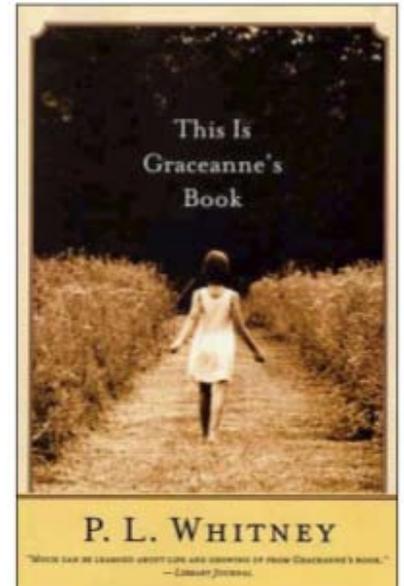




Reading Group Gold

This is Graceanne's Book

by P.L. Whitney



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Introduction to *This is Graceanne's Book*

The story is told by a nine-year old boy, Charlie, who observes with an encompassing awe a pivotal year in the life of his older sister Graceanne. She's loud, intellectual and a ruthless physical and psychological daredevil, a girl whose ferocious exploits are the stuff of local legend and the stuff of all that Charlie aspires to be. He narrates Graceanne's painful passage into teenage, a passage made tempestuous by their violent mother.

Praise for *This is Graceanne's Book*

"Much can be learned about life and growing up from Graceanne's book." -*Library Journal*

"Growing up is always hard, but even more so for Whitney's young protagonists who live in the tumultuous 1960s, on the wrong side of the tracks, with an abusive mother. Charlie, a quiet, club-footed, nine-year-old boy, narrates this story of his creative, smart, and wild older sister, Graceanne. He watches her become a teenager through beatings and other punishment and shares her innermost ideas and pain by reading her diary. After their mother confiscates the diary, he continues to keep her stories in his head. Graceanne incurs their mother's wrath for a number of reasons--the friendship of their next door neighbor (a black girl named Wanda), ice sculptures of a mixed-race baby Jesus, baseball games, and a college boyfriend named Collier--and yet, grows up a survivor. It is the unbreakable spirit of both Charlie and Graceanne that keeps this story afloat. While hurting along with them through the abuse, readers will cheer for them as they struggle to grow up." -Ellie Barta-Moran, *Booklist*

"[A] wonderful novel . . . Between one Independence Day and the next, as in a Brothers Grimm fairy tale, on Huck Finn's Mississippi, in John Kennedy's Camelot, looked down upon by heavenly astronomers, two children must save each other from an alcoholic father (the Combat Soldier), an abusive mother (the Queen of Egypt), the Ugly Blue Man, the Black Santa, degrading poverty and violent shame. Although just thirteen herself, Graceanne will protect her younger brother, Charlemagne, from the terrifying and arbitrary power of adults--with poetry and magic, kingfisher stories and Elvis records, ice babies and cornstalk silk, scarecrows and arrowheads, Catechism of the Mackerel and the Miracle of Our Lady of Fort McBain. In the book of wonders Graceanne braids out of their childhood games, Charlie learns to swim, not only in the swollen river, but all the way to Mars. This wonderful novel belongs on the shelf and in the heart next to Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and David Grossman's *The Book of*



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Intimate Grammar.” -John Leonard, critic for *New York Magazine* and CBS Sunday Morning

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. The river has a prominent place all through the book. Children play in its flooded spaces at the very beginning, and it is the setting of the book’s final scene. Charlie finds his secret there, his Ugly Blue Man. Tucka saves a boy from the river, ice for the baby Jesus comes from the river. What is the river a metaphor for?
2. Charlie makes lists and catalogues information and events. Is this tendency fueled by a desire to bring order and predictability into an existence that is a minefield for a small boy who never knows when a member of his family will turn on him?
3. There are contests throughout the story. The children are involved in all of them. What is the contrast between the contests and their troubled home lives? Are they drawn by the knowledge that outside the family, they have as fair a chance as everyone else to win?
4. How much is Graceanne the cause of her own troubles? Do you see her sometimes outrageous behavior as a way of expressing the subconscious fear of becoming like her parents and grandparents? Does Edie earn any of the reader’s sympathy or understanding?
5. Why does Graceanne think that if the Martian astronomers come to know everything, everyone will be happy? What connection does she make? Is it the desire of youth, especially in a girl like Graceanne, to encompass the universe? Or is it a sad statement (which she may or may not be aware of) that says “knowing everything” is so obviously impossible that happiness is impossible as well?
6. When the children make the ice baby Jesus, is their goal simply to win the church contest, or do they have, consciously or not, a larger purpose? Whatever their intentions, what is it that they achieve?
7. Are Edie’s desperate efforts to keep up a façade of gentility for herself and her family simply vanity, or is this an attempt to construct a semblance of a better life? Does her refusal to supply Charlie with bus fare for Wanda after the church festival and her occasional outbursts about blacks reveal her real racism?
8. How is writing Graceanne’s Book and then destroying it an expression of the children’s understanding of power, authority and control?
9. What is the significance of Graceanne and Charlie throwing their clothes into the river in the final scene?

About the Author

P.L. Whitney lives in New Jersey.