

## ***Cloud of Witnesses***

### **Jane Hertenstein**

#### **Book description – 200 words**

*“The stars and black sky closed over me. I was not Pip with the hope of great expectations, just an eighth grader looking for a lucky break.”*

Roland Tanner is looking for a benefactor, someone to rescue him from his family, the sorriest characters he’s ever met: a sister who works at the Curl Up and Dye salon, a brother who takes motors apart in their front yard, a grandmother who flashes him the evil eye from her ragged vinyl armchair, and a father who keeps him at arm’s length. Tested as gifted, Roland gets bused from his poor, rural home to the middle school in town, where his new classmates only see him as a hillbilly.

He is desperate to reach out beyond the power lines that crisscross the hills surrounding the family’s trailer in southeastern Ohio. Yet he’s afraid to step outside of himself to ask Patty to the dance, to stand up for his Muslim friend Hassan, to see that his father loves him. It’s only when he realizes he’s in charge of his destiny that Roland accepts the cloud of witnesses, the saints and sinners all around him—that his future is whatever he makes it.

####

This middle grade novel about being an outsider growing up in the foothills of the Appalachians has contemporary relevance.

**Themes:** being an outsider, feeling outside one’s culture, family life, dealing with grief, empathy, acceptance, overcoming bullying, being a true friend, courage in the face of defeat, ignoring stereotypes, taking charge of one’s own destiny.

**Characters:** Roland, a 13/14-year-old male protagonist  
 Patty, sassy, smart, independent and very likeable girl character  
 A whole array of minor characters lend humor to this overall humorous book

**Age range:** 10-13

**Grade level:** 5-8

**Publication:** September 20, 2018

**Price:** \$8.99

**Length:** 234 pages



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**Key terms:**

Iran Hostage Crisis

*Great Expectations*

opioids

southeastern Ohio

Appalachia

mine cave-ins

Holy Ghost Revival

**Chapter Synopses:**

**Chapter 1**

We meet Roland Tanner, a bright boy growing up in the Appalachian foothills of southeastern Ohio. Tested as gifted, Roland gets bused from his poor, rural home to the school in town, where his new classmates only see him as a hillbilly.

**Chapter 2**

At lunch Roland is joined by Patty and Kyle—two kids from his gifted class. He tries to fit in by making fun of Hassan, a new boy from Iran.

**Chapter 3**

Roland goes with his father to water their “crop” only to discover it has been pulled up. Even at home Roland feels like an outsider with a sister who works at the Curl Up and Dye salon, a brother who takes motors apart in their front yard, a grandmother who flashes him the evil eye from her ragged vinyl armchair, and a father who keeps him at arm’s length.

**Chapter 4**

At a county fair Roland has a run-in with Kyle and ends up being paired up with Hassan on the Ferris wheel. Roland feels empathy for the headless chicken at the freak show tent; they have a lot in common.

**Chapter 5**

Roland and Hassan are assigned to work together on a book report about Anne Frank. Both boys offer a perspective of hope within a hopeless situation.

**Chapter 6**

Granny tells a ghost story about when she was a girl growing up in the mountains of West Virginia.



**Chapter 7**

Roland's older brother and his dysfunctional family come for a visit. The narrow walls of the trailer feel like they are closing in on him. Life is a lot like crossing fence lines, getting lost, and trying to find your way back. In Iran "students" take over the American Embassy and take hostages.

**Chapter 8**

Relationships at school get even more complicated. Roland is falling for Patty and Hassan is held at arm's length by his classmates because of the Hostage Crisis. In Shop class Roland stands up to Kyle and is consequently sent to detention.

**Chapter 9**

Patty challenges Roland to open up more. He's been so afraid about not fitting in that it's been hard to be himself. He invites Hassan to join him after school in a hiding place back in the woods behind his trailer. Hassan says his family is seeking asylum; they cannot go back to Iran.

**Chapter 10**

Thanksgiving turns into a fiasco. Roland determines that it is a good thing his family didn't come over on the Mayflower. They'd have invented a bomb out of maize and blown each other up.

**Chapter 11**

Patty invites Hassan and Roland to work on Christmas decorations. Each boy fosters a secret admiration for Patty, and Roland more than ever wants to break free of his family. He realizes his academic ability might be the ticket out—with the upcoming academic bowl called Whiz Kidz.

**Chapter 12**

Angie, Roland's sister shows up on Christmas Eve after a spat with her husband, and Mama tells a story about a mine cave-in, while Granny's dyspeptic stomach causes problems. It is a Christmas to be remembered as the curtains catch fire from the wonky colored bulbs.

**Chapter 13**

At a school dance where Roland wishes he was brave enough to dance with Patty, she surprises everyone by inventing her own moves. Afterwards the kids are given a ride by Larry, Roland's crazy-driver brother, who strands the kids beside the road out in the country. Together they have to find their way back.

**Chapter 14**

In the midst of the winter doldrums Roland is dragged to a church revival by Granny who is hoping to catch a new husband. The preacher talks about heroes of the Bible as if they have



super powers; they are surrounded by a cloud that protects them. What is this cloud of witnesses?

### **Chapter 15**

Practice for Whiz Kidz begin. Roland's father who had gotten himself in a bit of trouble and landed in jail calls home to say he is sick. Lung cancer. Despite this distraction, Roland shines at the local Whiz Kidz contest. He allows himself to hope.

### **Chapter 16**

Roland and Hassan get together to drill each other. Roland tells Hassan the story of Great Expectations about a poor boy who one day hopes to become a gentleman. The news on the TV is about the failed military mission to free the hostages. Roland is confused—isn't America supposed to be a super power?

### **Chapter 17**

The boys attend the second installment of *STAR WARS*. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, the hero gets thrown off course. The movie leaves them with more questions than answers—especially as they face the district Whiz Kidz tournament, they each have their motivation to win and impress others.

### **Chapter 18**

The results of the competition leave Roland less than satisfied. With his family in financial desperate straits he is forced to look beyond Whiz Kidz to other practical means of improving their situation.

### **Chapter 19**

Roland goes with Hassan and his family to Columbus for the Whiz Kidz finale where he works in a visit to his father at the university hospital. Just like Pip, Roland all along has been hoping for his own Magwitch, for someone to jump out and save him, but there is no one. His father, weak and dying, might offer some insight.

### **Chapter 20**

At an end-of-school-year party, emotions for Roland come to a head. Everything he has ever dreamed of seems to elude him. Slowly it dawns on him that even in his loneliness he is surrounded.

### **Chapter 21**

The family scatters Daddy's ashes. In the pine grove Roland is visited by Patty, where they watch as puffy clouds scuttle across the canvas of the sky. Back at the trailer Granny is again agitating and Angie and her husband are forever fighting—regardless, Roland is assured. He is



surrounded by friends and people who love him. Maybe not right away, but someday his dreams of great expectations will happen.



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