

A GUIDE TO The Giver

Lois Lowry

“I thought there was only us. I thought there was only now.”

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

The Giver is a Newbery Award–winning science fiction novel and coming-of-age story addressing issues of individuality and freedom.

Setting: A future time in an isolated community in a landscape of Sameness.

Protagonist: Jonas, about to turn twelve as the novel opens, who comes to new understandings about his community and life.

Conflicts: At the beginning of the novel, Jonas is torn by internal conflict as he dutifully accepts his training for Receiver of Memory but yearns for his childhood and the normal lives his friends lead. His flight to freedom plunges him into external conflict as planes search for him and Gabe (if they are found, both will be put to death); Jonas struggles against exhaustion, cold, and starvation to stay alive and bring Gabe to safety.

Resolution: The ending is purposely ambiguous: Readers have to decide whether Jonas and Gabe reach safety Elsewhere or die trying. (In her Newbery Award acceptance speech, Lowry said that there is no “right” interpretation of the ending: “There’s a right one for each of us, and it depends on our own beliefs, our own hopes.”)

Point of View: Third person limited. We know Jonas’s psychology—what he thinks, feels, and observes—but not what goes on in other characters’ minds.

Themes: What is most important about human life isn’t safety or comfort but family, love, individual differences, and freedom to make choices. Life should not be restricted by rules and Sameness. One person’s efforts *can* make a difference in bringing about change.

Of Special Note: The elderly man on the dust jacket of the hardcover edition of *The Giver* is the painter Carl Nelson, whom Lowry photographed in 1979 for a magazine assignment. He talked with Lowry about the importance of color; years later she learned that he had become blind.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The novel should pose no problems for students reading at the middle school level. Some readers may be disturbed by the scene in which a newborn twin is “released” (killed), but this event marks the novel’s turning point. Jonas is so upset by the death that he takes steps to bring about change. Students will enjoy discussing the ambiguous ending. Teachers wholeheartedly recommend this novel—a sure winner.

BACKGROUND

Utopia and Dystopia. In 1516, Sir Thomas More made up the word *utopia* (from the Greek, “not a place”) for the island society in his political essay. In More’s *Utopia* every individual thrives, and injustice, poverty, and inequality no longer exist. Thus *utopia* refers to an ideal society, and at first the community in *The Giver* seems to be such an ideal world. All children are wanted; there is no divorce; no one is hungry or homeless or out of work. Gradually, however, we come to see that it is really a *dystopia*, a hypothetical society in which things are terribly wrong. Other dystopias in contemporary literature include George Orwell’s *1984* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.

MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Jonas, a serious young man who is apprehensive about the approaching Ceremony of Twelve, at which he will receive the Assignment that will determine his lifework.

Asher, an outgoing, fun-loving youngster who is Jonas’s best friend.

Father, Jonas’s father, who is a Nurturer of new children and a gentle, patient man.

Lily, Jonas’s younger sister.

Mother, Jonas’s mother, an official with an important position in the Department of Justice.

Gabriel, or **Gabe**, a “newchild” under Father’s care.

Fiona, a female Eleven, a caring, gentle girl whom Jonas likes.

Larissa, an old woman who lives in the House of the Old.

Chief Elder, the female Elder who gives a personalized speech announcing each individual's Assignment at the Ceremony of Twelve.

The Giver (the name this character tells Jonas to call him by), one of the Elders, the current Receiver of Memory. He is an elderly man and has been Receiver for a very long time.

PLOT

Chapter 1. We meet Jonas, the **main character**, and gradually learn details of the **setting**: A Speaker broadcasts orders to the whole community; apologies are a ritual. Everyone in a family discusses his or her feelings at the end of the day. Something called *release* is a punishment for any third transgression; it is not a punishment for the elderly or for a newchild who is not thriving. Jonas says he feels apprehensive about the approaching Ceremony of Twelve.

Chapter 2. Jonas's parents talk to him about the Ceremonies that take place each December. One-year-olds are named and given to families whose applications have been approved. Father tells of a newchild scheduled to be named Gabriel who is not thriving.

Chapter 3. Father brings Gabe home for extra nurturing. Like Jonas, Gabe has light eyes. Lily remarks that perhaps they have the same Birthmother and wishes to be a Birthmother some day. Mother describes a Birthmother's life as being pampered for three years, giving birth three times, and then working as a laborer for the rest of her life. Jonas recalls the Speaker's reprimand the previous month—directed at him, as everyone knew—for taking an apple home from the recreation area. He and Asher had been playing catch when Jonas thought he saw the apple change for an instant in midair (an incident that **foreshadows** Jonas's unique abilities). Jonas has seen such changes on four occasions, but Asher has seen nothing extraordinary.

Chapter 4. Jonas bikes to the House of the Old, where he does volunteer work. Asher and Fiona are already in the bathing room, each gently washing an elderly resident. Jonas bathes Larissa, who describes the release ritual of an elderly resident named Roberto, which was performed that morning. All of the Old assembled to hear the telling of Roberto's life, and Roberto left The House of the Old with a look of "pure happiness." When Jonas asks where Roberto went after the ritual, Larissa cannot tell him because she doesn't know.

Chapter 5. At home the next morning during the daily dream-telling ritual, Jonas recounts a vivid dream. He is in the bathing room of the House of the Old, bare chested and urging Fiona to get into the tub so that he can bathe her. She laughingly refuses. Jonas's parents say he has felt his first Stirrings and is therefore ready to begin taking daily medication to stop them.

Chapter 6. As Mother braids Lily's hair on the first morning of the two-day December Ceremonies, we

learn more details of the community's rules regarding children: Girls' hair is worn braided; back-buttoned coats are worn until Seven to encourage interdependence; at Seven front-buttoned coats are worn so that children will develop independence; bicycles are distributed at Nine. In the first ceremony of the day, newchildren are named and given to their assigned families. Father reports that Gabe, who is still not sleeping soundly, has been granted an extra year of nurturing and will spend nights with Jonas's family.

Chapter 7. Twelves are called to the stage in their birth order, and Jonas waits impatiently for his number—Nineteen. The Committee of Elders carefully matches each individual's talents and interests with a job necessary to the community. The Chief Elder gives a long speech for each young person. Jonas is horrified and humiliated when the Chief Elder skips his number.

Chapter 8. When all the Assignments have been made, the Chief Elder apologizes for causing the community and Jonas anxiety. She says that Jonas has been *selected*, not assigned, to be the next Receiver of Memory, the most honored job in the community. The current Receiver was to have been replaced ten years ago, but the selection failed. Jonas has all the necessary qualities: intelligence, integrity, courage, wisdom, and the Capacity to See Beyond. Jonas wants to say that he can't accept his selection, but when he looks out over the audience, it changes for an instant, the way the apple did. **Suspense** builds as Jonas fears his future.

Chapter 9. In his training folder, Jonas finds only a single page on which are written eight rules. The first two rules tell him to go to the Annex behind the House of the Old for training and to go home immediately afterward. The third rule, which startles Jonas, says he is to be exempt from all rules about rudeness and may ask any question of any citizen. The fourth rule warns him not to discuss his training with anyone. The fifth prohibits him from dream-telling, and the sixth forbids him to take any medication except for illness or injury unrelated to his training. Rule seven prohibits him from applying for release. Rule eight says that he may lie. This stuns him, for it is contrary to his training since earliest childhood: As a child, even saying he was starving (a bit of **foreshadowing** here) was considered lying. Jonas thinks that if others have been told they can lie, he cannot believe anyone.

Chapter 10. In a locked room lined with books, The Receiver welcomes Jonas and explains that he will transmit to him all the memories of the past of the whole world. Jonas doesn't understand what he means by "the whole world" or "generations before him." He thought there was only their community and now. The Receiver feels weighted with memories of all Elsewhere and of the past—as if he were trying to go downhill on a sled in deep snow. Jonas doesn't understand, so the Receiver says he will begin by giving Jonas the memory of snow. He switches the Speaker off and tells Jonas to remove his tunic and lie face down on a bed.

Chapter 11. With no words, just by touching Jonas's back lightly, the old man transmits the memory. Jonas actually feels the cold; then he can see snow, a sled, a hill and feel himself sledding downhill (**foreshadowing** here—remember that sled). When Jonas opens his eyes, the Receiver explains that the memory he has just given Jonas is a very distant memory, from before Climate Control, before the community went to Sameness. The Receiver then transmits memories of sunshine and sunburn. Before Jonas leaves, the old man, who seems terribly weary and sad, tells Jonas to call him The Giver.

Chapter 12. As Jonas and Fiona bicycle to their training sessions the next day, Fiona's hair changes the same way the apple did. When Jonas asks about these changes, The Giver tells Jonas to recall the sled memory and to look down at the sled; it has the same quality as the apple and Fiona's hair. Jonas is seeing the color red, The Giver explains. The sled's color doesn't go away because it is a memory from a time when there were colors (now there aren't). Before there was Sameness, even people's skins were of different colors.

Chapter 13. Weeks pass, and Jonas tells The Giver that the lack of color is unfair, that he wants to make choices. Jonas tries and fails to transmit memories to Asher (the color red) and to Lily and his father (the shooting of an elephant). We learn that The Giver advises the Committee of Elders when it faces something its members have never experienced before. Some days The Giver dismisses Jonas without training. Jonas asks what causes his pain, and The Giver says the time has come for Jonas to feel pain.

Chapter 14. This time Jonas is thrown from the sled, breaks his leg, and feels searing pain. The Giver explains that it is pain that leads to wisdom. For example, when the Committee considered increasing the number of children in a family to three, The Giver advised them not to, remembering the pain of hunger. Overpopulation led to worldwide hunger, he tells Jonas, which led to warfare. Jonas says everyone should share the pain, and The Giver replies that he's never been able to think of a way to change things.

Gabe is growing on schedule, thriving during the day but still fretful at night. Jonas offers to have Gabe sleep in his room that night. When Gabe is restless during the night, Jonas pats his back while thinking about a new memory: sailing on a lake. Jonas discovers he has inadvertently transmitted the sailing memory to Gabe and decides not to tell The Giver what has happened.

Chapter 15. Jonas finds The Giver in great pain and asks what he can do to help, so The Giver gives Jonas the memory of war: Horses and men lie dying and dead on a foul-smelling field; a boy in gray uniform begs for water. Jonas, in great pain from an arm wound that has shattered his bone, gives the boy a drink, and the boy dies. When Jonas can no longer stand the pain, he opens his eyes. The Giver asks Jonas to forgive him.

Chapter 16. The Giver transmits his favorite memory: a family Christmas celebration, complete with grandparents and beautiful **imagery**. He identifies the feeling that is so strong in the memory: love. That night, Jonas asks his parents if they love him. His mother replies that the word is generalized and meaningless. Jonas whispers to the sleeping Gabe that things could change. Everyone could have memories; there could be colors, grandparents, and love. We see a change in Jonas and new **character traits**. The next morning when he throws away his anti-Stirrings pill, Jonas shows independence.

Chapter 17. Four weeks have passed. On an unscheduled holiday, Jonas finds Asher, Fiona, and other children playing a war game. He tells Asher not to play it any more but cannot explain why. That night Father talks about the soon-to-be-born identical twins, who will be weighed and the smaller one released. Jonas asks if someone from Elsewhere comes to get the released twin, and Father says yes.

Chapter 18. Jonas asks The Giver about the failed Receiver of ten years before. The Giver says Rosemary trained for five weeks before requesting release. The Giver didn't give her physical pain but transmitted memories of loneliness, loss, poverty, hunger, and terror. After her release, the memories she'd received overwhelmed the people. Jonas asks what would happen if he drowned after having received a year's worth of memories. The Giver tells him to stay away from the river.

Chapter 19. When Jonas wishes he could watch the identical twin's release, The Giver obtains a tape recording of that morning's release, and they watch it together (the novel's **turning point**). Jonas's father and his assistant carry two newborns into a room. Father weighs the two, gives the heavier one to his assistant, and injects a clear liquid into the smaller infant's forehead. The baby cries and goes limp. Stunned, Jonas realizes his father has killed the baby—that is what *release* means and how it is accomplished. Father puts the baby's body into a carton and throws it into a waste chute. The Giver tells Jonas that he watched the tape of Rosemary's release. She asked to inject herself and did. Jonas feels "a ripping sensation inside," a terrible pain.

Chapter 20. In a **key scene**, Jonas, shouting and crying, refuses to go home. The Giver says he may stay that night and assures Jonas that people obey their orders to release others because they know nothing and have no real feelings. He tells Jonas of a plan: In two weeks at midnight before the December Ceremonies begin, Jonas will leave his home. The Giver will drive Jonas across the river, part of the way on his journey to Elsewhere. The Giver will return and tell everyone that Jonas has drowned in the river. The Giver reveals that Rosemary was his daughter.

Chapter 21. That night Jonas is forced to leave immediately. In a **flashback** we find out that at dinner, Father has revealed that Gabe is to be released the next

morning because he cried all night at the Nurturing Center. Jonas steals his father's bike and a little food and, with the sleeping Gabe in the child's seat, crosses the river on his way to Elsewhere. Days pass, and planes search for them; they sleep by day, and Jonas pedals all night. When he hears search planes, Jonas transmits memories of snow to Gabe so that they can evade the planes' heat-seeking devices.

Chapter 22. One night, Jonas falls, twisting his ankle and scraping his knee, but Gabe is unhurt. Now Jonas rides during the day through the beauties of nature without Sameness. Jonas is afraid they will starve and wonders if he has made a wrong choice. But he had no choice, for Gabe would have been killed. The terrain changes; now there are hills and rain. Gabe cries from hunger and cold. Jonas cries too, afraid he can't save Gabe.

Chapter 23. Jonas feels Elsewhere close by but has little hope that they will reach it. It is cold and snowy. Jonas ties Gabe to his chest to warm him and gives him memories of sunshine, but they fade quickly. The bike cannot move in the snow, so Jonas struggles on foot up a steep hill. Suddenly he is flooded with joy. He tells Gabe that they're "almost there" and finds the sled that he knew would be waiting for them at the top of the hill. (This is the story's **climax**.) Jonas sits on the sled, clutching Gabe, and they sled toward Elsewhere. He sees lights and Christmas trees and families. As the two speed downward, Jonas is sure the families are waiting to welcome him and Gabe. He thinks he hears music for the first time.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

The most important element of the novel is **setting**, and the conflicts in the story are directly connected with the setting. The writer has created a community so different from any community students know that they will enjoy discussing its structure and its implications for our time. Discussion groups or students working individually on research projects might focus on the following activity.

Analyzing Society

One of the first things students will want to do is discuss the community depicted in the novel.

- What is wrong with Jonas's community? Is there anything about it that is right?

- What problems in our society no longer exist in Jonas's community?
- Are the people in Jonas's community happy? How do you think you would feel if you were living there? What would you miss most?
- Do communities exist today that are very much apart from "mainstream" twentieth-century life? What are they like? What is their purpose?
- Ask students what they think their own community might be like at a far-distant date—the year 3000 perhaps.

MEET THE WRITER

Lois Lowry (1937–) says that when she writes, she knows how a novel will begin and end but makes up the rest as she goes along. In her fiction she tries to "help adolescents answer their own questions about life, identity, and human relationships." In her Newbery Award acceptance speech, she said, "The man that I named The Giver passed along to the boy knowledge, history, memories, color, pain, laughter, love, and truth. Every time you place a book in the hands of a child, you do the same thing."

READ ON

Lois Lowry, *Number the Stars*. Ten-year-old Annemarie Johansen and her family join the Danish resistance efforts to smuggle Jews to neutral Sweden from Nazi-occupied Denmark. (1990 Newbery Medal)

Isaac Asimov, "The Fun They Had." An ironic short story about a school of the future, set in 2155.

Ray Bradbury, "The Naming of Names." A short story about a man and his family who think they are colonizing Mars but find that the Martian setting is transforming their attitudes and their very identities.

Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, "The Medicine Bag." In this short story about the Sioux coming-of-age tradition, a great-grandfather passes on the most important values of his culture to his great-grandson.

Ray Bradbury, "There Will Come Soft Rains." In a future society where technology does almost everything, something goes very wrong.

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