

Franny and Zoey Book Review by Sarina

"Franny and Zooey," a novel by J.D. Salinger, is composed of two interconnected stories focusing on the youngest members of the Glass family--Franny and Zoey. It was slightly complicated for me to understand the first time I read it, but after I did so again, the story was deeper than I thought.

The first part, "Franny," follows Franny Glass as she visits her boyfriend Lane Coutell for a football weekend at his college. The story begins with Lane waiting at a train station for Franny's arrival. Upon meeting, they head to a restaurant called Sickler's, popular among the students of the college. During lunch, Lane talks mostly about himself the entire conversation, discussing a paper he wrote about French novelist Gustave Flaubert. Franny, visibly distracted and irritated, begins to express her dissatisfaction with college life. She criticizes the English department at her school, particularly the graduate student instructors who she feels over-intellectualize literature and destroy its essence rather than appreciating it.

As the conversation progresses, she confides in Lane about quitting a play she was in, feeling embarrassed by what she considers fake acting. Franny's frustration extends to her professors, whom she sees as pretentious and self-absorbed. The tension builds as Franny introduces the concept of the "Jesus prayer," a continuous prayer meant to cleanse one's spirit, which she learned from a book called "The Way of a Pilgrim." Lane, however, seems uninterested in Franny's spiritual concerns. As Franny becomes increasingly agitated, she excuses herself to the bathroom, where she has a breakdown. Upon returning to the table, Franny faints. Lane helps revive her, and as she regains consciousness, she begins murmuring the prayer. The story ends with Franny lying in the restaurant practicing the prayer.

The second part, "Zooey," takes place a few days after Franny's breakdown. The story is narrated by Buddy Glass, one of Franny and Zoey's older brothers. It opens with Zoey Glass, Franny's 25-year-old brother, reading a four-year-old letter from Buddy while taking a bath. The letter discusses their older brother Seymour's suicide and encourages Zoey to pursue his passions. Zoey's mother, Bessie Glass, interrupts his bath to discuss Franny's condition. Franny is now at home, sleeping and crying on the living room sofa. Bessie is concerned about Franny's state and wants Zoey to talk to her. During their conversation, Zoey explains that "The Way of a Pilgrim" was a book Seymour had read before his death, and Franny had taken it from Seymour's old desk.

After getting out of the bath, Zoey attempts to help Franny. They engage in a long discussion about spirituality, philosophy, and their upbringing. Both Franny and Zoey were raised on a blend of different religions, taught to them by their older brothers Buddy and Seymour. Zoey's approach to helping Franny is unconventional; he accuses her of being as inauthentic as the professors she criticizes, suggesting that

her spiritual pursuits are just as performative and ego-driven as anything else. Franny eventually admits that she is aware of her inauthenticity, which is the source of her depression.

The conversation continues, with Zooey pressing Franny about her motivations for using the Jesus prayer. Franny, overwhelmed, expresses a wish to speak with Seymour. This response surprises Zooey, but he continues to challenge Franny's ideas, ultimately causing her to cry. Feeling ashamed of his harsh approach, Zooey retreats to Seymour's old bedroom. There, he reads some of Seymour's writings and comes up with a plan. He calls the Glass family apartment from Seymour's room, pretending to be Buddy. Franny, unaware of the deception, takes the call in their parents' bedroom.

During this phone conversation, Zooey offers Franny comfort and insight. He helps her understand that her quest for spirituality and authenticity is not misguided, but her approach needs adjustment. Zooey suggests that true spirituality and authenticity come from embracing life and people as they are, rather than retreating from the world.

The novel concludes with Franny realizing that the very act of striving for spiritual perfection can be a form of egotism. Instead, she comes to understand that true enlightenment involves finding the sacred in the ordinary and loving people unconditionally. I learned later that "Franny and Zooey" is often interpreted as a modern Zen tale, with Franny progressing from a state of ignorance to enlightenment as well! I enjoyed reading this book but, personally, that was only because I had a dictionary on standby. I rate this book a 6.5/10.