Holling realizes that the biggest hole in the house is his sister's absence and wonders if it takes losing something to know you love it. He realizes he does love his sister, but he can't decide if he wants her to come back or find herself.

Late that night, when Holling is the only one awake, Heather calls. They both start crying, and she manages to say that she's in Minneapolis alone, with only \$4. She doesn't know what to do, since a bus ticket to New York City costs \$44.55, and she asks Holling to not tell their parents. Holling asks if there's a Western Union there, and his sister can't find one. Right before the call cuts out, Holling tells her to go to the nearest Western Union station.

The next morning, not knowing if Heather heard his instructions or not, Holling creeps around the Commerce Bank and waits for it to open at 10 A.M. When it opens, he cashes his \$100 savings bond in for \$52 and then runs down the street to the Western Union. He discovers there that Minneapolis has two bus stations, and he decides to send the money to his sister at the Western Union on Heather Avenue. Holling spends the rest of the afternoon hiding around town, thinking about his sister and hiding from his dad and Mrs. Baker.

Finally, on Friday night, Holling gets a call from his Heather saying she's on her way. He tells his dad and his mother at breakfast on Saturday morning that his sister will arrive in New York City at 10:50 A.M. Holling's mother's eyes fill with tears, and his dad asks how she's planning on getting home. Holling asks if he'd go get her, and Holling's dad refuses. He says the keys are on his dresser if Holling wants to go himself and laughs.

Holling grabs the keys to the Mustang and tries to convince his mother to drive them. When she refuses, he goes and sits in the car for a minute. His mother taught him how to drive, but only in parking lots. Holling comes back into the house and sits down. Suddenly, Meryl Lee calls: her dad is going to the Yankee Stadium and wanted to know if Holling wants to come. When Holling asks, Mr. Kowalski offers to drop Holling off at the station on his way. Holling asks his mother for money for train tickets and lunch, and she gives him the money.

*Holling's love for his sister plays out differently than Holling's dad's does. Holling's love for Heather acknowledges that she's a full person with thoughts, feelings, and desires, while their dad sees her only as an extension of himself. Holling's love is cast as the superior kind, suggesting that loving someone means allowing them the freedom to be who they want to be.*



*After his lessons with Mrs. Baker, Holling now has the confidence to come up with a plan and put it into action, an indicator that he's gaining self-confidence and maturity. The fact that Holling's sister calls when she knows Holling will pick up shows that the two are close, despite their bickering, and they trust each other more than Holling's narration let on.*



*Even though Holling's desire to hide is absolutely justified, it's also possible that Mrs. Baker would fully support his show of familial loyalty, given the ways she's shown up for Holling. Holling's dad, however, would absolutely be incensed: Holling not being in school will, per his understanding, reflect badly on him.*



*It's more important to Holling's dad to make a point than support his family in meaningful ways, which continues to develop as an almost inhumanly cruel character. Holling's mother's tears suggest that she actually does love and want to support her children, but she's possibly too scared of her husband to stand up for what she believes is right.*



*Again, Holling's mother's refusal to drive him, even in light of her very clear emotions and feelings about the whole situation, suggests that she's afraid of her husband—meaning that the relationship between Holling's parents is more dysfunctional than Holling ever let on. This again shows how limited Holling's perspective is; he cares more about how his dad treats him than he does about the particulars of his parents' relationship. Once again, Holling has to rely on his chosen family for help and support.*



When the bus from Chicago arrives, Holling is already at the station. When Heather gets off the bus, the noise of the station seems to stop and doesn't start again until they're hugging each other. She cries that she was afraid she wouldn't find Holling, and Holling tells his sister that he'll always be there. They have grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch and walk around Central Park. Holling talks about the bomb drills and [Hamlet](#), and Heather tells him that in Minneapolis, she got out of Chit's bug and refused to get back in. Later, when they take the train back home, their mother makes burnt grilled cheese sandwiches. Holling's dad asks Heather if she found herself, and Holling answers that she found him.

Holling tells the reader about the end of [Hamlet](#): everyone is dead, and it's hard to believe that Hamlet will find rest in death. He wonders if Hamlet should've stopped trying to find himself, and just let someone else find him. On the last Wednesday of May, Mrs. Sidman brings Mrs. Baker a telegram. Mrs. Baker shakily opens it and reads, "sweet eyes...stop." She makes a happy sound that Holling says is the happiest sound he's ever heard. Mrs. Sidman leads Mrs. Baker to get a drink of water, and Holling reads the rest of the telegram. It's from Lieutenant Baker himself, saying he'll be home in time for strawberries.

## JUNE

Even though Mrs. Baker openly despises camping, she still agrees to take her class camping to celebrate the end of the school year. She's done this every year, though Holling reasons that since Lieutenant Baker usually went too, he probably liked camping and Mrs. Baker just went for his sake. Despite her hatred of camping, Mrs. Baker smiles all the time after getting news that her husband is coming home. Holling even heard about Lieutenant Baker's miraculous rescue on the evening news and reasons that it's like what happened in [The Tempest](#).

In the weeks leading up to the trip, Mrs. Baker keeps her class working hard. She even makes Holling read [Much Ado About Nothing](#), which Holling is disappointed to discover is not funny, even though it's supposed to be a comedy. He tells the reader how the main couple, Claudio and Hero, fall in and out and back in love. He says it's ridiculous, and in real life, people don't fall out of love all at once. Instead, he says, they stop serving lima beans and the house grows quiet and sad.

*When Holling answers his dad instead of letting Heather answer, it's the first time that he truly stands up for himself and those he cares about—a sign that he's coming of age and gaining confidence. Their mother's grilled cheese sandwiches, although burnt, is a small way for her to show her love and that she cares for her children, even if she didn't feel able to actually support them this time.*



*The poetic nature of Lieutenant Baker's telegram suggests that like his wife, he's also a fan of poetry and Shakespeare. This gives more depth to Mrs. Baker's character, as it offers a small possible glimpse into what her relationship with her husband is like. Mrs. Sidman shows here that she's a kind and caring friend to Mrs. Baker, while the fact that Mrs. Baker reads the telegram in front of Holling shows that they've developed a sense of trust and openness with each other.*



*Here, Holling better understands Mrs. Baker's complexity and humanity. He realizes that she hates camping but goes anyway because of her deep affection for her husband. This realization underscores Holling's coming of age, but it also adds depth to Mrs. Baker's understanding of family. To her, family members make sacrifices for each other out of love—something Holling's parents clearly do not do for him.*



*[Much Ado About Nothing](#) offers Holling a way to think more critically about his parents' strained relationship. He also understands that his mother's cooking (specifically when she serves lima beans) is a way for her to show love, and the absence of lima beans means that his parents' relationship is dissolving.*



Holling reasons the real world is often more like [Hamlet](#): scared and angry. He thinks the world is often like Bobby Kennedy, who Holling says was a sure bet for president but got shot at point-blank range. When Heather hears the news, she locks herself in her bedroom and puts on the Beatles song "Eleanor Rigby." After the fiftieth repetition, Holling knocks on her door and leads her to Saint Adelbert's. They wait in line to light candles and cry with the others in the church. The next morning, they hear on the radio that Bobby Kennedy died. Holling thinks that if he hadn't heard the good news about Lieutenant Baker, he would've given up on being a Presbyterian.

The next Thursday morning, Holling's class gleefully boards the bus and heads to the Catskill Mountains. When Mrs. Baker stops Doug's attempt to sing "One Thousand Bottles of Beer on the Wall," Holling insists that it was an ominous beginning to the trip. They reach the trailhead an hour later, and Mrs. Baker and Mrs. Sidman distribute packs of food and supplies to the students to carry to the campsite. She gives Holling a pack containing utensils and chili and instructs him to not let anything happen to it. When he asks what could possibly happen, she references [Much Ado About Nothing](#) and implies that many things could happen.

The trail is mostly uphill. Holling is the last person in line, right behind Mrs. Sidman, who picks up dropped sweatshirts and water bottles. The cutlery pokes Holling in the back and he seethes—Doug's pack contains only marshmallows. Finally, the pack begins to feel lighter and Holling stops getting poked in the back not long before they reach the campground. Mrs. Baker organizes the site: Doug digs a fire pit and then latrines (far away from the camp), while Mrs. Sidman organizes a wood-gathering expedition. Meryl Lee cooks hot dogs for lunch as Mrs. Baker asks for the chili. Holling heads for the latrine and finds it very peaceful until he hears Mrs. Sidman yelling his name.

Holling's old pack had split and steadily dropped utensils, meaning that the entire class has only one spoon with which to cook and eat. He dropped the can opener, too. Mrs. Baker leads Holling to the river, where they use sharp stones to split the cans open. Despite the setback, Mrs. Baker is still smiling. Mrs. Sidman grumbles, and she cuts three fingers trying to extract the chili. While Holling discovers a way to eat using hot dogs as utensils, Mrs. Sidman stains her favorite sweater. Holling reasons that this is why she sends him to wash the dishes.

*When Holling leads Heather to the Catholic church, it shows that he's experimenting with looking outside his own Presbyterian church community to find comfort and human connection. This emphasizes the way that his limited worldview is broadening as he matures. In addition, it seems that his assertion about giving up on his Presbyterian faith if he hadn't heard good news about Lieutenant Baker might also apply to his family life. Perhaps Holling would have given up on his family, too, if he hadn't heard good news about Heather being safe and wanting to come home.*



*Holling's self-assuredness is comical and implies that something bad is, in fact, going to happen. The fact that Mrs. Baker has to remind Holling of this shows that he's still naïve and young, and even though they do view each other more as equals now, Mrs. Baker is still an authority figure and a mentor.*



*The fact that Mrs. Sidman is picking up so many dropped items suggests that it was a mistake to put Holling in the back, especially since the cutlery mysteriously stops poking him during the hike. Clearly, the utensils fell out of his pack, but Holling's lack of understanding of why the utensils stopped poking him highlights his ignorance and self-assuredness.*



*Mrs. Baker's smile in the midst of the setbacks illustrates the power of family and of love: just knowing Lieutenant Baker is coming back is enough to give her an unflappable positive attitude, unlike poor Mrs. Sidman. Even though Mrs. Sidman might be "punishing" Holling by making him do dishes, notice that he's not necessarily feeling wrongly targeted by some evil person. This is a major evolution for him, as this is the first time he doesn't feel attacked in a situation like this.*



Meryl Lee helps with the dishes. At the river, she and Holling splash each other, washing most of the chili off. When they get back to camp, they stand by the fire to dry. Swimming was on the itinerary for the afternoon, but a breeze picks up, and clouds cover the sky. The class plays Capture the Flag and then explores an abandoned house. Afterwards, it's even colder, so Mrs. Baker prepares hot chocolate. Mrs. Sidman grumbles about having only the spoon to turn over hamburgers for dinner. She burns the rest of her fingers turning them, and Holling and Meryl Lee do dishes again.

After supper, as night falls, the students stoke the fire and stand around it. Mrs. Sidman tries to tell ghost stories, but none of them are actually scary. Holling wonders if it's impossible for principals to tell good ghost stories. After her unsuccessful story, Mrs. Sidman tells the students what to avoid in the woods. Nobody pays attention when she talks about mosquito bites or bee stings, but everyone is terrified when she mentions poisonous snakes. She says that a snake bite will make the victim's leg swell to the size of a melon, and any student who gets bitten might die, even if they do take her special antidote in time.

Doug looks ready to pass out with exhaustion, and Danny declares he's staying up all night. Mai Thi, Meryl Lee, and Holling help stoke the fire and sit with Mrs. Baker well past midnight. They don't say anything until suddenly, a downpour begins. There's no escaping it. As they try to save their sleeping bags, students yell and ask if snakes come out in the rain. Mrs. Baker goes into the tent with Mrs. Sidman, but the students stay out in the rain all night. In the morning, Mrs. Sidman scolds the students for using so much wood. She cooks scrambled eggs with a stick, and Holling and Meryl Lee wade right into the river to wash the pots after she makes chili. Only Doug eats it.

By this point, the sky begins to clear, and it starts to warm up. Someone suggests swimming, and the entire class changes and heads for the river. Mrs. Baker and Mrs. Sidman supervise as the students all jump over the waterfall and into the pool below. Holling can tell that Mrs. Baker wants to try it, and he thinks that it must be hard to always be a teacher and not be able to do fun things like swim. Everyone eats lunch and then heads back to the waterfall.

*Just as on the Ides of March, the increasingly ominous weather on the field trip suggests that something bad is going to happen. This is yet another literary trope that colors Holling's experience, reinforcing the idea that literature is relevant to real life.*



*Holling attributes Mrs. Sidman's failure to tell a compelling ghost story to her position as a principal rather than the possibility that she's just not a good storyteller. This shows that Holling still has the impulse to view people as one-dimensional sometimes, even though he's getting better. To Mrs. Sidman's credit, there are very poisonous snakes in the Catskill mountains—though it appears as though she's milking her explanation to punish the students or compensate for her lackluster ghost story.*



*Staying up with Mrs. Baker shows that these students have formed a close, almost familial relationship with their teacher, especially given the companionable silence Holling describes. When Mrs. Sidman scolds the students in the morning, it suggests that she actually is the one who hates camping, not Mrs. Baker.*



*As Holling considers how difficult not getting to play must be for Mrs. Baker, it again shows him humanizing her and thinking of her as a person, not just a teacher. It's also a very empathetic thought, showing his progress in thinking about other people besides himself.*



Even though they've been in the woods for a day and a half, Doug declared upon arrival that he would, under no circumstances, use the latrines. However, after two meals of chili, he finally gives in. When he returns, Holling and Mrs. Baker notice that a cloud of mosquitos is following Doug. Mrs. Baker rolls her eyes, and everyone runs away from the mosquitos. The mosquitos are relentless, and the students huddle in groups, taking turns letting one person be safe in the middle. Holling lets Meryl Lee take his turn, and she smiles brightly at him.

Mrs. Bigio arrives as the students are busy fighting off the mosquitos. Fortunately, she has a can of bug spray. After spraying the students, she sends them to re-wash the pots and bring back flat stones. When Holling returns from this task, he sees Mai Thi staring at Mrs. Bigio's ingredients. She asks if Mrs. Bigio is making thit bo kho, and Mrs. Bigio says she is, though she couldn't find lemongrass. Mai Thi helps Mrs. Bigio make the wonderful stew, which everyone gets to eat with spoons.

Holling and Meryl Lee again wash the pots, and they're still at the river when Mrs. Bigio and Mai Thi arrive to wash the knives. Mrs. Bigio tells Mai Thi that she's late arriving at camp because she was at the Catholic Relief Agency. Mrs. Bigio stutters as she says that she has a small house where she now lives alone, and Mai Thi is welcome to live with her if she wants. Mai Thi throws her arms around Mrs. Bigio.

Holling doesn't sleep that night. He watches the stars and thinks about Mai Thi, Mrs. Bigio, Lieutenant Baker, Danny, and how in five years, he'll have to register for the Vietnam draft. When dawn arrives, Holling slips out of his sleeping bag and walks down to the river. He wades in and looks at the sun, which turns the river into a ribbon of beauty. Holling doesn't tell anyone about his trip to the river, as he believes it was more beautiful than anyone could understand.

A week later, Holling watches Danny step up in front of the full synagogue at his bar mitzvah. Holling's dad even came, as did Mrs. Baker, Mrs. Bigio, and Mrs. Sidman. Danny pulls his prayer shawl around his shoulders. He looks terrified as he carries the Torah to the reading desk, then suddenly, as Danny begins to sing and read from the Torah, Holling watches Danny become more than an overenthusiastic boy. Holling feels that Danny is taking his place in a huge choir made up of everyone who has ever sung these words, and he watches Danny become a man.

*When Holling gives his turn to Meryl Lee, it indicates that he's beginning to prioritize others over himself, which is another way that demonstrates his coming of age. It shows also that he's thinking more about the wellbeing of his greater community, suggesting that his classmates have given him a better understanding of family and community than his own blood family has.*



*Making this Vietnamese dish is a way for Mrs. Bigio to show Mai Thi that she truly cares about her and thinks she's worthy of respect and acknowledgement. Mai Thi's shock and awe suggests that she hasn't experienced much kindness like this, which implies that the greater community has not been very accepting toward her because of racism and the war.*



*By asking Mai Thi to come live with her, Mrs. Bigio is essentially asking Mai Thi to officially become her chosen family. This profound act of love can happen because Mrs. Bigio humbly admitted her wrongs and did whatever she could to make up for it, suggesting that this is the only way to heal emotional wounds.*



*When Holling recognizes that he'll have to sign up for the draft in five years, he shows that he understands that the war does affect him and has the power to change his life. In this way, Holling is truly coming of age, as he now feels connected to not just his local community, but the world at large.*



*Holling's interpretation of Danny's coming of age mirrors how the novel asks the reader to consider Holling's relationship to Shakespeare. Just as Danny is doing as he reads the Torah, Holling comes of age as he joins the thousands of other people who have read Shakespeare's works and found meaning from them. This is a testament to the transformative power of stories and reading.*



After the ceremony, Holling's parents and Heather decide not to stay for the party. Holling walks them out to the car, and his dad says that Holling must be glad to not have to do something like a bar mitzvah. Holling says he guesses he's glad, and his dad is disbelieving—he doesn't understand why Holling would want to stand up and "chant at people." Holling says that Danny became a man, and that becoming a man doesn't mean getting a job as an architect. His dad stiffens and says that's *exactly* how a boy becomes a man: he gets a job and provides for his family. Holling retorts that growing up is about choosing your own path, and his dad asks Holling who he is. Holling thinks of Bobby Kennedy and says that he'll let them know when he finds out. His dad slams the car door, his mother blows him a kiss, and Heather smiles.

Holling goes back inside the temple. Danny is smiling, as is everyone else. He dances with Meryl Lee, who says that something seems different about Holling. Later, he goes to get Meryl Lee a Coke and finds Mrs. Baker standing with a strawberry, smiling. He tells the reader that he decided to break the rule that forbids talking to teachers outside of school and asks Mrs. Baker if she really thinks Lieutenant Baker will be home for strawberries. She says she's sure, agrees that teachers know the future, and asks if Holling wants to know his future.

Holling says he doesn't want to know the future, but he asks how Mrs. Baker knows that Lieutenant Baker will come home. She reminds Holling of Don Pedro, standing alone at the end of [Much Ado About Nothing](#). Everyone else has a happy ending, but Don Pedro has to go on and deal with a traitor, and the fate of his country is at stake. When Holling reminds her sarcastically that this is a "great comedy," she says that comedies aren't about humor: they're about characters that know they can choose a happy ending. She says that Don Pedro knew he was loved. A ring dance starts, and Holling says "I'chayim!" to Mrs. Baker as he runs off to dance with Meryl Lee. She smiles a real smile at him and praises him.

Eleven days later, Lieutenant Baker comes home. All of Mrs. Baker's class is on the tarmac holding boxes of strawberries when the plane lands. Holling refuses to say what Lieutenant Baker and Mrs. Baker did, but curses any reader who can't figure it out. He says it was a happy ending.

*It appears as though Holling will get a happy ending, given that he has significantly matured and stood up to his dad. However, the fact that Holling's mother and Heather openly disagree with Holling's dad suggests that there will be more troubles at home before the Hoodhods can have a happy ending. Despite this, it's important to note that Holling is extremely self-aware, as he recognizes that he's not yet done coming of age.*



*Holling's coming of age is not complete, considering he still believes students shouldn't talk to teachers outside of school. Of course, he has broken this rule many times, as Mrs. Baker was with him at Opening Day, the hospital, and the camping trip.*



*In Mrs. Baker's interpretation of the ending of [Much Ado About Nothing](#), she suggests that the most powerful thing a person can do is to believe that they're loved, which is what allows them to have a happy ending. This teaching holds true for Holling's own evolution throughout the course of the novel. He has learned to accept Mrs. Baker and Meryl Lee's love, and he learned that he loves Heather, and that she loves him, too. In this way, Holling has stepped outside his narrow worldview and can now find his own happy ending.*



*Even though Holling refuses to give up his control over his narration, he now challenges the reader to come to his or her own conclusions about what happens. Of course, it is fairly clear that Holling is just embarrassed to tell the reader that Lieutenant Baker and Mrs. Baker kissed.*







## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Brock, Zoë. "The Wednesday Wars." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 25 Jun 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Brock, Zoë. "The Wednesday Wars." LitCharts LLC, June 25, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-wednesday-wars>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Wednesday Wars* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

Schmidt, Gary. *The Wednesday Wars*. Houghton Mifflin. 2007.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Schmidt, Gary. *The Wednesday Wars*. New York: Houghton Mifflin. 2007.