



An In-Depth Analysis

Characterization in One Book

Carol Fenner, the author of one of the 1996 Newbery Honor books, *Yolonda's Genius*, uses several techniques to develop the characteristics of two African American children, bright, fifth-grade Yolonda and her slower younger brother, Andrew. For example, the author reveals both Yolonda's intelligence and her strategy for retaliation after she is teased about her size by being called a whale: Yolonda tells her fellow bus rider that he knows nothing about whales because "whales are the most remarkable mammals in the ocean—all five oceans" (p. 16). She then provides information about whales, such as "The whales sank, lifting their tails high above the water like a signal. Deep in the ocean, their voices sent out a high swelling cry, sharing their message of victory for a hundred miles" (p. 17). We learn later that Yolonda goes to the library each week to learn new facts.

Yolonda's positive attitudes and Andrew's possible musical genius are developed as Yolonda shares Andrew's abilities. She reviews what Andrew can do and not what he cannot do when she thinks, "If there was music on the TV or the blaster, he could keep it company by beating out a rhythm on anything—his knees, a table, a wall. Or he could play a sweet line of sound on his harmonica just underneath the music, like water under a bridge. He played people's voices—an argument, cries of surprise, hushed conversation. The harmonica lived in his pocket. He fell asleep with it in his hand" (p. 38).

Later, Yolonda's actions show both her respect for Andrew's talents and her dislike for those who torment her younger brother because he is a slower learner in school and gains his enjoyment from playing his harmonica. Yolonda takes vengeance on the three boys who destroy Andrew's harmonica. She does this while Andrew is watching because she wants it to be Andrew's vengeance as well as her own.

The author continues to show characterization through the symbolism of music. Andrew makes discoveries about people through sounds, he learns the alphabet after a teacher relates the alphabet to the instruments, and he eventually plays his harmonica to reveal Yolonda's character. As you read the following quote, analyze how the author describes Yolonda through music: "Yolonda walking, a steady, strong beat—great big moves, slow, making waves of air pass by. Yolonda eating a chocolate éclair—full mouth—soft and happy. Yolonda reading to him, voice purring around the big words, Yolonda dancing. This is the sound of Yolonda's body—large, gobbling, space, powerful and protecting—great like a queen, frightening everyone with a scowl and a swelling of her shoulders" (p. 203).

Notice in this example how the author uses several different techniques to develop the characterizations of Yolonda and her brother. After reading the book, readers understand that both characters have well-rounded personalities.