

Stargirl



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JERRY SPINELLI

As a child, Jerry Spinelli wanted to be either a cowboy or a professional baseball player. In high school, however, he stumbled upon writing as a future career path when his poem about a championship football game was published in a local paper. He majored in English at Gettysburg College and also took writing seminars at Johns Hopkins University. After writing four unpublished novels for adults, he once again found his path by accident when one of his stories caught the attention of a children's publisher. As a result, *Space Station Seventh Grade* came out in 1982, and from then on, Spinelli wrote exclusively for kids. In 1990, *Maniac Magee* won the Newbery Medal. Spinelli now lives in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, in the Philadelphia metro area. He and his wife, Eileen, had six children together, and they now have over 20 grandchildren.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Stargirl was published a couple of years after the April 1999, Columbine High School shootings in Colorado, in which 15 people were killed, most of them students. Although Spinelli's most direct inspiration for the character of Stargirl was his wife, Eileen, the novel's emphasis on kindness and acceptance also brings to mind the sense of fear evoked by the Columbine massacre and similar incidents of mass violence at the time, and student-initiated efforts to combat them. A number of students who are practically unnoticed by their peers are not only seen and valued, but celebrated in the book—an outlook like Stargirl's offers an antidote to the bullying and ostracism that contributed to such events. *Stargirl* also came out a few years before social media had taken hold strongly in youth culture. In light of that, its emphasis on the importance of a more authentic, face-to-face connection between people has a prophetic feel.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

R.J. Palacio's *Wonder*, featuring a character with a rare facial condition and the reactions of his community, is similar to *Stargirl* in that it touches on themes of difference, kindness, and acceptance. Other YA books that tackle themes of social norms, nonconformity, and fitting in include S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, Cynthia Lord's *Rules*, and Sharon M. Draper's *Out of My Mind*. Jean Giraudoux's 1938 play, *Ondine*, is one work Spinelli cites as an inspiration for the story that became *Stargirl*—it tells the story of a medieval knight's doomed love for

a water-sprite. Spinelli followed *Stargirl* with a sequel, *Love, Stargirl*, in 2009. Some of his other well-known novels include *Maniac Magee* (1990), the story of a racially-divided community, and *Milkweed* (2003), which is set in the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Stargirl*
- **When Published:** August 8, 2000
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Fiction
- **Setting:** Mica, Arizona
- **Climax:** Arriving home from the state oratorical contest, Susan/Stargirl is greeted by one classmate instead of the hero's welcome she envisioned.
- **Antagonist:** Mica High School students
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Streaming *Stargirl*. A *Stargirl* film adaptation is scheduled to be released on the new Disney+ streaming service in 2020. Stargirl Caraway will be played by Grace VanderWaal, a 2016 winner of *America's Got Talent*, who, like Stargirl, sings and accompanies herself on the ukulele.

Sonny and Stargirl. The scene in which Stargirl receives a tepid welcome home from her oratory contest victory was inspired by the real-life story of Sonny Liston, a professional boxer in the 1950s and '60s, who expected a hero's welcome upon returning home from a championship victory—but no one greeted his arrival. Spinelli wishes he could have met Liston and comments, "I'd like to dump a teacup of confetti on his head."



PLOT SUMMARY

When Leo Borlock was a little boy, his uncle gave him a porcupine necktie. As a newcomer to Mica, Arizona, Leo decided to start a porcupine necktie collection. His collection is mentioned in a small newspaper feature on Leo's 14th birthday. A few days later, Leo receives a package containing another porcupine necktie. The sender is a complete mystery.

On Leo's first day of 11th grade, all of Mica High is whispering about a new 10th-grade girl named Stargirl Caraway. Stargirl wears flowing dresses and carries a ukulele on her back. Leo's best friend, Kevin, tells him that Stargirl was homeschooled until recently. They make plans to interview Stargirl on *Hot Seat*,

the student TV show they co-created. Over the coming days, Stargirl's strange outfits—and her habit of serenading kids in the lunchroom—lead to speculations that she's a fake. Stargirl also brings her pet rat, Cinnamon, to school and has an unsettling habit of greeting strangers in the hallways. Mica High is “not exactly a hotbed of nonconformity,” and Stargirl's ways continue to baffle the other kids. Leo, however, decides there's something wonderfully real about her, though he can't pinpoint what it is.

A few weeks later, Stargirl shows up at the Mica High football game and thrills the normally dull crowd by dancing around the field. Soon after, the head cheerleader invites Stargirl to join the squad. Leo and Kevin ask the advice of Archie Brubaker, a retired paleontologist who mentors the kids of Mica. Archie admits that Stargirl is very different, but that he believes she's closer to “who we really are.” He tells the boys that they'll know Stargirl “more by your questions than by her answers.” By December, Stargirl has become the most popular kid in school. Both boys and girls—shy, popular, athletic, and nerdy kids alike—are drawn to her. Inspired by Stargirl's kindness, kids start acknowledging and celebrating one another, and they express their individuality more in their dress, activities, and opinions. School spirit grows alongside the outburst of nonconformity. Leo looks back on this time as a “golden age” that wasn't to last long.

Things change as the Mica High Electrons make the state basketball playoffs. Suddenly, Stargirl's overenthusiastic, goofy cheering becomes threatening: she starts offering cheers for the opposing teams. When Stargirl is interviewed on *Hot Seat*, the student “jury” panel, led by Stargirl's meanest detractor, Hillari Kimble, turns hostile. They start by criticizing Stargirl's name and out-of-bounds cheering, and end by hurling accusations, claiming Stargirl just wants attention and demanding, “Why can't you be normal?”

After Mica High is eliminated from the playoffs, Leo finds a childish valentine in one of his notebooks. It's from Stargirl. Conflicted, Leo avoids Stargirl at first, but he's helplessly drawn to her. Their first date is a walk in the **desert**, where Stargirl teaches Leo how to meditate. Leo is giddy with happiness about their relationship and is oblivious to much else. After a few days, though, Leo notices that the entire student body is shunning the two of them. Kevin explains that this is because they hold Stargirl responsible for sabotaging Mica High in the basketball tournament. When Leo seeks out Archie's advice, Archie says that Stargirl seems to be in touch with a more primitive part of humanity that has become obscured in most people. He says the only question that matters is whose affection Leo values more: Stargirl's or the other students'. Meanwhile, Leo and Stargirl go exploring together, and Stargirl teaches Leo how to see the beauty and magic in everyday things. He also helps Stargirl on her secret missions, delivering cards and gifts to strangers. He realizes that Stargirl was the

sender of his porcupine necktie two years ago.

As much as Leo loves spending time with Stargirl, he is also tormented by his classmates' shunning. He wishes he could have it both ways—Stargirl *and* his peers' acceptance. He finally confronts Stargirl—doesn't she care what everyone thinks of her? Stargirl is baffled by Leo's instinctive connection to “everybody else”—something she realizes she lacks. Leo tries to explain the importance of going along with the group because, like it or not, “we live in a world of ‘them,’” and “they” don't like Stargirl. A couple days later, Stargirl appears at school dressed in “normal” clothes, calling herself by her birth name, Susan. Leo is delighted and now enjoys being seen with her in public. But Susan's desperate attempts to conform don't win her classmates' affection. But then Susan has a vision that she wins the state oratorical contest and receives a hero's welcome, finally becoming popular. As she'd predicted, Susan's oratorical performance is a resounding victory. But when they return to Mica High, nobody but two teachers and Susan's friend Dori Dilson has shown up to cheer for her. At school the following Monday, Susan is Stargirl once again. She kisses Leo and tells him she's given up on being normal. She also knows he won't ask her to the upcoming Ocotillo Ball, and tells him it's okay.

At the Ocotillo Ball, Stargirl shows up alone. She wears a regal outfit and joyfully dances solo. One guy finally asks Stargirl to dance, and not long after, she's leading a line of students in a goofy version of the bunny hop. The long line of kids wanders off into the desert and returns, still dancing. The dance is remembered decades after the fact. Before Stargirl leaves, Hillari Kimble slaps Stargirl for “[ruining] everything,” but Stargirl just kisses her cheek in return. Nobody from Mica High sees Stargirl again. Later, Archie informs Leo that Stargirl has moved to Minnesota with her family. He shows Stargirl's secret “office” for doing kindnesses to people to Leo: a toolshed filled with art supplies, a birthday calendar, and meticulous files on everybody at Mica High.

Fifteen years later, Leo is a set designer back East. Nowadays, Mica High has a “Sunflower Club” dedicated to good deeds, a ukulele player in the marching band, and a tradition of cheering for their opponents. Leo still thinks about Stargirl all the time and wonders if he'll ever get another chance with her. But he doesn't feel alone. Just before his most recent birthday, he received a porcupine necktie in the mail.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Leo Borlock – Leo is the narrator of *Stargirl*. He is a quiet, observant, sensitive 11th grader who doesn't enjoy the spotlight. He moved to Mica, Arizona, from Pennsylvania a few years ago and decided to start a porcupine necktie collection at this time. A couple years after his arrival, when Leo was 14, a

newspaper article was published about his collection and he received the anonymous gift of another porcupine necktie in the mail. Leo's best friend is Kevin Quinlan. Leo directs and produces their school's TV show, *Hot Seat*, which he and Kevin came up with. He wants to become a sports announcer or news anchor when he grows up. Leo is curiously drawn to Stargirl as soon as she arrives at Mica High School. While other kids initially reject her as a fake, Leo thinks she's real, an instinct shared by his mentor, Archie Brubaker. After he learns that Stargirl likes him, Leo is initially delighted. He accompanies her on walks in the **desert** and learns to see beauty and opportunities for generosity the way she does. However, because of his reluctance to stand out, Leo is also torn between his affection for Stargirl and his desire for his classmates' approval. After Stargirl's failed experiment of becoming a "normal" teenage girl—something she does for his approval—Leo and Stargirl break up. However, even after going to college and becoming a set designer back East, Leo always thinks about Stargirl and wonders if she'll ever give him another chance. Fifteen years later, he receives another porcupine necktie in the mail, and he knows Stargirl is still watching over him.

Stargirl/Susan Caraway – Stargirl's given name is Susan Julia Caraway. Over the years, however, she's taken many different names, including Pocket Mouse, Mudpie, and Hullygully. Stargirl is a 10th grader who quit homeschooling because she wanted to make friends. From the moment she arrives at Mica High, however, she stands out and struggles to connect with her more conformist classmates. She dresses differently, serenades kids on her ukulele, and carries around a pet rat named Cinnamon. She also reads newspapers and monitors bulletin boards to find opportunities to leave people encouraging notes and gifts—always anonymously. Most of Stargirl's strangeness could be forgiven by her peers, however, if it weren't for her unconventional cheerleading: she insists on cheering for opposing teams during Mica High's basketball playoffs. Soon, she's ostracized by the entire student body and ruthlessly grilled on *Hot Seat*, Kevin and Leo's TV show. Around the same time, she begins dating Leo, even briefly adopting a "normal" persona as Susan Caraway to make things easier for him. This fails utterly, however, and after "Susan's" resounding victory at the state oratorical contest, she gives up the act, realizing that no matter what she does, she will never be accepted at Mica High. She breaks up with Leo soon after, though she still cares for him. Dori Dilson is Stargirl's most loyal friend in Mica, and Archie is a tutor/mentor/grandfather figure to her. After the end-of-year Ocotillo Ball—where Stargirl triumphs by leading some classmates in a joyful dance through the surrounding **desert**—Stargirl leaves town abruptly, moving to Minnesota with her family. Years afterward, her quirks and kindnesses are emulated by younger generations of Mica students, and she still keeps an eye on Leo from afar.

Archie Brubaker – Archie is a retired paleontologist and professor who moved to Mica after his wife, Ada Mae, died. He lives in a fossil-filled house with a giant, dying cactus, "Señor Saguaro," in the backyard. The kids of Mica flock to Archie's house for rambling lectures on all sorts of topics; he calls them "the Loyal Order of the Stone Bone." He often talks in riddles. Archie helped out with some of Stargirl's homeschooling lessons and is a kind of grandfather figure to her. He also has an especially close relationship with Leo. Archie encourages Leo's relationship with Stargirl, claiming Stargirl is more "real" than most people, and continues to muse about the mystery of Stargirl long after she leaves Mica.

Kevin Quinlan – Kevin is Leo's best friend. They moved to Arizona in the same week four years ago and usually agree on everything—until Leo starts dating Stargirl. They came up with the idea for the *Hot Seat* TV show together. Kevin's aspiration is to become a sleazy talk show host, but he ends up becoming an insurance salesman.

Hillari Kimble – Hillari Kimble is the most popular girl at Mica High and also the nastiest. She especially hates Stargirl. Hillari dates Wayne Parr, and together they epitomize the "normal" high school couple. Hillari becomes enraged whenever her typical high school experience—including her status as leader—is threatened, and she expresses that rage by leading the student body in shunning Stargirl. When Stargirl "ruins" the Ocotillo Ball, Hillari slaps her, but Stargirl forgives her.

Wayne Parr – Wayne Parr is Hillari Kimble's boyfriend. He rarely opens his mouth, and he's not known for his athleticism, good grades, or leadership—his main job is to be "gorgeous" and show up at Hillari's side. When interviewed by Kevin on *Hot Seat*, Wayne revealed that his life's ambition is to become a GQ model. Leo once assumed that Wayne would always be Mica High's "grand marshal," until Stargirl came along.

Dori Dilson – Dori Dilson is an inconspicuous ninth grader who writes poems in a big looseleaf notebook and is the first Mica High student to sit with Stargirl at lunch. Though angry with Stargirl when she briefly becomes "Susan," Dori is by far Stargirl's most loyal—and only publicly supportive—friend. She is the only Mica High student who shows up to cheer for Stargirl after the state oratorical contest.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Caraway (Charles) – Stargirl's ordinary-looking father. Like most people in town, he works at MicaTronics. Both he and Mrs. Caraway are far more "normal" than Leo expects, and they are much more reserved than their daughter, though supportive of her quirks and talents.

Mrs. Caraway – Stargirl's mother. She designs costumes for movies and homeschooled Stargirl until the 10th grade. Both she and Mr. Caraway are far more "normal" than Leo expects, and they are much more reserved than their daughter, though

supportive of her quirks and talents.

Mallory Stillwell – The captain of the Mica High cheerleading squad.

Becca Rinaldi – One of the hostile Mica High students who interrogates Stargirl on the *Hot Seat* show.

Mr. Robineau – The *Hot Seat* faculty advisor.

Peter Sinkowitz – Peter Sinkowitz is a five-year-old boy who lives across the street from Stargirl. Stargirl is making a biographical scrapbook for him by taking candid photos of him, which she'll give to his parents to save for later.

Ron Kovac – Ron Kovac is a star Sun Valley basketball player who gets injured during a playoff game against Mica High. Stargirl comforts him when he gets hurt, earning her the ire of her classmates.

Mr. McShane – A faculty advisor for the state oratorical contest in which Stargirl/Susan competes.

Raymond Studemacher – An otherwise forgettable young man who's the first to ask Stargirl to dance at the Ocotillo Ball, kicking off the famous "bunny hop" into the **desert**.

the same food, listened to the same music. [...] If we happened to somehow distinguish ourselves, we quickly snapped back into place, like rubber bands." Everyone more or less conforms to one another, and each student has a habitual place that's neatly distinguished and makes sense within the context of the whole. Stargirl, however, with her obliviousness to conventional norms and comfort with her own "normal," disrupts all this: "We wanted to define her, to wrap her up as we did each other, but we could not seem to get past 'weird' and 'strange' and 'goofy.' Her ways knocked us off balance." Stargirl upsets Mica High's carefully delineated social hierarchy in a way that's hard for her peers to articulate. The students' inability to categorize her throws doubt on the way they categorize themselves, too. At first, this disruption even has a positive effect on life at Mica High. "It was wonderful to see [...] Small gestures, words, empathies thought to be extinct came to life. For years the strangers among us had passed sullenly in the hallways; now we looked, we nodded, we smiled. [...] We discovered the color of each other's eyes," observes Leo. As students begin to copy Stargirl's openness and kind gestures, they begin to discover more about themselves at the same time. Though Stargirl at first seemed like a problem to be solved, overturning "normal" at Mica High, now her disruptive presence seems to be fixing something that had been lacking among its students.

When Stargirl's behaviors transgress certain social conventions, however, her individuality comes to be seen as threatening—in particular, it offends school spirit in such a way that her peers feel rejected, ostracizing her in turn. After the state basketball tournament, when Stargirl cheers for the opposing teams and sympathizes with an injured rival, Mica High students begin to find Stargirl's uniqueness disquieting. She's mobbed with angry, uncomprehending questions ("Why can't you be normal?" "[I]s something wrong with us [that] you gotta be so different?") during the school's *Hot Seat* interview show and is subsequently shunned by the entire student body. Stargirl's refusal to fall in line with social norms (only supporting one's own team) separates her from her peers more than her unusual clothes and lunchtime ukulele playing have done. Her peers, in fact, interpret that refusal as a rejection of themselves. When Stargirl remains oblivious to the student body's pointed ignoring of her, Leo tries to explain that she should care more about others' opinions if she hopes to be accepted: "Stargirl, you just can't do things the way you do. [...] You can't just wake up in the morning and say you don't care what the rest of the world thinks." Stargirl meekly replies, "You can't? [...] But how do you keep track of the rest of the world? Sometimes I can hardly keep track of myself." Stargirl's bafflement suggests that her open, indiscriminating way of interacting with the world is connected to her comfort with who she is, and, conversely, "everyone else's" preoccupation with conformity suggests they have a fundamental discomfort with themselves.



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.



INDIVIDUALITY AND CONFORMITY

Jerry Spinelli's young adult novel *Stargirl* highlights the kind-hearted quirkiness of a high school girl who calls herself Stargirl. But the novel's action centers more around the reactions of her Mica High peers when the formerly homeschooled Stargirl shows up, serenading kids with her ukulele, celebrating those who are usually ignored, and—more controversially—even showing support to the school's rivals during a state basketball tournament. By focusing on the reactions of Stargirl's peers even more than Stargirl's strangeness, Spinelli argues that conformist rejection of individualism says more about conformists than about the person being rejected, and also that individualism's positive effects often appear long after the fact. At first, though Stargirl's individuality is unsettling and disruptive to Mica High's conformist environment, her peers mostly see it as harmless and even, eventually, as good. As narrator Leo Borlock explains, "Mica Area High School [...] was not exactly a hotbed of nonconformity. There were individual variants here and there, of course, but within pretty narrow limits we all wore the same clothes, talked the same way, ate

Though Stargirl never does find a stable place within Mica High society, her legacy has long-term ripple effects after her departure, suggesting that nonconformity does have a positive impact, even if it's not apparent at the time. Stargirl initially tries to conform, adjusting her style, using makeup, and even trying to adopt a "normal" girl's laugh, but it doesn't win her approval from her peers. Leo explains, "She constantly quizzed me about what other kids would do, would buy, would say, would think. She invented a fictitious person whom she called Evelyn Everybody. 'Would Evelyn like this?' 'Would Evelyn do that?'" Stargirl's "normal" persona fails because it comes from Stargirl's desire to fit in, not from her honest self-expression. Despite a brief triumph at the Ocotillo Ball, when she leads some of her classmates in a freewheeling dance across the surrounding **desert**, Stargirl disappears soon after, suggesting that there simply isn't a place for her—or for individualism in general—within a typical high school social order. Yet, years after her disappearance, Stargirl's memory produces a gradual change at Mica High, as acts of kindness, solidarity, and outright quirkiness become more common among the student body. For instance, "at every [basketball] game, when the opposing team scores its first basket, a small group of Electrons fans jumps to its feet and cheers." This suggests that the conformity of Mica High really did need fixing, but that the change necessarily occurred over time, not all at once.

To some extent, Stargirl remains a puzzle in the book. She disappears from Mica High as abruptly as she first appeared, and the origins of her oddness (she even comes from a fairly "conventional" family) are unclear. Spinelli gives her an intentionally far-fetched, fantastical aspect that prompts readers to ask questions about how they would react to such a newcomer, and in turn to question their standards for normalcy and acceptability.



HUMAN NATURE

In the novel, there's a nagging question about Stargirl: how could a person like her exist? Her openness and obliviousness to social customs

baffle her classmates so much that they even seem faked. Leo Borlock, in particular, makes Stargirl an object of study as he talks with his mentor Archie for insights and even joins Stargirl on her errands to surprise strangers in need of encouragement. He discovers that there isn't a tidy explanation for Stargirl; in fact, the more he studies Stargirl, the more he asks questions about himself and his peers. By portraying Stargirl as a more raw, undeveloped version of human nature, Spinelli suggests that human beings should get in touch with a kinder, less artificial, less socially divisive aspect of their natures that's already present.

Stargirl is uncomfortable for her peers because she reveals things about them that they'd rather not know. Archie Brubaker, a wise, retired paleontologist who mentors many of

the kids in Mica, explains to Leo that Stargirl's strangeness isn't fake; in fact, it's more authentic than what the students are used to seeing every day. "If anybody is acting, it's us. [...] You'll know her more by your questions than by her answers. Keep looking at her long enough. One day you might see someone you know," he says. In other words, Stargirl is a mirror for her peers; careful study will tell them something about themselves that has become obscured and that, under normal circumstances, they don't see easily. For example, Stargirl's willingness to cheer for rivals reveals the deeply ingrained desire to dominate and distinguish oneself from others that surfaces during Mica High's briefly triumphant basketball season: "Suddenly we were no longer comfortable with losing. In fact, we forgot how to lose. The transformation was stunning in its speed. [...] One day we were bored, indifferent, satisfied losers; the next we were rabid fanatics." Stargirl, on the other hand, persists in associating with and even celebrating rivals. The contrast between Stargirl and her classmates suggests that bitter rivalry, while seemingly natural, is not the way things are supposed to be. The subsequent rejection of Stargirl suggests that she reminds students of something better they have it within themselves to be—they'd rather marginalize her than ask questions about themselves and consider changing.

Stargirl's differentness, in fact, seems to be connected to buried aspects of human nature. Archie suggests to Leo that human beings are most "themselves" when they first wake up in the morning: "We have just slept the sleep of our most distant ancestors, and something of them and their world still clings to us. [...] We are, for a few brief moments, anything and everything we could be." He implies that Stargirl is more attuned to that ancestral world than her peers and embodies certain aspects of it in her "strange" behavior. One example of this primordial strangeness is Stargirl's random acts of kindness to strangers. While Leo briefly dates Stargirl, "We delivered many potted violets. And CONGRATULATIONS! balloons. And cards of many sentiments. [...] You would never mistake one of her cards for a Hallmark, but I have never seen cards more heartfelt. They were meaningful in the way that a schoolchild's homemade Christmas card is meaningful. She never left her name." Stargirl's kindness is characterized by childlike attentions to strangers—childlike in sentiment as well as expression. It's as if she's connected to a socially undeveloped, yet sincere, version of human nature. When Leo tries to explain that barging into other people's lives—even in well-intentioned ways, like dropping by a private funeral or giving an injured kid a bike because you truly care—is generally not viewed as socially acceptable, Stargirl begins to cry, saying, "I'm not connected!" She means that she isn't connected to the conventionality that most people "just know" intuitively and which tends to produce social conformity. Ironically, though, Stargirl is "connected" to something deeper: a version of human nature that isn't fettered by artificial barriers between people and is freer to express kindness.

There's something raw about Stargirl. Even her best deeds have an unpolished and sometimes ambiguous quality about them—like assuming that shy kids love having “Happy Birthday” sung to them in the high school cafeteria. If Spinelli argues that Stargirl is connected to a more primal version of human nature, perhaps it's also true that her unrefined kindness *could* stand to learn a few things about “ordinary” humanity. Nevertheless, the mysterious way in which Stargirl's kindness shapes later generations still suggests that her raw form is superior, in some ways, to the more cluttered, stifled kind that has built up over the years.



SEEING, VISIBILITY, AND INVISIBILITY

Stargirl opens with the story of Leo Borlock receiving a porcupine tie in the mail, in response to a newspaper article about his necktie collection. “At the time I simply considered the episode a mystery. It did not occur to me that I was being watched. We were all being watched,” he writes. This ominous-sounding statement actually refers to the harmless Stargirl, who keeps a close watch on people and events in Mica, Arizona, in order to cheer and support anyone who needs it. In time, Leo, who himself has a cameraman's eye for his environment, learns about Stargirl's way of seeing the world and witnesses its effects on those around her. By showing Stargirl through Leo's eyes, and revealing Stargirl's community through her eyes, Spinelli suggests that people's experiences of the world around them are largely determined by what they choose both to see and not to see.

Leo is one example of a character who “sees,” though his observations are mostly limited to his natural environment, and his eyes are only beginning to be opened to other people. As a newcomer to Arizona, Leo had to cultivate an appreciation for the seeming monotony of the **desert**: “What you notice [in the Sonoran Desert] are the saguaros. To the newcomer from the East, it's as simple as that. The desert seems to be a brown wasteland of dry, prickly scrub whose only purpose is to serve as a setting for the majestic saguaros. Then, little by little, the plants of the desert begin to identify themselves: the porcupine yucca, the beaver tail and prickly pear and barrel cacti, buckhorn and staghorn and devil's fingers, the tall, sky-reaching tendrils of the ocotillo.” Leo's appreciation for the beauty of what seems at first to be a barren, unvarying wasteland anticipates his later appreciation for the uprising of individuality that blossoms across Mica High in Stargirl's wake. Leo's ability to notice the beauty of nature makes him more open to Stargirl's beauty than many of his peers: “each night in bed I thought of [Stargirl] as the moon came through my window. I could have lowered my shade to make it darker and easier to sleep, but I never did. In that moonlit hour, I acquired a sense of the otherness of things.” Leo's sensitivity to the “otherness of things”—something he's cultivated through his

enjoyment of the unshaded moonlight and the variety of the desert—prepares him to appreciate Stargirl's “otherness,” too. Stargirl sees even more than Leo does. She is especially aware of those who aren't usually seen by others, and she transforms both her own and others' lives accordingly. After Stargirl becomes a cheerleader, she cheers for anyone and everything—even an unpopular kid throwing away a piece of litter. The unprecedented experience of being noticed in this way is both mortifying and thrilling: “People who never even saw you before are smiling at you and slapping your back and pumping your hand, and suddenly it seems like the whole world is calling your name, and you're feeling so good you pretty much just float on home from school.” Such recognition has both personal and broader social repercussions. For example, within the first few months of Stargirl's arrival at Mica High, her kindness to those who are typically ignored transforms the whole environment there: “It was wonderful to see [...] We were awash in tiny attentions. [...] For years the strangers among us had passed sullenly in the hallways; now we looked, we nodded, we smiled. [...] We discovered the color of each other's eyes.” People who've barely looked at each other now notice and acknowledge one another's presence. The joy of being recognized inspires kids to recognize others in turn, leading to a kinder, mutually supportive environment that contrasts sharply with the atomized, clique-driven, and lonely world it was before.

Stargirl's ability to “see” extends to her awareness of the broader community. She regularly hunts through the “fillers” in the newspaper and monitors the 41 bulletin boards in town for clues to things others would overlook: “A filler doesn't need to be ‘news.’ It doesn't need to be important. It doesn't even need to be read. All it's asked to do is take up space. [...] It might mention that so-and-so's cat is missing. Or that so-and-so has a collection of antique marbles. ‘I search through fillers like a prospector digging for gold,’ she said.” Stargirl notices the people and events that are conventionally thought to “take up space,” and she sees them differently—as worthy of love, attention, and celebration.

In contrast, *not* being seen is socially devastating and can even become a self-fulfilling prophecy. At first, Stargirl seems oblivious when she's booed or ridiculed for things like cheering for Mica High's basketball opponents: “Then came the boos. She didn't seem to notice. *She did not seem to notice.* Of all the unusual features of Stargirl, this struck me as the most remarkable.” Stargirl is so focused on seeing the happiness and pain of others that she's unaware when the hostile gaze of her peers is directed at her. Eventually, though, Leo—who's much more attuned to Mica High's social order—points out to Stargirl that she's being shunned (intentionally *not* seen) by the student body. Though this doesn't deter her from continuing to show kindness to others and even winning the state oratory contest with a characteristically quirky speech, she is heartbroken

when her peers virtually ignore her historic victory, realizing once and for all that she's not accepted by them. She disappears from Mica High not too long after—the shunning becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. In other words, Stargirl's peers treat her like she's invisible, so she takes that cue to slip out of sight for real.

As his romance with Stargirl blossoms, Leo marvels that Stargirl “was bendable light: she shone around every corner of my day. [...] She saw things. I had not known there was so much to see. She was forever tugging my arm and saying, ‘Look!’” Stargirl isn't just an observer of her world, but the “light” by which other people see things. This is her biggest legacy in the book: a light that lingers even after she has disappeared from the story herself.



FRIENDSHIP, LOVE, AND SOCIAL PRESSURE

Much of the drama in *Stargirl* can be traced through Leo's friendship and romance with Stargirl. Leo himself is a somewhat shy, retiring young man who prefers to stay in the background. He's simultaneously drawn to Stargirl's unusual beauty and yet repelled by the social rejection that comes of associating with her at Mica High. Although Leo is Stargirl's boyfriend for a while, their overall relationship is fairly representative of the reaction of most of Stargirl's peers at Mica High. By following their relationship through puzzlement to infatuation to final rejection, Spinelli argues that even when genuine friendship develops, the pull of peer pressure is almost impossible for the average young person to overcome.

Leo is drawn to Stargirl, even as he's perplexed and repelled by her strangeness. While his classmates speculate that Stargirl can't be real, Leo can't stop thinking about her: “each night in bed I thought of her as the moon came through my window. [...] In that moonlit hour, I acquired a sense of the otherness of things. I liked the feeling the moonlight gave me, as if it wasn't the opposite of day, but its underside, its private side, when the fabulous purred on my snow-white sheet like some dark cat come in from the desert.” Leo is drawn to Stargirl's “otherness” and even feels a mysterious personal connection to it. Though he tries to stay away, Leo can't resist trying to understand Stargirl and wants to be part of her life. “Meanwhile, I kept my distance. I observed her as if she were a bird in an aviary [...] Then one day after school I followed her. I kept at a safe distance. [...] We trekked all over Mica, past hundreds of grassless stone-and-cactus front yards,” all the way into the **desert** after nightfall. This simultaneous push and pull is similar to Stargirl's power over much of Mica High, although Leo, unlike most people, dares to get close—seeing her as a person, not just an exotic newcomer to speculate about.

Even though Leo genuinely likes Stargirl, however, he's haunted by his desire to be liked by his peers, too. When he finds a

valentine from Stargirl in his notebook, Leo has to summon the courage to thank Stargirl when she openly confronts him in the cafeteria: “I knew I had to turn around and speak to her, and I knew she was going to stand there until I did. This was silly, this was childish, this being terrified of her. What was I afraid of, anyway? [...] I felt heavy, as if I were moving through water, as if I were confronting much more than a tenth-grade girl with an unusual name. [...] I said, ‘Thanks for the card.’ Her smile put the sunflower to shame.” Even though Leo is genuinely dazzled by Stargirl's attentions, he is humiliated by public recognition of their bond. His inner conflict sets the tone for their stormy relationship. Archie Brubaker confronts Leo with the question, “Whose affection do you value more, hers or the others’?” Leo is tormented over this: “I suffered. But whose sake was I suffering for? [...] I became angry. I resented having to choose. I refused to choose. I imagined my life without her and without them, and I didn't like it either way. I pretended it would not always be like this. [...] I pretended she would become more like [everyone else] and they would become more like her[.]” Leo cares for Stargirl, but he also doesn't want to be deprived of the esteem of his peers, who shun him for befriending her. Leo's attempt to have it both ways represents the strong pull of peer approval.

Despite his genuine fondness for Stargirl, Leo ends up giving in to peer pressure. When Stargirl transforms herself into an “average teenager,” Leo's response to her new appearance is telling: “Stargirl had vanished into a sea of [average girls], and I was thrilled. [...] I grabbed her, right there outside the lunchroom in the swarming mob. I didn't care if others were watching. In fact, I hoped they were [...] I had never been so happy and so proud in my life.” Leo no longer cares what other people think about his relationship with Stargirl. In contrast to his embarrassment and avoidance while Stargirl was being herself, he now wants people to see that they're together, and to admire their association. When Leo suggests that Stargirl back off of her aggressively “normal” persona instead of giving it up altogether, she responds to him with disarming compassion: “‘Because we live in a world of *them*, right? You told me that once [...] I know you're not going to ask me to the Ocotillo Ball. It's okay.’ She gave me her smile of infinite kindness and understanding, the smile I had seen her aim at so many other needy souls, and in that moment I hated her.” Stargirl knows Leo won't ask her to the school dance because, at the end of the day, he's too conventional to be at peace with her strangeness. Leo hates that she sees him as an object of care just like the many ordinary folks she's helped in Mica—and he also hates that she's right about him.

Leo's conflicted responses to Stargirl are one of the most frustrating aspects of the novel. Because he's an outsider in Mica himself and a sensitive, good-hearted kid, it's hard not to root for him, especially when he becomes one of the few students to give Stargirl a genuine chance. At the same time, his

reluctance to give up his peers' approval is disappointing and undercuts expectations for a happy, romantic ending. Spinelli seems to provoke this discomfort intentionally, suggesting that most people would likely respond to Stargirl much as Leo did. In later years, a mature Leo is regretful, too—he's always haunted by what could have happened with Stargirl if only he'd stood strong.



SYMBOLS

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



THE DESERT

The desert symbolizes individual beauty emerging from conformity, and—related to that—the magic that can be seen in everyday things, when someone knows how to look. For example, Leo describes the Sonoran mud frogs in the desert that suddenly emerge from long months of dormancy after the rains come, comparing the frogs' singing to Mica High students' awakening to friendship and empathy, following Stargirl's lead. When Leo and Stargirl have an unconventional first date in the desert, Leo observes how surprising the desert is to someone who only expects sand and rocks—besides the towering saguaros, there's "porcupiny yucca, the beaver tail and prickly pear and barrel cacti, buckhorn and staghorn and devil's fingers, the tall, sky-reaching tendrils of the ocotillo." Just as the diversity of the desert belies an outsider's expectations, the whole world harbors unsuspected beauties, which become even more noticeable to Leo after the nonconformist Stargirl teaches him to open his senses and emotions to them.



QUOTES



Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Knopf edition of *Stargirl* published in 2000.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ Mica Area High School— MAHS— was not exactly a hotbed of nonconformity. There were individual variants here and there, of course, but within pretty narrow limits we all wore the same clothes, talked the same way, ate the same food, listened to the same music. Even our dorks and nerds had a MAHS stamp on them. If we happened to somehow distinguish ourselves, we quickly snapped back into place, like rubber bands.

Kevin was right. It was unthinkable that Stargirl could survive—or at least survive unchanged— among us. But it was also clear that Hillari Kimble was at least half right: this person calling herself Stargirl may or may not have been a faculty plant for school spirit, but whatever she was, she was not real.

Related Characters: Leo Borlock (speaker), Hillari Kimble, Kevin Quinlan, Stargirl/Susan Caraway

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

This quote sums up the reaction of Mica Area High School within a few weeks of the arrival of Stargirl, a formerly-homeschooled 10th grader who stands out from MAHS conformity in every respect. Standing out is not the usual way of things at MAHS. Each student knows his or her place in the Mica High social order and never transgresses those boundaries for long. That's what makes Stargirl so puzzling and impossible to categorize—she remains completely outside the boundaries, and what's more, she's infectiously happy in that position.


Most Mica High students, like popular Hillari Kimble, have never seen someone like Stargirl and therefore argue that she must be a fake. Others, like Kevin, point out that even if she's for real, Stargirl's individuality can't last long in a place like MAHS. Kevin turns out to be more right than he knows at the time. Mica High doesn't have a place for someone who rejects conformity like Stargirl does—yet, in the long run, *she* isn't the one who changes; the other students do, albeit gradually. In this way, Spinelli argues that individuality *does* have a lasting impact, even if those who won't conform tend to suffer in the short term. Also, the students' preoccupation with Stargirl as a "fake" ultimately suggests an insecurity about their own authenticity—they sense that, in her own way, she's more "real" in her self-expression than they are.

☛ And each night in bed I thought of her as the moon came through my window. I could have lowered my shade to make it darker and easier to sleep, but I never did. In that moonlit hour, I acquired a sense of the otherness of things. I liked the feeling the moonlight gave me, as if it wasn't the opposite of day, but its underside, its private side, when the fabulous purred on my snow-white sheet like some dark cat come in from the desert.

It was during one of these nightmoon times that it came to me that Hillari Kimble was wrong. Stargirl was real.

Related Characters: Leo Borlock (speaker), Hillari Kimble, Stargirl/Susan Caraway

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

This quote gives insight into narrator Leo Borlock's feelings about Stargirl and thereby sheds light on his own character as well. As his classmates argue about Stargirl—is she for real? is she fake?—Leo reserves his judgment and watches Stargirl from a distance. As the quote reveals, Leo has an ability to think outside of Mica High social norms, too, even though he's more quiet about it than Stargirl. His sensitivity to the "otherness of things" in the natural world also, apparently, opens him up to the "otherness" of people like Stargirl. He perceives that she isn't wholly alien, but is simply different, her unusual habits offering unexpected perspectives on what's familiar. Besides revealing the higher sensitivity of his character, Leo's moonlit reflections foreshadow his later friendship with Stargirl. His simile of a "dark cat come in from the desert" is also an example of Spinelli's use of the desert as a symbol for monotony being transformed into diverse beauties—something that a person used to conformity, like Leo, must develop sensitive "eyesight" in order to appreciate.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☛ We talked until dark. We said "adiós" to Señor Saguaro. On our way out, Archie said, more to me than to Kevin, I thought: "You'll know her more by your questions than by her answers. Keep looking at her long enough. One day you might see someone you know."

Related Characters: Archie Brubaker, Leo Borlock (speaker), Stargirl/Susan Caraway, Kevin Quinlan

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Archie Brubaker, a retired paleontologist and much-beloved mentor of Mica's kids, represents the voice of reason in *Stargirl*. Interestingly, though, Archie has much more in common with the quirky Stargirl than with the average students of Mica High. Besides his fossil-bedecked house, Archie has a towering, bedraggled cactus, Señor Saguaro, which he expects visitors to address as if it's a person. But the kids are undeterred by this, often seeking out his enigmatic stories and advice. In this case, Leo and Kevin ask for Archie's take on Stargirl—who, it turns out, has received some of her homeschooling lessons from Archie in recent years. Earlier, Archie suggests to the boys that Stargirl is hardly a fake; in fact, she's probably more "real" than they are. Now, he follows up by suggesting that the mystery of Stargirl will reveal more about those around her than about the girl herself. In Archie's eyes, Stargirl is more attuned to a kind of primitive goodness in human nature than most people are. Such goodness both attracts and repels others, revealing what's in their hearts. Archie embodies a similar oddity, but because Stargirl is the boys' peer, her oddness is more unsettling and difficult for them to categorize.


Chapter 9 Quotes

☛ In the Sonoran Desert there are ponds. You could be standing in the middle of one and not know it, because the ponds are usually dry. Nor would you know that inches below your feet, frogs are sleeping, their heartbeats down to once or twice per minute. They lie dormant and waiting, these mud frogs, for without water their lives are incomplete, they are not fully themselves. For many months they sleep like this within the earth. And then the rain comes. And a hundred pairs of eyes pop out of the mud, and at night a hundred voices call across the moonlit water.

It was wonderful to see, wonderful to be in the middle of: we mud frogs awakening all around. We were awash in tiny attentions. Small gestures, words, empathies thought to be extinct came to life.

Related Characters: Leo Borlock (speaker), Stargirl/Susan Caraway

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Using an extended metaphor, this quote sums up the change that comes over Mica High students within the first few months of Stargirl's arrival. Leo is a newcomer to Arizona, and, as such, he is especially attentive to the unexpected beauties of its natural environment. Here, he observes the transformation of the desert landscape when rain brings the dormant mud frogs to life. He compares the awakened, noisily croaking mud frogs to what happens when Mica High students begin finding their voices, expressing themselves, and showing kindness to one another, inspired by Stargirl's example. Just as the rainfall creates the conditions for the mud frogs to thrive, so Stargirl's presence creates an environment in which kindness, creativity, and empathy can flourish. Notably, too, it's not that the students become something altogether new. Rather, like the sleeping mud frogs nudged to life by rain, the students become "fully themselves" as Stargirl helps them reconnect with parts of themselves that aren't extinct after all.

about this is that it's another example of Stargirl's way of seeing and celebrating kids who are usually ignored. She recognizes something good about them and, in so doing, draws others into the celebration, too. It helps create a kinder, more supportive and accepting atmosphere at conformist Mica High. At the same time, Stargirl's cheers have more ambiguous repercussions, too. For one thing, even if a kid like "Eddie" goes home with a smile on his face, it's hard to miss how startling and intrusive Stargirl's behavior could be for a shy underclassman. More broadly, too, her indiscriminate cheering will get her in trouble when she engages in unauthorized cheers that transgress the high school social structure. In other words, Stargirl's obliviousness to social pressures ends up landing her in hot water, even as it spreads good feelings.

☝ Then came the boos. She didn't seem to notice.

She did not seem to notice.

Of all the unusual features of Stargirl, this struck me as the most remarkable. Bad things did not stick to her. Correction: *her* bad things did not stick to her. *Our* bad things stuck very much to her. If we were hurt, if we were unhappy or otherwise victimized by life, she seemed to know about it, and to care, as soon as we did.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝ You never knew when it would happen. Maybe you were a little ninth-grade nobody named Eddie. As you're walking down the hall you see a candy wrapper on the floor. You pick it up and throw it in the nearest trash can— and suddenly there she is in front of you, pumping her arms, her honey hair and freckles flying, swallowing you whole with those enormous eyes, belting out a cheer she's making up on the spot [...] People who never even saw you before are smiling at you and slapping your back and pumping your hand, and suddenly it seems like the whole world is calling your name, and you're feeling so good you pretty much just float on home from school.

Related Characters: Leo Borlock (speaker), Stargirl/Susan Caraway

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

When the Mica High cheerleaders invite Stargirl to join the squad, they unwittingly create a monster, albeit a friendly, well-meaning one. Stargirl takes cheerleading at face value: she wants to cheer for everybody, no matter who's side they're on, and regardless of whether they're a star athlete or a regular kid doing a good deed. The wonderful thing

Related Characters: Leo Borlock (speaker), Stargirl/Susan Caraway

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

As Mica High progresses in the state basketball tournament, Leo watches with trepidation as Stargirl's cheering for the other team edges her closer to crossing a line she won't be able to come back from. Stargirl is so focused on the feelings of others that she doesn't seem to be aware of it when people mock her, like when she's booed at the basketball game. This is just one example of a broader characteristic; she's has a deep, intuitive empathy for other people's joys and sorrows, and so little preoccupation with her own that she hardly seems to feel them. In a world like Mica High—or *any* high school, for that matter—where students are keenly attuned to the fluctuations in their social status, this is downright aberrant behavior. Stargirl seems as if she's a visitor from another culture altogether—or perhaps in touch with buried aspects of human nature to which her peers struggle to relate. This

difference sets Stargirl up for an even worse clash when, soon after this, she shows empathy and concern for an opposing team's injured star.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝☝ A hand reached into the picture and grabbed the mike[.] Becca Rinaldi's angry face appeared on Camera Two. "Why do you cheer for the other team?"

Stargirl seemed to be thinking it over. "I guess because I'm a cheerleader."

"You're not *just* a cheerleader, you dumb cluck"— Becca Rinaldi was snarling into the mike— "you're supposed to be *our* cheerleader. A *Mica* cheerleader." [...]

Stargirl was leaning forward, looking earnestly at Becca Rinaldi, her voice small as a little girl's. "When the other team scores a point and you see how happy it makes all their fans, doesn't it make you happy, too?"

Related Characters: Stargirl/Susan Caraway, Becca Rinaldi (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis


Leo invites Stargirl onto the student TV show he produces with his friend Kevin, who's the host. Typically, *Hot Seat* is an opportunity for students to be in the spotlight, playfully grilled by their peers—it's all in good fun. When Stargirl sits in the hot seat, however, things take a sinister turn. She's been cheering for opposing teams during the state basketball tournament (as well as her own), and her classmates blame her for sabotaging the morale and bringing about Mica's downfall. Here, Becca Rinaldi says what everyone else is thinking, demanding to know why Stargirl does what she does. The thing is, though, that none of Stargirl's peers really care about the answer; they'd rather scapegoat her for the loss than examine their own conformist mindset too closely. Stargirl, meanwhile, is genuinely puzzled by Becca's question, showing just how "other" she is. Her halting, childlike response—unable to conceive of *not* wanting to celebrate others' successes—throws a challenge before her peers, but it's not one they're willing to hear.


Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ To the person who expects every desert to be barren sand dunes, the Sonoran must come as a surprise. Not only are there no dunes, there's no sand. [...]

What you notice are the saguaros. To the newcomer from the East, it's as simple as that. The desert seems to be a brown wasteland of dry, prickly scrub whose only purpose is to serve as a setting for the majestic saguaros. Then, little by little, the plants of the desert begin to identify themselves: the porcupiny yucca, the beaver tail and prickly pear and barrel cacti, buckhorn and staghorn and devil's fingers, the tall, sky-reaching tendrils of the ocotillo.

Related Characters: Leo Borlock (speaker), Stargirl/Susan Caraway

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 87



Explanation and Analysis

This quote is another example of Leo's awareness of the unique beauties of the American desert. He originally moved to Arizona from Pennsylvania, so he tends to notice the vibrancy of the desert more than those who are accustomed to it, or those who simply don't take the time to look. Not only is the desert far from barren, even its characteristic cacti exhibit stunning variety. Leo's observations touch on a few prominent themes in *Stargirl*. For one thing, Leo is more attuned to the virtues of difference than most of his peers (though his desire to conform eventually wins out). This sensitivity allows him to befriend Stargirl when others won't. For another, the vibrancy of the desert symbolizes the burgeoning life at newly liberated Mica High, although as it turns out, the variety seen among the student body defaults all too quickly to conformity. Finally, Leo's attentiveness to nature lays a foundation for an even deeper "seeing" that Stargirl is about to show him—one that transcends even the senses and opens one's heart to the things most people can't or won't see.

Chapter 19 Quotes

“An unusual girl,” he said. “Could see that from the first. And her parents, as ordinary, in a nice way, as could be. How did this girl come to be? I used to ask myself. Sometimes I thought she should be teaching me. She seems to be in touch with something that the rest of us are missing. [...] You know, there’s a place we all inhabit, but we don’t much think about it, we’re scarcely conscious of it, and it lasts for less than a minute a day [...] It’s that time, those few seconds when we’re coming out of sleep but we’re not really awake yet. For those few seconds we’re something more primitive than what we are about to become. We have just slept the sleep of our most distant ancestors, and something of them and their world still clings to us. For those few moments we are unformed, uncivilized. We are not the people we know as ourselves, but creatures more in tune with a tree than a keyboard. We are untitled, unnamed, natural, suspended between was and will be, the tadpole before the frog, the worm before the butterfly. We are, for a few brief moments, anything and everything we could be.”

Related Characters: Archie Brubaker (speaker), Stargirl/Susan Caraway, Leo Borlock

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

When Leo begins dating Stargirl, he quickly finds himself conflicted, torn between his genuine affection for her and his desire to retain his classmates’ approval. He goes to Archie for advice, since Archie has mentored Stargirl and has insights others don’t. Archie’s perspective on Stargirl is marked by his long career as a paleontologist, examining and even befriending old things that still have stories to tell (as his house full of fossils shows). He suggests to Leo that there’s something prehistoric about Stargirl, too. Everyone is connected to this ancestral sort of instinct for intuition and kindness that she has—it’s just fleeting for most people, limited to those first moments of waking. Stargirl somehow lives in those wondrous waking-up moments, and this makes her unintelligibly strange to her peers. Archie suggests that Stargirl is connected to something “unformed, uncivilized” that can teach her more “sophisticated,” socially-advanced peers. While this appears to be true, the novel never explores the converse in much depth—could Stargirl stand to learn from her peers as well? The idea that “primordial” equals “purer” is taken for granted in the story.

Chapter 20 Quotes

She was bendable light: she shone around every corner of my day.

She taught me to revel. She taught me to wonder. She taught me to laugh. My sense of humor had always measured up to everyone else’s; but timid, introverted me, I showed it sparingly: I was a smiler. In her presence I threw back my head and laughed out loud for the first time in my life.

She saw things. I had not known there was so much to see.

She was forever tugging my arm and saying, “Look!”

I would look around, seeing nothing. “Where?”

Related Characters: Stargirl/Susan Caraway, Leo Borlock (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

This passage tenderly captures the dynamic in Leo and Stargirl’s early dating relationship and exemplifies the way that Stargirl brings the best out of other people. Leo is not just seeing Stargirl in a new light; she’s becoming the light in which he sees the rest of the world, too. As he accompanies her on walks around town and even helps her with her anonymous acts of kindness, Leo begins to notice things and people that he would once have passed by without a thought, like ants on a sidewalk or a smiling old man on a bench. He doesn’t just see them, but finds delight in what they represent—bits of humor, beauty, and emotion that are on constant display, if only people learn to see with their hearts as well as their senses. This type of seeing animates Stargirl’s relationships with other people and motivates her indiscriminating kindnesses to them. While sharing Stargirl’s world undeniably draws Leo out of his shell, however, it stops short of canceling his ingrained desire to stay in step with his classmates—showing that peer pressure is nearly intractable, often impossible to escape as long as one remains in a conformist environment like high school.

Chapter 21 Quotes

“On weekends and after dinner, we delivered many potted violets. And CONGRATULATIONS! balloons. And cards of many sentiments. She made her own cards. She wasn’t a great artist. Her people were stick figures. The girls all had triangle skirts and pigtails. You would never mistake one of her cards for a Hallmark, but I have never seen cards more heartfelt. They were meaningful in the way that a schoolchild’s homemade Christmas card is meaningful. She never left her name.”

Related Characters: Leo Borlock (speaker), Stargirl/Susan Caraway

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

One of Stargirl’s trademarks is leaving gifts and encouraging cards for strangers who have something to celebrate or who need a pick-me-up. In this passage Leo gets an inside view of Stargirl’s method. There’s something endearingly childlike both about Stargirl’s sentiments and her expression of them. It’s not about her creativity, artistic talent, or desire for attention. Indeed, there’s nothing particularly unique about her gifts, and they don’t put the spotlight on *her* in any way. Her handmade cards are more like a little kid’s refrigerator art—they’re an unselfconscious expression of love before anything else. This childlike characteristic is both one of the most beautiful and most arresting things about Stargirl. Her peers are drawn to it and even touched by it, but for the most part, they can’t freely participate. Unlike Stargirl, who’s spent most of her life outside of traditional peer structures, her classmates are too much shaped by group assumptions to share in her innocent wonder.

““I love fillers!” she exclaimed.

“What are fillers?” I said.

She explained that fillers are little items that are not considered important enough to be a story or to have a headline. They’re never more than one column wide, never more than an inch or two deep. They are most commonly found at the bottoms of inside pages, where the eye seldom travels. [...] A filler doesn’t need to be “news.” It doesn’t need to be important. It doesn’t even need to be read. All it’s asked to do is take up space. A filler might come from anywhere and be about anything. [...] It might mention that so-and-so’s cat is missing. Or that so-and-so has a collection of antique marbles.

“I search through fillers like a prospector digging for gold,” she said.

Related Characters: Stargirl/Susan Caraway, Leo Borlock (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis



As Leo helps Stargirl deliver gifts and cards, he finally learns some of her secrets. Stargirl finds people to send gifts to by reading the sections of the newspaper that most other people ignore. The “fillers” are bits of news that even editors don’t really care about. They’re just inserted to take up space. Just as Stargirl notices kids at school whom nobody else thinks worthy of notice, she also mines the newspaper for things that are “just there,” finding not uselessness, but inherent value. She sees these bits as not just newsworthy, but as summons to action. For example, the news feature about Leo’s tie collection two years ago—this silly, inconsequential story, overlooked by most, prompted Stargirl to go to the trouble of giving Leo a one-of-a-kind porcupine tie, just because his story resonated with her. This quote sums up Stargirl very well, showing not just her vivid imagination, but her unusual generosity, finding joy and meaning in things—and people—that the average person would dismiss as trivial.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☝☝ I saw. I heard. I understood. I suffered. But whose sake was I suffering for? I kept thinking of Señor Saguaro's question: *Whose affection do you value more, hers or the others'?*

I became angry. I resented having to choose. I refused to choose. I imagined my life without her and without them, and I didn't like it either way. I pretended it would not always be like this. In the magical moonlight of my bed at night, I pretended she would become more like them and they would become more like her, and in the end I would have it all.

Related Characters: Leo Borlock (speaker), Archie Brubaker, Stargirl/Susan Caraway

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

This quote sums up Leo's painful dilemma when he finds both himself and Stargirl shunned by the Mica High student body. Leo realizes that as long as he's associated with Stargirl, he will be rejected, too. After talking with his mentor, Archie, about his predicament, he acknowledges that his situation comes down to a stark choice. He must either be content with Stargirl's affection, or accept the fact that his peers' approval means more to him than hers does. Leo, a sensitive kid, doesn't want it to be this way, so he tries to soften the choice, pretending that Stargirl will become more "normal," and that the other kids will become a little less conventional. As a keen observer of Mica High, though, Leo already knows deep down that this isn't a sustainable compromise. He's just delaying the inevitable choice he'll have to make—one that is, really, a confrontation with his own shortcomings. By using Leo as the narrator, Spinelli invites readers to put themselves in Leo's position and evaluate how *they* would react to Stargirl in this unenviable scenario.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☝☝ Stargirl's face went through a series of expressions, ending with a pout and a sudden sobby outburst: "I'm not connected!" She reached out to me and we hugged on the bench in the courtyard and walked home together.

We continued this conversation for the next couple of days. I explained the ways of people to her. I said you can't cheer for everybody. She said why not? I said a person belongs to a group, you can't belong to everyone. She said why not? I said you can't just barge into the funeral of a perfect stranger. She said why not? I said you just can't. She said why? I said because. I said you have to respect other people's privacy, there's such a thing as not being welcome. I said not everybody likes having somebody with a ukulele sing "Happy Birthday" to them. They don't? she said.

Related Characters: Leo Borlock, Stargirl/Susan Caraway (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

After the student body begins to shun Leo and Stargirl, things come to a breaking point for them as a couple. Leo, realizing how much he desires his classmates' approval, tries to explain to Stargirl why she should care about everyone else's opinions. Stargirl is unsure who "everyone else" is and how to know what "they" think. Leo says that it's instinctive—an intuitive sense of connection where one "just knows" what's expected. Stargirl, distressed, realizes that she's not connected in that way. Ironically, she's *more* connected to her peers in other respects—she's empathetic to them in ways that have gotten obscured in other kids' rush to conform. It's just that her instincts are different from those most other people develop. Her "overdeveloped" empathy is expressed by things like cheering for opponents, showing up at a stranger's funeral, and public serenades on people's birthdays. Her undeveloped social graces make her kind gestures come across as clumsy, baffling, or even offensive to others. Leo thinks that if he just explains things to Stargirl in the right way, perhaps he can still have it both ways. However, it's plainly a clash of instincts that can't be overcome as neatly as that.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☝☝ She looked magnificently, wonderfully, gloriously ordinary. She looked just like a hundred other girls at Mica High. Stargirl had vanished into a sea of *them*, and I was thrilled. She slid a stick of chewing gum into her mouth and chewed away noisily. She winked at me. She reached out and tweaked my cheek the way my grandmother would and said, “What’s up, cutie?” I grabbed her, right there outside the lunchroom in the swarming mob. I didn’t care if others were watching. In fact, I hoped they were. I grabbed her and squeezed her. I had never been so happy and so proud in my life.

Related Characters: Stargirl/Susan Caraway, Leo Borlock (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

A couple days after Leo’s rather patronizing lessons on conformity, Stargirl tries her hand at blending into the crowd. She appears at school wearing jeans and makeup, acting like a conventionally normal teenage girl. In one of Leo’s least sympathetic moments in the whole book, he reacts with total delight to the “new” Stargirl—or, rather, Susan (her birth name). Leo’s unrestrained embrace of a girl who looks “just like a hundred other girls” says a lot about him. His enthusiasm toward Susan is as much about his own desire to disappear “into a sea of *them*” as it is about Stargirl herself. This points to a contradiction in Leo’s personality—he hates drawing attention to himself, but he also genuinely appreciates uniqueness in others. He just doesn’t want Stargirl’s uniqueness to ask too much of him—hence his pride when she vanishes into a more intelligible, socially-acceptable persona. Leo’s uncomfortable reaction provokes the reader to think about what their reactions would be in this scenario—would they truly be more accepting of the real Stargirl?

Chapter 27 Quotes

☝☝ Susan’s eyes were glistening. “Did moas have a voice?” The teacher thought about it. “I don’t know. I don’t know if anybody knows.”

Susan looked out the window at the passing desert. “I heard a mockingbird back there. And it made me think of something Archie said [...] He said he believes mockingbirds may do more than imitate other birds. I mean, other *living* birds. He thinks they may also imitate the sounds of birds that are no longer around. He thinks the sounds of extinct birds are passed down the years from mockingbird to mockingbird [...] He says when a mockingbird sings, for all we know it’s pitching fossils into the air. He says who knows what songs of ancient creatures we may be hearing out there.”

Related Characters: Leo Borlock, Mr. McShane, Stargirl/Susan Caraway (speaker), Archie Brubaker

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

On the way to the state oratorical finals, Stargirl asks Mr. McShane to stop the car so she can revel in the desert’s springtime beauty. This is a delightful interlude of the “old” Stargirl, even though she’s still presenting herself as Susan. The desert is perhaps Stargirl’s most natural abode—the place where she’s in touch with her own basic nature—so the interlude is consistent with her personality. It also reassures readers that the “real” Stargirl hasn’t been truly effaced. More immediately, however, Stargirl hears an unusual mockingbird call and speculates that she’s hearing a prehistoric echo—the call of an extinct bird. Besides an episode of characteristic whimsy, this scene also reinforces Archie’s theory that Stargirl is really a blast from the past—a remnant of a more ancient, less socially-developed side of human nature. Stargirl’s speeches at the oratory contest, then, are like the call of the extinct moa—a remnant of a primordial song that’s survived against the odds.

Chapter 29 Quotes

☞☞ We swung around back to the parking lot and— yes— there was a car, and another car. And people, three of them, shading their eyes in the sun, watching us. Two of them were teachers. The other was a student, Dori Dilson. She stood apart from the teachers, alone in the black shimmering sea of asphalt. As we approached, she held up a sign, a huge cardboard sign bigger than a basketball backboard. She set the sign on edge and propped it up, erasing herself. The red painted letters said:

WAY TO GO,
SUSAN
WE'RE PROUD OF
YOU

The car stopped in front of it. All that was left to see of Dori Dilson were two sets of fingers holding the sides of the sign. We were close enough now to see that the sign was trembling, and I knew that behind it Dori was crying. There was no confetti, no kazoo. Nothing cheered, not even a mockingbird.

Related Characters: Leo Borlock (speaker), Dori Dilson, Stargirl/Susan Caraway

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

Ever since Stargirl won the school oratory contest, she has been dreaming of winning the statewide title and being welcomed home by an adoring crowd. The first part of her dream comes true easily, but as her homecoming becomes imminent, she and Leo become increasingly nervous about what kind of reception she'll receive. Indeed, it couldn't be more opposite the scenario Stargirl had pictured—there's no jubilant crowd, just a couple of teachers and Dori Dilson, Stargirl's faithful friend. This devastating scene of invisibility—perhaps best summed up by Dori's hidden tears—symbolizes the totality of Mica High's rejection of Stargirl. They're still so angry about her "betrayal" during the basketball tournament that even when she represents the school with her own triumphant victory, they don't want to associate themselves with her. This event decisively bursts Stargirl's bubble. She realizes that trying to conform as "Susan" won't help her fit in; even more, she realizes she's fighting a losing battle, and that no matter what she does, she will never feel fully "connected" to her peers in the way Leo thinks she should be. Soon after this, Susan reverts to Stargirl and is happy once again. This also means that she and Leo must break up.

Chapter 30 Quotes

☞☞ "Don't you think maybe you should back off a little?" I said. "Don't come on so strong?"

She smiled at me. She reached out and brushed the tip of my nose with her fingertip. "Because we live in a world of *them*, right? You told me that once."

We stared at each other. She kissed me on the cheek and walked away. She turned and said, "I know you're not going to ask me to the Ocotillo Ball. It's okay." She gave me her smile of infinite kindness and understanding, the smile I had seen her aim at so many other needy souls, and in that moment I hated her.

Related Characters: Stargirl/Susan Caraway, Leo Borlock (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after Stargirl's oratory victory, she returns to Mica High in a characteristic Stargirl outfit again, ukulele and pet rat in tow. Leo, so thrilled by the appearance of "Susan," feels rebuffed by this. He tries to reason with Stargirl, suggesting once again that she try to meet everyone in the middle—couldn't she be just a little less "Stargirl"? What he's really asking is for Stargirl to make things easier for him by being less authentic. While it's one of Leo's lower moments, it's one of Stargirl's most shining ones. She forgives Leo for his weakness and presumption, and she walks away from him rather than forcing him to break up with her. Leo "hates" Stargirl because, in this moment, he knows he's classified as one of "them"—from whom he'd tried so hard to differentiate himself—and thereby makes himself an object of Stargirl's compassion. His feeling of hatred doesn't last, of course, but things will never be the same between him and Stargirl. He's also left coming to terms with the fact that he's truly angry at himself.

Chapter 31 Quotes

☝☝ Shortly after, as the Serenaders gratefully played “Stardust,” Hillari Kimble walked up to Stargirl and said, “You ruin everything.” And she slapped her.

The crowd grew instantly still. The two girls stood facing each other for a long minute. Those nearby saw in Hillari’s shoulders and eyes a flinching: she was waiting to be struck in reply. And in fact, when Stargirl finally moved, Hillari winced and shut her eyes. But it was lips that touched her, not the palm of a hand. Stargirl kissed her gently on the cheek. She was gone by the time Hillari opened her eyes.

Related Characters: Hillari Kimble, Leo Borlock (speaker), Stargirl/Susan Caraway

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

The end-of-year Ocotillo Ball is the scene for a final confrontation of sorts between Stargirl and her peers. On one level, it’s a resounding triumph. Stargirl presents such a compelling, joyous image at the ball that people finally flock to her, and she leads 200 classmates into a bunny hop across the desert. People’s resistance to Stargirl has broken down, and the event is fondly remembered for years. The exception is Hillari Kimble, who’s hated Stargirl from the beginning. It’s not just that Stargirl is weird—she represents a fundamental attack on Hillari’s preeminence in the school. Seeing the other kids following Stargirl (not to mention in such an unconventional way) is the last straw for her. When she hits Stargirl, she expects to be treated in kind. But Stargirl has never operated by the instincts of those around her, and she shows great tenderness instead. It’s never revealed whether this has a long term effect on Hillari, but the impact is felt by the rest of the school long after.

More Than Stars Quotes

☝☝ The high school has a new club called the Sunflowers. To join, you have to sign an agreement promising to do “one nice thing per day for someone other than myself.”

Today’s Electron marching band is probably the only one in Arizona with a ukulele.

On the basketball court, the Electrons have never come close to the success they enjoyed when I was a junior. But something from that season has resurfaced in recent years that baffles fans from other schools. At every game, when the opposing team scores its first basket, a small group of Electrons fans jumps to its feet and cheers.

Related Characters: Leo Borlock (speaker), Stargirl/Susan Caraway

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

Fifteen years after Leo fell in love with Stargirl, he reflects on the changes that have taken place at Mica High since that time. Many of Stargirl’s quirkiest “innovations” live on there, almost like the cry of a long-forgotten prehistoric bird. There are clubs devoted to good deeds, unconventional musicians, and even factions who “cheer for everybody.” In one way or another, all these activities are devoted to celebrating others—the thing Stargirl excelled at. Their survival suggests that, as Spinelli has argued throughout the book, unconventionality doesn’t go unrewarded; it’s just that its effects are often felt long after the fact. It also suggests that everyone has it within them to do Stargirl-like kindnesses. Leo’s concluding reflections have a bit of a fairy-tale resonance, adding to the sense that Stargirl disappeared from Mica High as improbably as she twirled into it. But the concrete acts of kindness are proof, despite people’s initial doubts about her, that Stargirl was indeed “real.” For Leo’s part, there will always be regret—he had the chance to know and love Stargirl like nobody else, and he blew it because of his ambivalence about her individuality. But the book ends on a hopeful note: Leo receives another porcupine tie, showing that Stargirl is still present in his life, too.



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.

PORCUPINE NECKTIE

When Leo Borlock was little, he admired his uncle Pete's porcupine necktie. When Leo was 12, his family moved from Pennsylvania to Mica, Arizona. When Uncle Pete said goodbye, he gave Leo the necktie. Leo loved it so much that he decided to start a collection of porcupine neckties. Two years later, however, he still hadn't found another.

From the first introduction of Leo, there is a whiff of individuality about him: a porcupine necktie, much less a collection of them, is rather unconventional. This detail suggests that Leo has an eye for the unusual. Likewise, his newcomer status to Mica will give him a broader perspective on things there.



On Leo's 14th birthday, the local newspaper ran a small feature about him. The article mentioned that Leo collects porcupine neckties as a hobby. A few days later, Leo comes home from school and finds a wrapped gift in front of his house. Its tag says, "Happy Birthday!", and it contains a unique porcupine necktie. There is no indication of the package's sender. Leo asks around and concludes that the origin of the gift is simply a mystery: "it did not occur to me that I was being watched. We were all being watched."

Someone else sees and appreciates Leo's eye for the unusual, though it's not yet apparent who that will be. But "being watched" introduces the theme of being and visibility in the novel. Right now, it has an ambiguous overtone—is the "watcher" benevolent or sinister?



CHAPTER 1

On the first day of 11th grade, Leo's friend Kevin approaches him, grinning. "Did you see her?" he asks. Leo doesn't know who Kevin is talking about. As the day goes on, he hears many students whispering about a mysterious "her," and he wonders who the new student might be. Finally, in Earth Sciences class, Leo hears a name: Stargirl Caraway. At lunch, Stargirl herself is unmistakable: she wears a long, old-fashioned, ruffled dress, and she carries a ukulele on her back. She also carries a canvas bag with a sunflower painted on it.

The "watcher" of the previous chapter is juxtaposed with the one who's being noticed by everyone in this chapter. Even before Mica High is described, Stargirl is clearly a disrupter of its norms, judging from people's whispered reactions to her appearance alone.



Stargirl sits alone in the cafeteria while the rest of the students stare and whisper. Stargirl eats her lunch, oblivious to the curious buzz all around her. Kevin explains to Leo that Stargirl is a 10th grader who was homeschooled until recently. He and Kevin gleefully plan to invite Stargirl as a guest on *Hot Seat*, the school's interview show. Kevin is the host, and Leo is the producer/director.

At Mica High, students obviously don't flock to a newcomer, highlighting the prevailing emphasis on conformity. But Stargirl already appears to hold her own and not to require others' validation. Meanwhile, Kevin and Leo see Stargirl as an opportunity for greater visibility for their show (and, thus, for themselves).



Suddenly, to everyone's disbelief, Stargirl stands up and begins walking among the tables, strumming her ukulele and twirling. Leo sees her face for the first time: she's average-looking, with a freckled face, huge eyes, and a notable lack of makeup. She marches out of the cafeteria. As the other students continue to sit there in bewilderment, Kevin and Leo high-five, eager to feature Stargirl on an upcoming episode of *Hot Seat*.

Confirming people's suspicions about her, Stargirl's individuality is on full display, and most of her peers have no idea what to do with such an exhibition of nonconformity. The two boys just think of it as something they can easily harness for their own use.



CHAPTER 2

The next day at school, a girl named Hillari Kimble is sneering. Stargirl can't be real, Hillari is telling everyone: she's just a scam, an actress, or a "nutcase" sent by the administration to stir up school spirit. Leo quietly mocks this idea, but Kevin hopes it's true—after all, they could unmask the hoax on *Hot Seat*. Leo is surprised that Kevin seems to *want* Stargirl to be a fake.

Someone as unusual as Stargirl doesn't fit into anyone's ready-made categories, so some conclude that she simply can't be what she appears. Meanwhile, there's a distinction between Leo and Kevin: Leo is open to the idea that Stargirl is for real, even hoping for that, while Kevin cynically thinks of how exposing Stargirl as a fake could benefit him.



The more Leo sees Stargirl, the more he wonders whether she's for real. On the second day of school, she wears overalls, pigtails, and fake freckles, looking like Heidi or Bo Peep. At lunch, she wanders among the tables and boldly looks people in the face, making Leo uneasy. At last she stops in front of a chubby senior named Alan Ferko, singing "Happy Birthday" while strumming the ukulele. Alan looks embarrassed. As Stargirl leaves the cafeteria, Leo sees Hillari pointing at her and saying something he can't hear.

Stargirl makes a concerted effort to see people, and not only that, to communicate to them that they are seen—something that's so unusual as to embarrass onlookers, as well as the object of Stargirl's well-intentioned song. It's a disruption of a high school culture in which who is or isn't seen determines social order.



Kevin tells Leo that Stargirl had better be fake—if not, how long is she going to last at Mica High? Leo wonders the same. Mica High is "not exactly a hotbed of nonconformity." If people distinguish themselves in any way, they "quickly [snap] back into place, like rubber bands." If Stargirl is real, she can't survive for long in an environment like this.

Mica High is not a place that encourages people to diverge from the norm. If they do, Kevin's remarks imply, they will pay for their nonconformity in one way or another.



Stargirl keeps showing up at school in unusual outfits: a 1920s flapper dress, a kimono, a line of ladybug and butterfly pins crawling up her stockings. She frequently serenades classmates with "Happy Birthday" in the lunchroom. She even greets strangers in the hallways—something a lowly 10th grader doesn't normally do. Stargirl carries her pet rat to school every day. She dances in the rain during gym class. Leo finds Stargirl impossible to summarize and observes that "her ways knocked us off balance."

Stargirl remains oblivious to what's expected of her at Mica High as a conventional high school girl and as a sophomore. Her obliviousness, as much as her specific quirky behaviors, unsettles onlookers, who don't know how to classify her within the school's social structure, and perhaps question their own position as a result.



Yet Leo can't get Stargirl off his mind. At night, he likes to let the moonlight stream into his bedroom—it gives him “a sense of the otherness of things.” On one of these nights, Leo decides that Hillari Kimble is wrong: Stargirl is for real.

Leo stands apart from his classmates, but in a more quiet, restrained way than Stargirl does. His sensitivity to the world around him allows him to be open to the possibility of Stargirl's genuineness. He lacks his peers' defense mechanism of cynicism.



CHAPTER 3

Kevin and Leo start fighting. Kevin wants Leo to recruit Stargirl for *Hot Seat*. Leo, unsure, keeps hesitating. Kevin is furious. He and Leo don't typically disagree, especially when it comes to *Hot Seat*, the show they invented and together convinced the faculty to let them run. Leo isn't sure why he feels this way—it's just a vague feeling that Stargirl should be left alone.

Leo's sensitivity to Stargirl leads him to feel protective of her. He senses that Kevin's interest in Stargirl is more exploitative, more in line with the grain of Mica High's culture. Leo himself feels conflicted about catering to that culture, especially at the expense of someone he instinctively likes.



Meanwhile, rumors run wild about Stargirl. People move on from Hillari's claim that Stargirl is fake. Instead, they imagine that she's “homeschooling gone amok,” or an alien, or a ghost town resident. She continues to baffle, placing a tablecloth and a wilting daisy on her desk during each class. She also provokes curiosity—her laughter, dancing, and looks of astonishment making kids wonder what they're missing.

Stargirl's wide-eyed wonder, expressed in her evident delight over everyday things, starts to shake other kids out of their complacency about themselves and their world. But they still try to find a box to assign her to, suggesting that people naturally search for ways to smoothly categorize one another.



Leo keeps his distance from Stargirl, though he's curious, “[observing] her as if she were a bird in an aviary.” He panics when their paths cross, feeling shaken and “goofy.” But then, one day, he follows Stargirl after school, trailing her all over Mica. He watches as she leaves something in a mailbox and then peeks inside to find a handmade “Congratulations” card. Eventually he follows her out of town and into the **desert** sunset. He watches her playing and singing into the sunset, resists the urge to call after her, and eventually runs back to the highway.

Leo still just watches Stargirl, seeing her as something remote and outside of himself that he wants to study. At the same time, he's also personally drawn to her and the mystery she represents. The desert will come to symbolize a place where the mundane becomes beautiful. Stargirl is at home in such a world; Leo isn't yet ready to follow her there.



CHAPTER 4

Hillari Kimble is famous for her big mouth, an infamous hoax, and her boyfriend, Wayne Parr. The hoax took place in Hillari's sophomore year: she'd tried out for cheerleading, made the team, then turned down the position, claiming she'd just wanted to prove she could make it. Her boyfriend, Wayne, is taciturn, attractive, and otherwise undistinguished. Yet he's the “grand marshal of our daily parade.” Without anyone's quite realizing it, Wayne Parr has become the leader of Mica High, though Leo isn't sure if he “[created] us, or was [...] simply a reflection of us.”

Hillari Kimble is a foil for Stargirl: where Stargirl's authenticity shines, Hillari prefers to lead people on with a big fake-out. While Stargirl naturally garners attention because of who she is, Hillari forcefully commands people's attention and devotion, as she does Wayne's. Leo's musings about Wayne reflect his more big-picture perspective on the dynamics at Mica High. He observes that conformity is a self-reinforcing phenomenon, with Wayne Parr a prime example.



During sophomore year, Leo had recruited Wayne Parr for *Hot Seat*, though he wasn't sure why. During the show, Kevin had asked Parr who his role model was. Parr smugly replied that it was the magazine *GQ*—he wanted to be its cover model someday. He gave a stereotypical model's pose for the camera. Leo then assumed that Wayne Parr would always be Mica High's "grand marshal": "How could I have known that he would soon be challenged by a freckle-nosed homeschooler?"

Leo's instincts about people are apparent in his decision to put Parr in the "hot seat." He senses that Parr's desire to literally be just a handsome face on a magazine—and the approval this wins for him—says a lot about Mica High. He assumes that his peers will always try to conform themselves to the mold created by Parr, because it doesn't hold them to a particularly high standard.



CHAPTER 5

One Friday night, Leo receives a frantic phone call from Kevin at the football game. Leo jumps in the family truck and races to the stadium, where Kevin pulls him into the stands. Leo sees the small, normally dull marching band standing on the field. But tonight, something's different: Stargirl is dancing around them in her bare feet. She twirls and pantomimes her way around the field. When the band files off the field, she stays. She even joins in the football players' warmup exercises. When the referee orders her off the field, she grabs the football instead, punting it over the opponents' bench and running off the field with the officials in pursuit. Everyone cheers madly, prompting the cheerleaders to perform with renewed enthusiasm—they've never heard such a crowd reaction before.

Stargirl erupts into a conventional high school scene, completely overturning expectations for a plodding, predictable game night. There's no particular rhyme or reason to Stargirl's behavior or the reaction it gets, except that it's lively, cheerful, and unexpected. That in itself spurs renewed spirit and enthusiasm in other people.



At the next home game, the normally sparse crowd has grown to more than 1,000 people (everyone except for Wayne Parr and Hillari Kimble). Everyone waits expectantly until halftime. But Stargirl never shows up.

Most people want to get in on the fun, except for the former student leaders, Wayne and Hillari—foreshadowing the coming conflict. However, true to herself, Stargirl is unpredictable, not performing to people's whims.



On Monday, at lunch, everyone is shocked to see Mallory Stillwell, the captain of the cheerleaders, sitting and talking with Stargirl. Soon the news circulates that Stargirl has been invited to become a cheerleader. After school, cheer practice draws a crowd, as everyone watches Stargirl learn and practice cheers in her pioneer dress. Even after she dons the green and white cheerleader uniform, she doesn't really seem like one of the team.

*Typical boundaries are being transgressed at Mica High. Presumably, a cheerleader would normally never talk to someone like Stargirl, but—rather like Kevin with *Hot Seat*—Mallory senses that Stargirl can serve the cheerleaders' interests. It's already clear, however, that Stargirl will be an unconventional fit, at best.*



By this time, Mica High students have decided that they like having Stargirl around. She leaves Halloween treats on everyone's homeroom desks. She always does something unexpected and gives kids something interesting to talk about. At the same time, she's different. She's "unknown territory," and it feels "unsafe" to draw too close. And everyone is waiting to see what will happen on Hillari Kimble's birthday.

Stargirl delights the kids of Mica High. But, so far, that's because she doesn't pose too much of a challenge. She does nice things, and she's interesting. As long as people don't draw too close to her differentness—and as long as people like Hillari can remain aloof from it—she's more like an entertaining mascot than a person.



CHAPTER 6

The day before Hillari's birthday, Hillari approaches Stargirl at lunch. Everyone stops eating and stares as Hillari hovers behind Stargirl's chair. At last Hillari introduces herself. Eventually Hillari points at Stargirl's face and warns her, "Don't try singing to me." Stargirl quietly replies, "I won't sing to you."

The next day, nobody can get to lunch fast enough. At first, both Hillari and Stargirl eat their lunches in silence, while the entire cafeteria watches, afraid to miss a thing. Eventually, Stargirl finishes her lunch, picks up her ukulele, and begins strolling and strumming. But she walks right past Hillari's table. Instead, she walks up to the table where Leo and Kevin are sitting. She sings "Happy Birthday" with Hillari's name—but she sings it to Leo. Leo blushes, unsure of where to look.

After the song is finished, Hillari stomps out of the lunchroom while everyone else breaks into applause. Kevin asks Stargirl, "Why him?" She grins at Leo, tugs his earlobe, and says, "he's cute." Leo feels "nine ways at once" and keeps thinking of Stargirl's touch on his ear. Kevin says he thinks it's time to go see Archie.

Hillari openly confronts Stargirl, and it's more than a desire to avoid an embarrassing serenade—it's a warning that Stargirl needs to stay away from Hillari's position atop the social order.



Stargirl continues to show that she won't be influenced by other people's expectations of her. It's the first example that, in her rivalry with Hillari, she won't respond to Hillari's aggressive tactics in kind. It's also the first hint that she's attracted to Leo and sees something different about him.



Stargirl is unabashed in her expression of her feelings, no matter who's watching. Leo, more reserved, feels conflicted, a state of mind that will continue throughout his relationship with Stargirl.



CHAPTER 7

Archie Brubaker lives in a house filled with bones—he's a paleontologist. He's collected many of the bones for himself, all over the American West. He used to be a college professor, but he moved to Arizona after his wife, Ada Mae, died. He chose his house, in part, because of the towering cactus, "[Señor Saguaro](#)," that stands in the backyard. Señor Saguaro is almost dead, and elf owls nest inside him. Archie talks to the cactus like a person.

Archie befriends the students of Mica. On Saturday mornings, kids of all ages flock to hear Archie talk about "everything from toothpaste to tapeworms," and he calls the group the Loyal Order of the Stone Bone, giving each kid a homemade fossil necklace. He insists that they call him Archie.

That day, Kevin and Leo visit Archie. They find him rocking on the back porch, reading in the sunset. The boys greet him, salute Señor Saguaro, and take seats in the adjacent rockers. They explain that they've come because of Stargirl and are surprised to learn that Archie already knows her. Smoking his pipe, Archie admits that Stargirl is indeed "different." Kevin says she's like "another species." Archie counters that, actually, Stargirl is "who we really are."

Archie sounds rather like Stargirl in his unconventionality and whimsy. And, like Leo, he's an outsider to Mica. That outsider status, in this case, makes him appealing to the kids—likely because he's completely outside of the Mica High social world.



Again, Archie is an example of strangeness being loved and sought after instead of feared and resisted. He also meets the kids on their level, making them feel valued and accepted.



Because Archie is already established as an unusual character, his association with Stargirl seems fitting. He also seems to understand her more readily than her peers do—to recognize who she is and to see kinship there, rather than something alien.



Archie explains that while Stargirl was being homeschooled, her mother brought her to Archie's one day a week. Kevin asks if Stargirl's behavior is just an act. Archie says no—"if anybody is acting, it's us." She's as real, he says, as Barney—a little rodent fossil sitting on the porch. He adds that Stargirl has changed her name many times over the years—before Stargirl, she's been Pocket Mouse, Mudpie, and Hullygully.

Archie, who's attentive to the origins of things by profession, sees Stargirl's authenticity. He is able to recount her history almost as if he's describing the history of one of his beloved fossils—yet, like the fossils, he doesn't objectify her, but sees her as a friend.



Leo and Kevin ask what Stargirl's parents do. Archie explains that Mrs. Caraway designs costumes for movies, and Stargirl's father, Charles, works at MicaTronics, like most people in town. Stargirl originally came from Minnesota, but Archie calls her *rara avis*, a rare bird. Archie seems approving when Kevin tells him that Leo is reluctant to put Stargirl on *Hot Seat*. In closing, he tells them, "You'll know her more by your questions than by her answers."

Stargirl's strangeness doesn't seem to originate with her parents, which aligns with Archie's view that, in a certain way, she descends from something more primal and rare. He also suggests that Stargirl is a kind of litmus test for her peers. By reacting to Stargirl, they'll ultimately discover more about their own human nature than about her.



CHAPTER 8

Around Thanksgiving, things begin to change. By December, Stargirl has become the most popular student at Mica High. Leo can't quite account for the change. Her untiring antics on the football field—joining the other team's cheerleaders, playing her ukulele with the band, and climbing up the goalposts—delight the crowds despite the Electrons' losses. It might also be a backlash against Hillari Kimble, who threatened to drop Cinnamon, Stargirl's rat, down the stairs. Or it could be Dori Dilson, an inconspicuous 9th grader who is the first to sit with Stargirl at lunch.

Mica High students begin to thaw toward Stargirl. They continue to find her nonconformity entertaining and harmless, and accordingly, they disapprove of overt hostility toward her, such as Hillari's cruelty.



Or could it be the students body as a whole? Whatever the reason, Stargirl is no longer considered dangerous, but is sought-after in the hallways of Mica High. Both boys and girls, shy and popular, athletic and nerdy kids are drawn to her. Kids start playing the ukulele, dancing in the rain, and buying pet rats.

Ironically, kids show appreciation for Stargirl's individuality by conforming to some of her quirky behaviors—suggesting that, despite their newfound warmth and no longer holding her at arm's length, the students of Mica High still don't quite understand what Stargirl is all about.



In December, Stargirl enters the League of Women Voters' oratorical competition. She gives a spirited performance called "Elf Owl, Call Me by My First Name" to raucous applause. While the judges confer, the students watch a short film about last year's state final, which concludes with the winner being mobbed by cheerleaders, a band, and confetti when he arrives home. Then, Stargirl is announced as the winner, advancing to the district competition in Red Rock. With their cheers, and with all the attention the Mica High students give Stargirl, they "also gave something to ourselves."

The video of last year's winner—though she doesn't even realize it yet—frames Stargirl's expectations for the outcome of the oratorical competition, something that will come back to bite her in a heartbreaking way. For now, though, Stargirl and her classmates simply enjoy one another. Just opening up to someone like Stargirl is its own reward for kids who've complacently aligned with the status quo.



CHAPTER 9

The Sonoran **Desert** is full of ponds, but the ponds are usually dry. Underground, dormant mud frogs are sleeping. They spend much of the year like this. Then, when the rain comes, hundreds of frogs emerge. Leo likens the Mica High students to mud frogs emerging from dormancy. Instead of sullen strangers, the kids now look one another in the eye. They celebrate each other's triumphs and feel one another's pain.

Leo sums up this "awakening" as "a rebellion *for* rather than against." Kids submit Letters to the Editor in the school paper. Over 100 audition for the musical. New clubs start. People come to school with boldly colored nails and hair. Leo doesn't outwardly rebel, but he likes what he sees. He observes that as students celebrate their individuality, a stronger school spirit emerges.

Leo tells Archie one day that the outbreak of individuality is a "miracle." Archie replies that the trouble with miracles is that they don't last long. Leo looks back on that December and January as a "golden age." He couldn't have known that "when the end came, I would be in the middle of it."

Leo, attentive to his relatively new surroundings in Arizona, likens the mud frogs to students who've emerged from their own subterranean sleep. Significantly, they aren't becoming something altogether different—they're becoming what they've always been intended to be, when conditions were right.



The newly "emerged" students seem to become more of who they are, not less: speaking their minds, expressing themselves, and not feeling constrained by what's popularly accepted. This reinforces the point that conformity tends to stifle, but where individuality is encouraged, creativity and expression flourish.



Archie, with his older and wiser perspective, correctly predicts that Mica High's flowering is a temporary phenomenon. As with the mud frogs, conditions have to stay just right in order to support emergent life.



CHAPTER 10

Leo changes his mind about inviting Stargirl to be interviewed on *Hot Seat*. He tells Kevin they should go ahead, and later that day, Stargirl agrees. Leo is a little surprised by this. Later, looking back, he will realize that underneath the surface, even Stargirl is more "normal" than he had guessed.

In the school courtyard, there is a roadrunner-shaped slab of plywood, a student bulletin board. On it, someone has taped a "pledge" beginning "I pledge allegiance to United Turtles of America..." with the note, "This is how she says the Pledge of Allegiance." Everybody knows who "she" is. For now, nobody seems too bothered.

A few days later, another story is going around. The grandfather of a senior named Anna Grisdale has just died. At the cemetery, Anna noticed Stargirl was there, too, crying. Stargirl also showed up at the post-funeral lunch at Anna's house. Suddenly, Anna's mother confronted Stargirl, demanding to know who she is and what she's doing there. Stargirl had nothing to say, but she quietly left when Anna's mother showed her the door.

Seeing the way students are now reacting to Stargirl, Leo prematurely supposes that the time is ripe to interview her. Even Stargirl, it seems, is capable of enjoying being the center of attention for her own sake.



The roadrunner bulletin board will feature significantly in the story, as a place where personal things are made visible to the whole community. Some students still seem unsure about Stargirl's self-expression.



The funeral is a good example of Stargirl's naïveté. On one hand, she's kind and empathetic enough to support a grieving classmate. On the other hand, inserting herself in other people's business creates unintended conflict at times—a foreshadow of future events involving Stargirl.



A little boy named Danny Pike breaks his leg and develops a blood clot after crashing his bike. When Danny recovers and is brought home from the hospital, a new bike and “Welcome Home” banner await him outside his house. In the *Mica Times* article about Danny’s homecoming, a beaming Stargirl is visible among the celebrating neighbors. It later transpires that none of the Pikes purchased Danny’s new bike, and the family falls into a squabble over it. The bike winds up in the trash.

This scene also foreshadows later events involving Stargirl’s acts of generosity and their effect on Mica High. Stargirl’s kind gestures can be misinterpreted and even stir up trouble—the opposite of her intent. The problem is not so much with her kind action, but with the social norms she disrupts without realizing it.



CHAPTER 11

Stargirl’s previous social faux pas are relatively harmless, but things change during basketball season. At each home game, Stargirl gives the visiting section its own cheer. She also cheers whenever anyone makes a basket, whether it’s the Electrons or their opponents. The other cheerleaders try to stop her at first—“like trying to calm down a puppy”—but soon Stargirl’s cheers spill over into everyday life. She erupts into spontaneous cheers for, say, an unknown 9th grader who throws away litter. This inevitably draws a clapping, smiling crowd, and though it’s mortifying, the recipient of the cheers can’t help going home with a smile on his face. Everyone enjoys Stargirl’s random celebrations. But then, suddenly, the basketball team starts winning.

Stargirl is a natural cheerleader—at least on a superficial level. She loves to support and encourage others. The problem arises when that well-meaning support crosses invisible boundaries, like opposing sports teams. Stargirl’s cheers—tolerated even when they’re somewhat embarrassing, as with a little-known 9th grader—become problematic when they overstep deeply-felt group loyalties.



By February, the Electrons are undefeated. This is unprecedented. It also has a transforming effect on the student body, who are accustomed to losing. Suddenly, they’re fanatically obsessed with winning. As their love for their team grows, they begin to hate and resent their opponents, wanting not just to simply win, but to humiliate other teams.

Just as Stargirl’s surprising presence has stirred up kindness and individuality at Mica High, another unprecedented event of athletic victory stirs up something just as present, but very different: rivalry and a desire for dominance.



But Stargirl continues to cheer for the opposing teams. She even remains oblivious when her classmates boo this behavior. Such insults seem to slide right off of her. She notices and cares about other people’s pain, but is curiously unaffected by mean-spiritedness aimed her way.

For Stargirl, who’s always been relatively unconnected to group norms, it’s natural to cheer for anyone’s good fortune. That same disconnection, conversely, seems to make her less aware of herself and more attuned to the pain of others.



At an away game, the Electrons are slaughtering their opponent, Red Rock. During the game, Stargirl wanders outside and chats with the bus driver. When asked why she stopped cheering, she explains that she felt bad for the other team. Then the other cheerleaders play a trick on her, leaving her stranded in Red Rock as the Mica High bus drives away. The next day, they tell Stargirl it was a misunderstanding, and she believes them. But the following day is Stargirl’s interview on *The Hot Seat*.

The anger at Stargirl erupts, for the first time, into actual cruelty. As before, Stargirl feels sympathy for the sadness of her opponents, but doesn’t feel insults deeply herself. However, the stage is now set for a more brutal confrontation.



CHAPTER 12

In the *Hot Seat* studio, there are two chairs—one with flames painted on the legs, for the interviewee, and a regular chair for Kevin, the host. Overlooking the stage are two rows of chairs, which the “jury” occupies. The 12 members of the jury are there to ask embarrassing and nosy questions. There are three cameras—one for the stage, one for the jury, and one nicknamed “Chico,” a close-up camera. Leo works in the control room, directing the camera shots, alongside the technical director and faculty advisor, Mr. Robineau.

Though the questions are meant to make the “victim” squirm, the overall atmosphere of *Hot Seat* is good-natured. The shows are filmed after school and broadcast that night on local cable. For this show, the crew is expecting especially high ratings. But Leo secretly wishes that nobody would watch. When they scheduled Stargirl’s appearance, she was still popular. Now that reactions to Stargirl have soured, however, Leo fears that things will turn ugly.

Leo’s foreboding gets stronger as the grim-faced jurors—including Hillari Kimble—enter the studio. Only Stargirl seems to be in a good mood. She even makes Cinnamon the rat wave at Leo through the control room window, to his embarrassment—he didn’t realize Stargirl knew his name. He collects himself and begins calling the shots for the opening of the show. As the cameras roll, Kevin introduces Stargirl and good-naturedly greets Cinnamon, too.

Kevin tells Stargirl that they’ve been eager to put her on the *Hot Seat*. Stargirl turns to the camera, her “wonderstruck” eyes slowly getting wider and wider. Leo realizes that she’s milking the moment, pretending to take “hot seat” literally, so he orders a long shot, capturing Stargirl’s scream as she theatrically leaps from the flame-decorated chair and sticks her rear end directly in the camera, fanning it. Kevin laughs hysterically as Cinnamon the rat gets loose and dashes toward the startled jury. Leo continues frantically calling shots—it’s the best *Hot Seat* footage he’s ever gotten. But, as it turns out, nobody will ever see it.

The Hot Seat show provides a perfect arena for the novel’s theme of visibility and invisibility. Stargirl is intentionally placed front and center, at the mercy of her peers—a setup that reveals more about the lenses through which her peers see her, and how those reflect Mica High in turn, than it does about Stargirl herself.



Leo still feels protective of Stargirl. He appreciates her, and he senses that the Hot Seat won’t show anyone in their best light. Unlike Kevin and the other members of the crew, Leo cares sees beyond superficial ratings to the human feelings involved.



The student jurors appear to be out for blood, but Stargirl is characteristically oblivious. Leo, true to form, is both embarrassed and charmed by her attentions. At first, it seems as if Kevin will steer the interview in a way that’s friendly to Stargirl.



Stargirl shows off her unique sense of comedy, in a typically unexpected move that might have won over many viewers, if it had been allowed to air—she’s not taking herself too seriously. But her timing is all wrong; as she hasn’t yet realized, the jury’s intentions are far from light-hearted.



CHAPTER 13

As Stargirl retrieves Cinnamon, things return to normal on the set of *Hot Seat*. Kevin eagerly begins the interview. He asks Stargirl about her unusual name, then looks flustered when she shrugs about it. A girl in the “jury” demands to know what was wrong with Stargirl’s birth name. Stargirl explains that her original name, Susan, was a good name, and that she simply changes her name when she feels she’s outgrown it—going from Pocket Mouse, to Mudpie, to Hullygully, to Stargirl. One night, while walking in the desert, the name Stargirl “just [...] fell onto” her. Her parents have always gone along with her new names.

Kids continue to hurl hostile questions at Stargirl. One girl, Becca Rinaldi, wants to know why a Mica cheerleader cheers for the other team. Stargirl, “her voice small as a little girl’s,” asks if Becca has never felt happy while seeing the other team’s joy at scoring a point—or does Becca always want to be a winner? She seems genuinely surprised, saying that she roots for *everybody*.

Another girl asks why Stargirl quit homeschooling. Stargirl says that she wanted to make friends. The student says that Stargirl has a funny way of showing it. Leo begins to regret ever having asked Stargirl onto the show. Stargirl, too, is starting to appear rattled. Finally, Hillari Kimble takes the microphone. She says that if Stargirl wants to cheer for other schools, then she should get out of this one.

Other kids grab the microphone, flinging accusations, claiming that Stargirl only behaves unusually for attention, or to get a boyfriend. “Why can’t you be normal? [...] [I]s something wrong with us?” they ask. Leo feels helpless behind the control room glass. Suddenly the faculty advisor, Mr. Robineau, turns off the console, saying, “That’s enough.” *Hot Seat* stops filming, but the students’ shouts continue.

CHAPTER 14

Looking back on this period, Leo finds that his memory blurs, because “head and heart are contrary historians.” Even though Mr. Robineau destroys the tape, everyone knows what happened on *Hot Seat* by the next day. Mica High is filled with tension over the treatment of Stargirl and how Stargirl will react. But the next day, Valentine’s Day, Stargirl leaves candy on her classmates’ desks, just as she’d done for each previous holiday.

Stargirl isn’t the typical interview subject—the things that seem unusual to Kevin, and to viewers in general, are normal to her. But before Kevin has a chance to regain control of the interview, a student runs with Stargirl’s hesitation, using it as a chance to attack her individuality as abnormal.



Stargirl’s “little girl” voice emerges at moments when her lack of social conditioning is most apparent—when she seems closest to a less sophisticated version of human nature that’s baffled by the world around her.



The heart of the students’ objection to Stargirl is apparent: they find her disloyal. To them, her cheering for others can’t simply be an expression of kindness; it’s a failure to conform, and since it threatens school unity, it can’t be allowed.



The students keep trying to reduce Stargirl’s behavior to motives they can easily understand. They take Stargirl’s actions as a personal affront. The pile-on is bitterly personal, as shown by the fact that even though the interview has stopped, the attacks persist.



Leo observes that one’s ability to perceive and remember things accurately is often shaped by the state of one’s heart at the time. His heart is already invested in Stargirl’s status at Mica High.



That night there's another basketball game. The Electrons are undefeated—an unprecedented development—and heading into the playoffs for the Arizona championship. At first, Stargirl only cheers when Mica scores. Then, halfway through the game, opposing Sun Valley's star player, Ron Kovac, trips and breaks his leg. As his coaches and teammates attend him, Stargirl, too, kneels beside him and soothes him. Everyone applauds as Kovac is carried out of the game on a stretcher. Leo wonders if some Mica students are applauding because they're happy to see him go. They win the game easily.

Two nights later, Mica High loses to an even better basketball team. The students are devastated—winning had come to feel like destiny. But Leo notices that, as the other cheerleaders cry and listlessly cheer, Stargirl continues to cheer with “ferocity [...] [flinging] her defiance at our gloom.” Then, suddenly someone throws a ripe tomato in Stargirl's face. There's scattered, bitter laughter as she stands there in bewilderment.

The next morning, Leo finds a card in one of his school notebooks. It's a childish cut-out Valentine declaring, “I LOVE YOU.” It's signed with a crude picture of a star and a stick-figure girl.

Though the exact cause of Kovac's injury is never specified, the preceding scenes of student cruelty suggest that the Victory-hungry Electrons would do almost anything to win a game. Stargirl, however, is once more oblivious to everything except that someone is hurt, and that she wants to help.



Stargirl is the truest cheerleader, in a sense—she's most steadfast in her cheers when things are falling apart. But for some students, her cheering is like salt in a wound, and they lash out, seeing Stargirl as a symbol of everything that's gone wrong.



At the point when Leo's sympathy for Stargirl is at its height, she declares her love for him in a characteristically heartfelt, albeit unsophisticated, way. At a time when she's most rejected and ostracized, she's still thinking of someone else before herself.



CHAPTER 15

At first, Leo tries to convince himself that Stargirl gave everybody a Valentine. At lunch, however, Stargirl—who's been acting uncharacteristically subdued—detours to Leo's table. Leo panics and bolts for the exit, even after Stargirl follows him and says, “Hi, Leo.” He replays her voice in his head all night.

The next day, Leo, Kevin, and about 15 other kids show up at Archie's house for a meeting of the Loyal Order of the Stone Bone. Archie listens as the kids vent their devastation about the basketball loss. He shows them the skull of a prehistoric fox-like creature and says that this guy lost his championship game, too; and not only that, he never showed up again.

Leo's ambivalence about Stargirl is more than just his shyness. While he has genuine feelings for her, he's also uncomfortable being associated with her in public.



Archie is enigmatic as usual, but his words challenge the kids to put the devastation of their loss into a larger perspective—it isn't the end of the world for them. He challenges them to be resilient.



CHAPTER 16

The following Monday, Leo doesn't escape Stargirl. She approaches his lunch table and says, “You're welcome,” in a singsong voice. Leo realizes he must acknowledge Stargirl, though he's terrified. He turns to face her, feeling heavy with dread. He finally says, “Thanks for the card,” and Stargirl's smile “put the sunflower [on her bag] to shame.” Leo is so staggered by the smile that even Kevin's teasing doesn't bother him.

Leo's hesitation to acknowledge Stargirl shows that he's uncomfortable being seen as departing from the larger student body. He's never been comfortable in the spotlight, yet is torn because he's attracted to Stargirl. It will be hard for him to have it both ways.



After school, Leo feels helplessly drawn in Stargirl's direction. As he searches for her, he hears girls gossiping about Stargirl getting thrown off the cheerleading squad. The girls mock Leo as "Starboy," but he's secretly thrilled. He walks to Stargirl's house, nervous—he feels "more comfortable with her as history than as person," wanting to know everything about her. He hangs around outside her surprisingly ordinary-looking house and whispers skyward, "That's where Stargirl Caraway lives. She likes me."

Leo's comment—that he feels more comfortable with Stargirl as an idea than somebody he has to deal with directly—is another example of both Leo's shyness and his reluctance to face the implications of association with her.



Suddenly the door of Stargirl's house opens, and Leo hides behind the car parked in front. A shadow stops a few steps from him. Stargirl asks Leo if he remembers following her that day after school. She asks why he'd turned and gone back. Leo lies that it wasn't because he was afraid. Stargirl says she wouldn't have let him get lost. Just then Cinnamon comes over and noses at Leo. Stargirl teases Leo, saying she'll make Cinnamon bite him if Leo doesn't admit that he thinks she is cute. Leo stays crouched behind the car, letting Cinnamon nuzzle his ear. Finally Stargirl and Cinnamon leave. Leo limps home, stiff from his hiding place, yet wishing he could stay there all night.

Leo's concealment behind the car—though it's a sweet example of his continued shyness—further illustrates his ambivalence about getting into a relationship with Stargirl. It's also another of the many examples of the interplay between visibility and invisibility in the novel—in this case, of desiring both to be seen and to remain hidden.



CHAPTER 17

Two weeks ago, Leo didn't think Stargirl knew his name, but now he's "loopy with love." At school, he avoids lunch, feeling self-conscious about everyone's stares. After school, he and Stargirl find each other, and Stargirl offers to take Leo to an "enchanted place." They walk miles into the **desert**, holding hands through town and not caring who sees. Leo realizes she's taking him to the same place he'd followed her to before. Stargirl teases him that he was stalking her then because he was in love with her.

Again, Leo alternates between avoiding being seen with Stargirl and embracing it. Whereas he'd previously shrunk from joining her in the desert, he's now ready to enter her enchanted realm—the desert being a place where unexpected life and vitality can be found as if by magic.



Leo observes that a newcomer to the Sonoran **Desert** is always surprised by what looks at first like a barren wasteland. First seeing the majestic saguaro cacti, soon one begins to notice many others—everything from "porcupiny yucca" to "the tall, sky-reaching tendrils of the ocotillo" against the backdrop of the lavender Maricopa mountains.

Leo's description of the Sonoran Desert highlights the surprising diversity to be found amidst what looks at first like a barren, unvarying landscape. It's much like his observations of Mica High during its interlude of nonconformity.



As they walk along, Stargirl tells Leo that he's shy, and Leo's awkward responses make her laugh delightfully. When they reach the "enchanted place," Leo doesn't see anything unusual about it. It's an ordinary spot with a scraggly cactus and some tumbleweed. But Stargirl says the scenery she has in mind is different. They sit on the ground. Stargirl says they have to do as close to "nothing" as possible, stilling the commotion produced by their minds and senses. There's no single technique for this. She likes to picture herself being erased by a big pink eraser until she feels like she's one with the landscape. They sit silently together. Leo is distracted and restless, envying Stargirl's ability to comfortably sit still. But after a while, holding Cinnamon, he feels a greater peace and silence than he's ever experienced before. Eventually, he and Stargirl leave the spot, holding hands and not speaking.

Against this unlikely backdrop, Stargirl is beginning to teach Leo how to "see" in the way she does. Already more sensitive and aware than most, Leo is now being initiated into Stargirl's way of seeing the unseen—not just by meditating, as she does here, but in a way that extends to noticing people others don't, and intuiting things about them that most wouldn't know.



CHAPTER 18

In the coming days, it feels like Leo and Stargirl are the only kids in school. At first, it's because Leo is so happily preoccupied with Stargirl, feeling her presence even when he doesn't see her. But one day, as they walk side by side to class, Leo notices that nobody acknowledges or speaks to the two of them.

Before long, the much-feared consequences of dating Stargirl begin to appear: both he and Stargirl are being shunned—treated as if they're invisible—by the rest of Mica High.



At lunch, he asks Kevin about it. Kevin says "they" are not talking to Stargirl. Almost everybody, except her friend Dori Dilson, is giving Stargirl the silent treatment. It started after the basketball playoffs. People blame her for Mica High's loss. Leo protests the injustice of this behavior—it's irrational, and besides, don't Stargirl's kind gestures mean anything?

Leo's indignation reflects the foolishness of Mica High's mob attitude toward Stargirl. The shunning is unfair, yet as even he will come to recognize, there's also a perverse logic to it, at least from an us-and-them point of view.



From then on, Leo starts to feel more paranoid. His sense of being alone with Stargirl is no longer "a cozy, tunnel-of-love sweetness, but a chilling isolation." Stargirl, though, doesn't seem to notice.

From now on, there's an ominous note in Leo's relationship with Stargirl—although Leo cares for Stargirl deeply, he is not immune to others' perceptions of her. Stargirl seems to be untouched by teenage mob behavior, however.



CHAPTER 19

Leo visits Archie, needing to talk to somebody. Archie tells him about the Amish practice of shunning. Leo fills him in on recent events with Stargirl and, feeling conflicted, wonders why Stargirl can't be more like everyone else. They stand gazing at the **desert**, and Archie muses that Stargirl "seems to be in touch with something that the rest of us are missing."

The Amish, a self-isolating Christian sect that rejects technology and other modern entanglements, views shunning as a way of driving an "offender" to eventually realign with the norms of the community. This parallels with Stargirl's experience at Mica High, as students are shunning her in an attempt to make her conform. Leo feels the pressure to give in and wishes Stargirl felt it more, too.



Archie remarks that, in the few moments after we first wake up in the morning, we're in touch with a more "primitive" part of our humanity—less attached to civilization and technology, and more attuned to nature.

Archie, with his interest in prehistory, associates Stargirl with a less advanced time in human history. Everyone has some vestige of this "primitive" nature; Stargirl, he suggests, has more of it than most.



Archie suggests that they consult Señor Saguaro. He addresses the cactus in Spanish, saying the Señor prefers it when dealing with "delicate matters." He explains Leo's situation and explains to Leo that he asked Señor Saguaro for "questions." Señor Saguaro's response is that there's only one question: "whose affection do you value more, hers or the others'?" Later, Leo realizes that he understands this question perfectly, but he doesn't want to answer it.

In a moment of whimsy reminiscent of Stargirl herself, Archie tries to help Leo put his situation in perspective. As he'd earlier remarked that Stargirl would become known more by the other kids' questions than by her answers, he now tries to help Leo focus on the right question—and there's nothing ambiguous about it.



CHAPTER 20

Stargirl wins the district oratorical contest and is now preparing for the state finals in Phoenix in April. She often practices in front of Leo and Cinnamon in the **desert**. She and Leo also take walks, ride bikes, and talk. Leo thinks of Stargirl as "bendable light: she shone around every corner of my day." Stargirl teaches Leo to see things like she does, always tugging his arm and saying, "Look!"

For Leo, Stargirl doesn't just teach him how to see; she is becoming the light by which he sees his world. In this way, Stargirl seems to be having a greater influence on Leo than the rest of his peers are—when the two of them are alone, at least.



Often, the things Stargirl points out are ordinary to Leo's eyes—an old man sitting on a bench, or ants on the sidewalk. Stargirl sees with her heart, too—often moved to tears or laughter. The more Leo sees the specialness of what she sees, the more his own ability to notice things grows. Stargirl says that if it were up to her, things like ants and old men would be headline news, while crime would be on page 10.

Stargirl's secret to "seeing" is that she notices the small or inconspicuous things that other people usually walk past without a second thought. This deeper seeing also bolsters her nonconformity, since it digs past the superficial pressures of the crowd.



Leo also learns about Stargirl's secret missions. One day they leave a potted African violet outside the home of someone who's in the hospital. Leo notices that Stargirl doesn't leave a note with her name. Suddenly, he slams his bike to a stop, remembering the porcupine necktie that was left on his doorstep two years ago. He realizes it was a gift from Stargirl. Stargirl explains that her mother made the tie. It doesn't seem like a big deal to her, and she doesn't seem to desire credit for the gesture.

Now a witness to the other side of Stargirl's gift-giving, Leo realizes that Stargirl was the mysterious "watcher" who sent him the porcupine tie. He was once seen by Stargirl just as she sees the needy strangers she goes out of her way to encourage today.



CHAPTER 21

In the coming weeks, Leo and Stargirl continue delivering potted violets, congratulatory balloons, and handmade cards. The cards are childishly made, yet heartfelt. Leo also finds out some of Stargirl's secret methods. She reads the parts of the newspaper that most people ignore, like the obituaries, birthday announcements, and police blotter. Her favorite are the "fillers"—the insignificant news items that are simply used to take up space. She also listens to hair salon gossip and monitors the dozens of bulletin boards around town.

For example, they find a flyer posted by a person seeking odd jobs. Stargirl explains that it suggests to her that the guy is struggling to make ends meet, so she might send him a "keep your chin up" card. She challenges Leo to what she calls her "card game"—following a person in public for 15 minutes, then guessing what type of card that person might need. They go to the Redstone Mall and follow a woman in her early 40s through several stores for 15 minutes. When time's up, Stargirl makes up a story about the woman, whom she suspects is divorced and lonely. They follow some other mall shoppers, Stargirl dropping spare change for little kids as she goes.

CHAPTER 22

Stargirl invites Leo to her house for dinner. Leo can't help imagining Stargirl's parents as hippies, but both the Caraways, and Stargirl's bedroom décor, are very ordinary-looking. Stargirl explains that she has a secret office where she goes to do her work. She does, however, have a "happy wagon" in her bedroom—a toy wagon filled with pebbles. She adds a pebble when she feels happy and removes one when she's unhappy. There are 20 pebbles in all, and right now, the wagon contains 17—an all-time high. Leo is surprised to hear that, once, the pebbles were down to just three.

At dinner, everyone has meatloaf, except for Stargirl, who's a vegetarian. The Caraways nonchalantly call their daughter "Stargirl" or "Star." After dinner, Leo watches Stargirl take pictures of the five-year-old little boy across the street, Peter Sinkowitz. She's documenting his life with candid photos, which she'll collect in a scrapbook and give to his parents for later, when he's old enough to enjoy it.

The childish style of Stargirl's cards fits in with the theory that she's connected to a less socially developed aspect of humanity than other people—a compassionate part that conformity largely obscures. Her delight in "fillers" also fits with her knack for noticing those who "just take up space" in society—those who don't have much value in others' eyes.



Stargirl's "card game" is very different from typical teen behavior in a mall. It requires a lot of patience and a willingness to see other people as inherently valuable and interesting. At the same time, there's something a bit naïve about it, too—it doesn't seem to occur to Stargirl that her behavior could be seen as intrusive or creepy if she were caught. It's another way in which she's rather childlike in nature.



Stargirl's home life and environment don't provide many clues to the mystery of her personality—her parents seem profoundly "normal." This reinforces Archie's whimsical claim that she somehow originates from elsewhere. The story of Stargirl's happy wagon suggests that there are hidden depths to her. Just because she delights in the magic of ordinary things doesn't mean she's immune to sorrow.



Stargirl is always looking for opportunities to bring delight to other people by making them feel noticed; it's an instinct, not something requiring a special effort from her. It's as if there's not a strict line between her own life and those of others.



As Stargirl explains the Peter Sinkowitz project, Leo gives her a funny look and asks, “Are you running for saint?” Stargirl looks hurt. Leo tries to explain that Stargirl has spent her entire Saturday paying attention to other people and doing kindnesses for them. Stargirl doesn’t see what the big deal is. Suddenly, she starts teasing him flirtatiously, telling him that he just wants her all to himself. Pretty soon they’re kissing right in front of her house; and, Leo says, “that was no saint kissing me.”

Leo has been straddling both worlds lately: he’s gotten an insider view on Stargirl’s way of encountering the world, but he’s also aware of how strange it looks to outsiders (including him). Stargirl is hurt by the implication that she has ulterior motives. However angelic her actions, though, her kiss shows that she’s clearly not otherworldly.



CHAPTER 23

Leo’s favorite times are the weekends he and Stargirl spend alone together, walking in the **desert**, people-watching, and visiting Archie. But on Mondays, the shunning always hits home again. While people don’t ignore Leo as totally as they do Stargirl, they seldom acknowledge him. He realizes “how much I needed the attention of others to confirm my own presence.”

Leo continues to navigate the margins of two overlapping worlds: the happy one he shares with Stargirl and the cold realities of Mica High. He’s learning some unwelcome things about himself, especially his need for the approval of his peers.



Leo knows he’s being ignored because Stargirl has become part of his identity. They’re mean to Stargirl because they think she thinks she’s better than her classmates and is a “phony.” But above all, they’re still angry that she supposedly sabotaged the Electrons by cheering for their opponents and helping the injured Kovac. They hate Stargirl for this.

Stargirl’s classmates exhibit a very different way of thinking about the world—one that’s preoccupied with their own status and an us-and-them mentality. Stargirl is shunned because she violates both these frameworks.



Stargirl remains oblivious to her classmates’ attitudes toward her. Leo is painfully conscious of it, however, and “something small and huddled within me” even agrees with their position. He suffers over it all and keeps remembering Señor Saguaro’s question: whose affection does he value more? He keeps thinking he won’t have to choose; that somehow, he can have it all.

Leo’s predicament shows how “normal” Leo really is. While he’s more sensitive than most kids, he’s much more attuned to the high school mob mentality than Stargirl is, and whether he likes it or not, he values his peers’ opinions.



CHAPTER 24

One day, Leo keeps hearing kids at school whispering about the “roadrunner.” Soon he sees a bedsheet covering the roadrunner bulletin board; on the sheet are the bright red words, “STARGIRL LOVES LEO.” Leo is torn between the desire to revel in the sign and to tear it down in embarrassment. He suddenly understands why students like Hillari Kimble hated being the center of Stargirl’s attention: he feels “spotlighted on a bare stage.”

Leo feels ever more conflicted as he’s ruthlessly thrust into the limelight because of his relationship with Stargirl. Ironically, his empathy leads him to sympathize with Stargirl’s enemies in this case; being the center of attention can be crushing, even if it’s because of someone’s love.



At lunch, Leo sits with Kevin and tries to ignore Stargirl’s gaze. She even blows him a kiss. After school, she finally catches up with him and wants to know what he thought of the sign. He just shrugs. Then, when she teasingly puts Cinnamon on Leo’s shoulder, he sweeps the rat to the ground. Stargirl looks shocked as Leo walks away.

Leo feels caught between competing affections, and he resents it. He loves Stargirl, but her dotting attentions make him a target for bullying. Sooner or later, one side or the other will have to give.



The next day, Kevin is the only student who still talks to Leo. Leo tries not to care, but he desires nothing more than even a nod of acknowledgment from an unpopular classmate. At lunch, when he complains to Kevin, he comes to the realization that he's committed the crime of linking himself to Stargirl, and there's nothing he can do about it.

Leo feels the full weight of the injustice of being ostracized. Just trying to be true to himself is getting him pushed to the margins. The challenge before him is to figure out what it really means to him to be true to himself.



CHAPTER 25

For days, Leo avoids Stargirl. He wants both her and his classmates, but he tries to avoid choosing; he just hides instead. Stargirl keeps pursuing him. One day she finds him in the TV studio and grabs his collar. He follows her out to the courtyard, where she asks if they're breaking up already. Leo explains that he doesn't want to, but that *something* has to change—nobody talks to him or sees him. Stargirl sadly tries to comfort him: "It's no fun not being seen, is it?"

Leo lacks the courage to break the ongoing stalemate until Stargirl forces the issue. Stargirl, who is always looking out for marginalized, unnoticed people, is sympathetic to his feelings—ironic, because she's the cause of the school's ostracism and oblivious to the fact.



Leo asks Stargirl if the shunning bothers her. She says that Leo, Dori, Archie, and her family talk to her. Leo isn't satisfied. He says he wants to understand what makes Stargirl "tick": why doesn't she care what everybody thinks? She doesn't even seem to know what they think. Stargirl seems unsure what he means by "everybody," and asks if *he* cares what they think. Leo says yes; after all, "I'm in touch with everybody. I'm one of them. How could I not know?"

The big difference between Leo and Stargirl finally comes to the forefront. Although Leo is a sympathetic defender of Stargirl, he's also connected to "everybody else" in a way she's never been, and that poses an unavoidable problem. Leo is frustrated that Stargirl, so intuitive in other respects, doesn't share his intuitive sense of what "everybody" thinks.



Stargirl tries to understand why it matters what everybody thinks. Leo says it does—just look at the fact that nobody's talking to them. He tells Stargirl that you can't just "not give a crap what anybody thinks," or cheer for an opposing team, or care about Kovac, if you want your own school to like you.

Just as Stargirl has certain instincts that lie undeveloped in others—a sensitivity to nature and others' emotions, for example—she also lacks instincts that come naturally to other kids and can't easily be explained, like siding with one's own team.



Stargirl doesn't even recognize Kovac's name, or understand why her concern for him was seen as offensive by her classmates. She didn't think about any of that when she ran to help him—she just acted. Leo starts feeling sorry for Stargirl. Speaking gently, he tries to explain that her homeschooled background makes it hard for her to understand such things, but she can't just decide not to care about everyone else's opinions.

The things that Stargirl takes for granted, like helping others, don't even register as significant in her memory. The school, by contrast, can't stop thinking about them. Leo begins to speak rather patronizingly to Stargirl, as she continues to find his perspective incomprehensible.



Speaking in a "little girl" voice, Stargirl asks, "You can't? [...] But how do you keep track of the rest of the world?" Leo says that "you just know. Because you're connected." Stargirl bursts into tears: "I'm not connected!"

Stargirl adopts the childish voice that seems to connect her to her more innocent, less sophisticated self. It's the first time she's really aware of what divides her from her classmates.



Over the next few days, Leo tries to educate Stargirl in “the ways of people”—like why you can’t cheer for everybody, or barge into a stranger’s funeral, or sing “Happy Birthday” to someone in public. This is because people belong to groups, and group loyalty is very strong—instinctive, even. Groups are held together by people acting the same, and Leo thinks that Stargirl should act more like everybody else, too. When Stargirl presses him as to why this is, Leo admits that nobody—*them*, of course, not Leo himself—likes her. And after all, whether they like it or not, “we live in a world of *them*.” Leo tries to make it clear that he doesn’t include himself among “them.” But two days later, Stargirl is gone.

Leo tries to walk a fine line by explaining group dynamics to Stargirl, without aligning himself too sharply with “them.” Ultimately, he can’t quite explain why caring what “they” think is important—any more than Stargirl can make everyone see the world as she does.



CHAPTER 26

Two days later, Leo doesn’t see Stargirl at school until after lunch. But after lunch, he hears a laughing voice asking, “What do you have to do to get somebody’s attention around here?” When he looks, he sees a girl in jeans, sandals, makeup, and hoop earrings. When Leo incredulously asks, “Stargirl?” she replies that her name is Susan.

Ironically, Stargirl/Susan’s newly conventional appearance makes her even less noticeable than she already was as a shunned figure at school, showing the stifling effects of conformity.



Stargirl’s sunflower bag, ukulele, and pet rat are gone. Leo thinks she looks “magnificently, wonderfully, gloriously ordinary”—just like any other girl at Mica High. He even grabs her right in the middle of the crowd of students, not caring who sees. He feels proud.

For the first time, Leo is uncomplicatedly happy to be seen with Stargirl—and his relief shows just how much he wants to fit in with the crowd.



Leo and Stargirl/Susan start holding hands all the time and sitting together at lunch. Leo even “struts,” proud to be associated with her, even saying “Susan” over and over to himself. They start going on conventional dates to the movies and Cinnabon instead of following strangers around and leaving gifts for people. Susan develops a passion for designer clothes and jewelry.

Leo and Stargirl begin to look like a typical high school couple. Leo relishes this. He’s always preferred to be in the background, and having a conventional girlfriend allows him to hide in a different way. “Susan,” meanwhile, studies how to fit in with everyone else.



Susan asks Leo constant questions about how ordinary kids act and think. She goes so far as to invent a fictional “ordinary person” named Evelyn Everybody, asking Leo things like, “Would Evelyn like this? Would Evelyn do that?” She even cuts back on laughing so that she can be a sullen teenager. Yet no matter what Susan does to appear “normal,” it doesn’t work. The rest of the kids still shun her.

Susan tries to master the skill of conformity, but it isn’t enough for her peers. For one thing, it’s just another costume on Susan; it doesn’t go more than skin-deep. And anyway, it doesn’t change what the rest of the school hates about her—her stubborn sympathy for enemies.



Realizing that nobody likes her, Susan cries for herself—something Leo hasn't seen her do before. At her house, he notices that her "happy wagon" contains just two stones. The next day at school, he finds Susan sitting on the courtyard bench, holding a scratching stick and wearing a sign that reads, "TALK TO ME AND I'LL SCRATCH YOUR BACK." She doesn't get any takers, and Leo walks away before he gets too close.

The next day, Susan runs up to Leo with bright eyes, saying it's going to be okay—she knows because she had a vision. She explains that, while sitting in her enchanted place in the **desert**, she saw herself returning from the state oratorical contest in triumph. She wins first place and is greeted by all of Mica High giving her a hero's welcome. "I'm going to be popular!" she joyfully declares. The more Leo listens to Susan practicing her speech, the more he begins to believe her vision, too.

CHAPTER 27

Susan and Leo are riding to the state contest in Phoenix while Mr. McShane, the faculty advisor, drives. Susan is in a flirtatious mood, sitting in the middle seat so she can cuddle with Leo. She admits that she also invited Dori Dilson to come along, but that Dori is angry at her, seeing "Susan" as a betrayal of Stargirl. Leo feels uncomfortable at this, but Susan distracts him with her chatter about the victory parade she predicts tomorrow. She wants Leo to hold her big silver trophy plate so that she doesn't drop it when the crowd rushes her.

Mr. McShane asks Susan if she's heard of counting her chickens before they hatch, and Leo reminds her that a loss is possible, but Susan is confident, saying she'd rather celebrate now. She's only nervous about what it will be like to be "adored by mobs of people." Leo gives up reasoning with her.

Noticing the vibrant spring colors of the surrounding **desert**, Susan begs Mr. McShane to stop the car, and he relents. Susan jumps out of the car and whirls among the various cacti, pretending to wave to an adoring crowd. A little later, she stops and comes back, asking Mr. McShane if he knows of any extinct birds. Mr. McShane knows of a huge bird called a moa that died out in New Zealand. He'd done a report on them as a kid. But he doesn't know if moas could sing.

Though she's so focused on others, Susan does not lack a capacity to feel pain for herself—she's "normal" in certain ways, too. She's even desperate for attention, now that her eyes have been open to the fact that she lacks others' regard.



Susan's vision is modeled on the triumphant homecoming of last year's oratorical champion. She believes that her own victory will somehow reverse her peers' stance on her and win acceptance for herself at last—a shortcut to belonging.



Dori Dilson's reaction to "Susan" shows that at least one of Stargirl's friends sees through her attempts to fit in and isn't buying it. This forces Leo to confront the fact that he doesn't fully accept Stargirl for who she is, but he allows himself to get swept up in Susan's vision before he can think about this too much.



Susan is confident in the accuracy of her own vision, as she's always trusted her view of the world. Her expectation of sudden adoration is irrational, though—it doesn't match up with how "everybody else" works.



The desert is a special realm for Stargirl—she comes to life there, in a way that she doesn't elsewhere. That's what happens here—it's a momentary emergence of Stargirl from the outward trappings of Susan.



Susan explains that she'd just heard a mockingbird in the **desert**, and it made her think of something Archie told her—that maybe mockingbirds don't just imitate living birds, but that perhaps the sounds made by extinct birds have been passed down and preserved by mockingbirds—"pitching fossils into the air" as they sing.

Archie sees Stargirl as kind of a relic from an extinct age. Susan hears something similar in the unusual mockingbird song she hears—given Archie's hypothesis about her, it makes sense that she would instinctively relate to such a sound.



CHAPTER 28

Susan, Leo, and Mr. McShane meet Susan's parents at the hotel in Phoenix, and Susan is bused to the semifinal round at a local high school. To no one's surprise, she makes the cut. Leo is surprised that her speech is new, different from the one he's heard her practice. But it's wonderful, full of images from her life—Archie's fossils, Cinnamon, the old man on a bench, enchanted places—and even a reference to that morning's mockingbird conversation. She titles it "I Might Have Heard a Moa."

Susan's speeches are as unrehearsed as other aspects of her personality—they're just an outward expression of her vibrant, observant inner world. Thus, the speech contest is the one arena in which Susan's strangeness is not only recognized, but amply rewarded.



Later, Leo asks Susan where the speech came from. He suddenly realizes that the speech was extemporized—"all I did was open my mouth and let it out," Susan explains. She has no idea what she's going to say tonight.

Leo realizes that Susan's speeches are given on instinct—just as her self-naming, her delight in the world, and her kindness to others are instinctual parts of her nature.



That night, the contest finals are packed with both students' supporters and the general public. Among the ten contestants onstage, Susan is the only one who looks animated. She chatters away to the stiff, nervous-looking boy beside her. Susan is one of the last to give her speech. When it's her turn, she dashes to the microphone, curtsies, and waves, saying "Hi." The audience doesn't know how to respond. In fact, the crowd murmurs as Susan begins to chatter, thinking the real speech hasn't yet begun. Then they realize they're missing it, and the entire crowd becomes absolutely silent. Her speech ends with a whisper—"Can you hear it?"—and there's no reaction for several seconds. Then the crowd explodes with applause and cheers, as if it were a championship basketball game.

Susan's speech is completely different from everyone else's because it isn't a conventionally prepared speech at all. It's just Stargirl chattering away about the things that are meaningful to her, inviting other people to see what she sees. Here, she touches something in the audience that the high school crowd has been unable or unwilling to see.



CHAPTER 29

Just as she predicted, Susan wins the contest. Everyone mobs her afterward; even strangers at the hotel smile and congratulate her. It's as if she has a "magical power" that draws others' approval. Susan carries her silver trophy plate everywhere. She's even on the front page of the newspaper the next day.

Susan has her first experience of mass outward approval from those around her. For now, it looks as if her vision of an adoring high school mob might end up coming to pass.



As Mr. McShane drives them back to Mica later that day, Susan is chatty at first. But as they draw closer to town, she becomes more and more nervous. She keeps sweating, checking her appearance, and changing her mind about whether to hold her trophy when her classmates hoist her onto their shoulders. Leo feels a mounting dread as they approach the high school which, sure enough, looks empty.

Susan is evidently nervous about the unprecedented situation of unprecedented popularity—or else, like Leo, she’s begun to have her doubts about the vision, too.



When they circle the school, they see two cars and three people—two teachers and Dori Dilson. Dori holds up a big sign, which says, “Way to go, Susan. We’re proud of you.” The sign is shaking as Dori cries.

Susan’s vision is unambiguously proven false: only faithful Dori (despite her earlier anger at Susan) shows up. Dori’s tears capture the tragedy of the school’s rejection of Susan.



CHAPTER 30

Susan looks like she’s in shock. As her parents, who are less outwardly emotional, lead her from the car, she drops her silver plate. Mr. Caraway gives the plate to Leo.

Susan’s parents seem more accustomed to Susan finding herself in situations like this—which is heartbreaking in its own way.



By Monday, Stargirl is back to her old self, with long skirts and hair ribbons. She passes out cookies and plays her ukulele with Cinnamon perched on her shoulder. Dori applauds. Leo is too cowardly, not wanting to signal approval for the return of Stargirl.

Susan’s poor reception after winning the contest is a breaking point: she goes back to Stargirl, and Leo is forced to confront the fact that he really prefers the conventional Susan to the challenging Stargirl.



After school, Leo catches up with Stargirl to ask if she’s given up on being “normal.” Cheerfully, she says yes. Leo asks if Stargirl might just back off a little from her persona and not come on so strong. In reply, she simply smiles and says, “Because we live in a world of *them*, right? You told me that once.”

Stargirl is truly happy being herself, and Leo can never be completely happy with that. He wants a Stargirl who’s comfortable for him—because he really does belong to “them” in a way he can’t, or won’t, escape from.



After a moment of silence, Stargirl kisses Leo’s cheek and starts to walk away. She adds, “I know you’re not going to ask me to the Ocotillo Ball. It’s okay.” She gives Leo a benevolent, sympathetic smile—the same smile he’s seen her bestow on countless “needy souls.” In that moment, Leo feels as if he hates her.

Stargirl’s and Leo’s breakup is especially heartbreaking because their romance looked so much more promising at first. When newly in love, Leo felt the pull of Stargirl’s differentness more strongly than the conformist pull of his peers. Now he’s snapped back, like the rubber band image he used earlier himself—and he hates knowing that about himself.



That night, Kevin calls Leo to ask if he's taking Stargirl to the Ocotillo Ball. Leo crankily hangs up on him. That night, for the first time, he pulls down his bedroom shade instead of relishing the beauty of the moonlight. He dreams of an old man on a bench, saying, "How dare you forgive me."

Leo is pained by reminders of the "otherness" in which he'd previously found such mysterious beauty. He's also tormented by Stargirl's forgiveness of him, knowing he doesn't deserve it, and that it places them among those, like the old man, most in need of Stargirl's kindness.



The next morning, the Mica High roadrunner bears a flyer inviting students to sign up for a new musical group calls the Ukee Dooks. By the end of the day, the sheet is filled with joking entries, like Darth Vader and Wayne Parr, but Dori Dilson signs up in earnest. After school, Kevin tries to joke with Leo about Stargirl acting goofier than ever, but Leo walks out on him. He knows that "permission to [mock Stargirl] must have come from my behavior." He knows Stargirl saw through him in the same way.

Kevin acts as though Leo is uncomplicatedly on the "normal" side of things now. Leo is pained by this implication and resists it, even as he knows that, deep down, that it's true to a large extent. He tried to be on both sides, and it wasn't sustainable.



Leo hears Stargirl mocked everywhere he goes at Mica High. Trying to become a popular girl backfired, and now everyone hates her more than ever—or at least Leo is more attuned to others' hatred.

The hatred of Stargirl shows that even while she was "Susan," her real nature remained evident to the rest of the kids. Now that Leo has been in Stargirl's world, the others' hostility feels sharper, and he feels partly responsible.



Stargirl and Dori Dilson practice ukulele duets and become a very good singing duo. They perform in the school courtyard, where they're stubbornly ignored by everyone. Leo realizes that the shunning is never going to end, and that he should be brave enough to show some public appreciation for Stargirl's individuality. But he doesn't. As the two girls continue to perform for no one, he slips out another door.

The full extent of Leo's cowardice comes through. Stargirl and now Dori are undaunted in their determination to be themselves, while Leo can't even bring himself to applaud them when no one else is watching.



CHAPTER 31

Stargirl's prediction is correct: Leo doesn't ask her to the Ocotillo Ball in late May. He doesn't even go. But Stargirl does. The ball takes place on the Mica Country Club's tennis courts. That night, Leo rides by on his bike, taking in the sea of powder blue (Wayne Parr's color of choice, broadly imitated by the student body). He rides back and forth for hours but never goes in. He just hears about it after the fact.

At first, it looks like the Ocotillo Ball will be a showcase of conformity. It turns out to be a climactic moment for Stargirl and her place in the community. But Leo can't fit in either of those worlds, so he stays outside, physically and symbolically.



Stargirl arrives at the ball in a flower-strewn bicycle sidecar that looks like a parade float. Dori Dilson, wearing a tuxedo and tall hat, pedals the bicycle. There's a hush as Stargirl, wearing a buttercup-yellow gown with a billowing skirt, emerges from the sidecar. She kisses Cinnamon the rat goodbye and waves Dori off.

Even though she doesn't have a date and has no expectation of kindness from anyone at the ball, Stargirl happily exhibits her individuality, undaunted by the conformity she has every reason to expect.



As Stargirl enters the ball, she doesn't shrink from everyone's stares, but smiles openly into people's eyes, "as if they have shared grand and special things." Some look uncomfortable, while others are touched. Stargirl seems so complete in herself that her lack of an escort is almost unnoticed.

Stargirl, as always, makes others feel as if they have a common bond on the basis of their shared humanity—something beyond individuality or conformity. Though some people are made uncomfortable by this, others welcome it.



Stargirl dances all the dances solo, her head thrown back with unrestrained enjoyment. Most people, in fact, notice that they feel more alone than Stargirl appears. Eventually, a boy named Raymond Studemacher dances with Stargirl. He's an ordinary boy who doesn't belong to any clubs or distinguish himself in any apparent way—he lacks "the heft to carry his own name." Yet he walks up to her and asks her to dance. After that dance is over, several other boys start to approach Stargirl.

Raymond's bold dance with Stargirl is another example of Stargirl's knack for drawing the best out of those who might be seen by most as "fillers"—much like the newspaper articles that other people skim past—unworthy of notice for most, but deemed worthy of celebrating by Stargirl.



Suddenly Stargirl walks up to Guy Greco, the bandleader, and says something to him. The band starts playing the bunny hop. Soon Stargirl is leading a long line of dancers across the floor. Almost everybody, except for Hillari Kimble and Wayne Parr, joins in.

The bunny hop is a simple line dance that grew popular, especially among teenagers, in the 1950s. Hillari and Wayne's resistance signals that Stargirl's dance will become an unconventional showdown for Mica High.



Stargirl keeps improvising with funny steps and motions, and her movements are copied down the line of dancers. When the band stops, the group begs them to start over. Before long, the line of about 200 kids wanders off the tennis courts and around the adjacent golf course, and eventually disappears into the night. Those still on the tennis courts wait for the dancers' return, staring off toward the **desert**—everyone except Hillari Kimble, who demands "regular music" so she and Wayne can dance. Guy Greco doesn't comply, however, and the bunny hop plays on.

Stargirl's infectious joy pulls others into her wake, much like it did earlier in the school year before she was shunned. She's once again the "parade leader" of Mica High, reconnecting people with a more fundamental aspect of themselves. Fittingly, the dance wanders into the desert, which has been the site for self-discovery at several points in the story.



No one is sure how long the dancers are gone, but soon they hear whoops coming from the **desert**, and Stargirl appears, hopping in her yellow dress. The group is still dancing precisely on the beat. Those still on the tennis courts start dancing, too, and the two lines meet in a happy collision. But Hillari Kimble walks up to Stargirl, says "you ruin everything," and slaps her.

Interestingly, there's a sort of conformity at work in the dance—they stay on the beat together—even as they rebel against high school "normal." But it's a freeing sort of community, rather than a stifling compliance with the norm. Hillari recognizes Stargirl's triumph as a threat to her reign at Mica High and can't abide it.



At this, the crowd grows quiet. Stargirl and Hillari stare at each other. Hillari cringes as if she's expecting Stargirl to slap her in return. Instead, Stargirl gently kisses Hillari's cheek. Then she gets into Dori Dilson's waiting sidecar and rides off. It's the last time anyone from Mica High ever sees her.

Fittingly, Stargirl's last act as a Mica High student is to show compassion to someone who hates her. This unsettles Hillari, who expects to be treated on her own terms.



CHAPTER 32

That dance happened 15 years ago—15 Valentine’s Days, Leo reflects. He vividly remembers the “sad summer” after Stargirl left. He remembers peering inside her empty house, a For Sale sign out front. He went to see Archie, who tells him that the Caraways moved to Minnesota. Leo said that it all seemed like a dream—was Stargirl even real? Archie assures him that Stargirl was “as real as we get.”

Archie admits that he doesn’t understand Stargirl, either, but that every once in a while, a “star person” comes along who’s “a little more primitive than the rest of us,” more in touch with the primordial “star stuff” that makes up human beings.

Archie tells Leo that Stargirl really liked him. She loved him so much that she even became a “normal” girl for a while, just for him. He tells Leo he doesn’t know how lucky he was. But Archie doesn’t rub it in any further.

The summer before Leo leaves for college, Archie invites him over. He opens his toolshed and reveals Stargirl’s “office”—it’s filled with ribbon, wrapping paper, newspaper clippings, phone books, and other supplies. A Mica map and birthday calendar cover the walls. Peter Sinkowitz’s album is there, waiting until Peter is a little older. Leo opens a filing cabinet filled with hanging folders. He opens the “Borlock” file and finds the article about his necktie collection, as well as photos and lists of his personal likes and dislikes. There are files for everybody at Mica High. Leo is stunned, saying Stargirl was like a spy. “A lovely treason, hm?” jokes Archie.

CHAPTER 33

After college, Leo got a job as a set designer back East. Looking back, he realizes he became a set designer the day Stargirl took him to her enchanted **desert** place. Whenever Leo comes home to Mica, he visits Archie. One day they take a drive together into the desert. They still talk about Stargirl, trying to understand her.

One day Archie has Leo drive him deep into the **desert**. They stop at an outcropping of rock, and Archie gouges a hole in the rock. Leo is surprised to see Archie take out his favorite prehistoric rodent skull, Barney, and bury it in the hole. He also buries a scrap of paper. When Leo asks, Archie says the paper contained one word.

Even as an adult, Leo can’t stop thinking about Stargirl. Her appearance in his life had a fairy-tale quality to it. But Archie maintains that this is because Stargirl is more connected to what’s most “real” about human beings, not because she was less of one.



Archie associates Stargirl with his paleontologist insight that people are composed of star matter. This truth is obscured in most people; in Stargirl, it shines through.



In a way, Stargirl’s conformist phase as Susan was an act of kindness toward Leo, even more than an attempt to gain approval for herself.



Long after she’s left Mica, Stargirl’s secrets are still being revealed. Her attention to others, it turns out, took a great deal of effort, research, and planning. There’s still something a bit raw and unsettling about her methods—while they’re undoubtedly a sign of love, they also require a devoted, single-minded watching of others, in a way that’s not seen as socially acceptable and could easily be misconstrued. Stargirl’s society was never really ready for her.



When Stargirl taught Leo how to see, it had a lifelong impact on him—even preparing the way for his future career, which is dedicated to helping people see the stories of others, as well.



The word on the paper is never revealed. In Archie’s past lectures, Barney symbolized a connection with humans’ primordial selves, so it’s reasonable to guess that the word has something to do with Stargirl, or her legacy.



MORE THAN STARS

Leo doesn't stay in touch with many Mica High kids, though he still talks to Kevin. Kevin stayed in Mica and became an insurance salesman instead of a talk show host. Kevin tells Leo that people still speculate about Stargirl at high school reunions. People always ask each other, "Were you on the bunny hop?" They even tried to recreate the famous dance at a recent reunion, but it wasn't the same.

Nowadays, Mica High has a new club called the Sunflowers, in which members must promise to do "one nice thing per day for someone other than myself." The Electrons' marching band has a ukulele player. There's now a tradition of cheering for an opposing team's first basket at every game. Once, Leo drives past Stargirl's house and sees a grown-up Peter Sinkowitz outside his house. He wonders if Peter is old enough to appreciate the scrapbook yet.

Leo throws himself into his set design work. But sometimes he leaves spare change on the sidewalk and listens for mockingbirds. He reads newspapers cover to cover, including the fillers. He reads of little acts of kindness happening everywhere. Every time, he wonders, "Is she there?"

Leo wonders what Stargirl calls herself nowadays and if he'll ever get another chance with her. Although he's single, he doesn't feel alone—he knows he is being watched. Last month, he received a birthday package in the mail. It contained a porcupine necktie.

Stargirl remains a topic of conversation years after the fact. Outside the social pressures of high school, people feel more free to think about what she meant to them and even enjoy her legacy.



Stargirl's kindness and quirkiness lives on generations after she's left, as Mica High students carry on some of her traditions. This suggests that, while nonconformity often goes unappreciated in its time, it can often have a bigger impact than anyone guesses.



Leo, too, tries to pick up where Stargirl left off and keeps his eyes open for her. The bond between them was real, even though Leo failed in his friendship to Stargirl at the time.



The story ends as it began, with Stargirl watching Leo—only this time, he knows it's her. The porcupine necktie suggests that there will be an enduring bond between them no matter what.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Patterson-White, Sarah. "Stargirl." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 28 Nov 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Patterson-White, Sarah. "Stargirl." LitCharts LLC, November 28, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stargirl>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Stargirl* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Spinelli, Jerry. *Stargirl*. Knopf. 2000.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Spinelli, Jerry. *Stargirl*. New York: Knopf. 2000.