Chapter one begins with Hiram Hillburn’s explanation of some “awful things that happened to Emmitt Till” in 1955. This is told from his sixteen year old point of view. But before he recaps the culminating events of the book, Hiram takes us back seven years earlier when he was being raised by his gramma and grampa Hillburn. The first thirty-seven pages, (through chapter four), establish Hiram’s relationship with his grandfather and grandmother and his young life in Greenwood Mississippi. Chapter five brings us back to the present time of the novel when Hiram returns for a visit, without his family, to Greenwood.

Each chapter runs between ten to fourteen pages with the exception of chapters fourteen (31 pages) and sixteen (21 pages). Chapter fourteen contains the bulk of the trial for the alleged murderers of Emmitt Till. Chapter sixteen resolves some of the unanswered questions concerning Emmitt’s murder.
Issues related to this Study of Literature

Themes:

Certainly the overriding theme of this book is *racial prejudice*. The fictional re-telling of Emmett Till’s heinous murder represents the prejudice between blacks and whites so prevalent in the south in 1955. But the prejudice in the story goes beyond skin color. The Hillburn’s demonstrate that prejudice can be in your own family. There is prejudice against anyone different in the small town of Greenwood. The prejudice in this town is as pervasive as the weeds in a cotton field.

*Relationships* are another theme that prevails throughout the novel. The predominant relationship of turmoil represented is between father and son. Hirum is well aware of the angst and dislike between his grandfather and his father. Because Hirum’s father can’t get along with his father, Hyrum is pulled away from the life he loves as a nine year old boy. Yet when Hirum reaches his teenage years, he too, cannot get along with his father. Throughout the narrative, Hirum’s relationship with his father eats away at him. He is always trying to understand why his father and grandfather can’t get along and tries to apply those observations to his own father. The father-son attitudes force us to look at prejudice within a family.

Personality and perception *labels* are not only given to the African Americans, but to several characters/types in this book. Grampa Hillburn has always had several misperceptions about the black men who work for him. Hiram’s father perceives that everyone in the Mississippi Delta is prejudiced. RC believes that living animals are stupid and therefore can be hurt and abused. Ralph and Ronnie Remington are ostracized because they are labeled as “fairies”(22). People who are for integration and civil rights are called “Northern Rabblersours”(148). Trouble makers are called “Redneck Peckerwoods”(124). Hiram Hillburn and his sweet grandmother are the two characters who try to look beyond labels and care and socialize outside of their label.

Setting: This book is based on a true story of a murder that happened in Money, Mississippi. The Hillburn’s home and crops are in Greenwood Mississippi. The trial takes place in Sumner, north of Greenwood in the Tallahatchie County Courthouse. Emmett Till is visiting from Chicago and his body is found in the Tallahatchie County Courthouse.

Hiram has ties to Arizona and after leaving Greenwood, actually grows up in Tempe Arizona; but very little action happens in Tempe.

Martinez, 2008
Point of View: Hiram Hillburn is the first person narrator of this tale. The point of view never varies from Hillburn’s life lens.

Literary devices as found in Mississippi Trial:

Tragedy:

According to a CyberEnglish website (http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/lit_terms/tragedy.html), Aristotle defined tragedy as "the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself." A tragedy includes "incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish the catharsis of such emotions The Mississippi Trial fits the definition of a tragedy and even more so because of the truth it re-tells.

Emmett Till can also be used as an example of a tragic hero. A tragic hero will invoke our pity and our fear. That he is not especially good or especially wicked is a possibility. He died as a young innocent boy so that would be a harsh judgment to make on a fourteen year old boy. But if we apply the circumstances and the context—that Emmett possibly was misbehaving towards a southern woman, (“He was a colored boy who didn’t know his place” 135), that he continually broke the social standards of the segregated south- we may be able to cast him in this role as tragic hero. This could be a lively debate for a class: Does Emmett Till fit the role of a tragic hero, or was he just an innocent bystander caught in the prejudicial poison that pervaded the Delta? Is it an act of prejudice to put any blame on the young man when there is no excuse for his treatment? Is there any culpability to Emmet’s actions?

As an educator, studying Emmett Till as a tragic hero, it is important to make two things very clear. First, according to the book it was never proven whether or not Emmett Till was the black man who flirted with the store woman. Second, whether Emmett Till was or was not guilty of the accusations, he did not deserve to be tortured or murdered. That a tragic hero brings on his own downfall would have to be explored as a question with sensitivity and zero tolerance for racial hate and murder.

Certainly Emmett fits the role of a tragic hero in that his life changes from happiness to misery because of a mistaken act.

A tragic hero is doomed to fail and is put in a situation where he cannot win. Emmett Till was a stranger to the social morays of the south. As an aggressive northern black youngster, putting him in the prejudice saturated Mississippi delta was a tragedy in the making. When Emmett Till is playing in the river with his friends, he sees Hirum and crosses the highly symbolic river to talk to him. Emmett’s friends stay on the other side of the river in discomfort. They know better than to treat a white boy as a friend.

A tragic hero achieves a moral victory. Emmet certainly wins a moral victory even if it is after his death, for his story and his spirit live on and this incident is cited as the beginning of the Civil Rights movement.
Allusion—There are at least three casual references to famous historical events and people. The allusions would provide tangents to study important Civil Rights subjects. The first allusion is to the Jim Crowe laws. The reference made to the NAACP is another allusion. During the trial, Charles C. Diggs, a congressman from Michigan, shows up in the delta. Author Chris Crowe uses the real names of southerners who were actually involved in the case: Sheriff HC Strider, Judge Curtis L. Swango, public prosecutor Gerald Chatham. All of these men have a fascinating history. Since the entire novel is an allusion to a historical event, it would be interesting to find and study the real transcripts from the trial and see how closely the author stayed to this historical event.

Tone
Hiram Hillburn is a sweet young man who is trying to sort out the conflicts that he confronts. His tone is sympathetic as he yearns to learn about and find justice in his surrounding circumstances. The author attempts to be objective and let the reader, or Hiram figure out the mystery of the murder and his patriarchal examples of relationships. The overall tone of the novel is sympathetic, solemn and questioning.

Affective Issues Related to the Work
Throughout the novel, Hirum Hillburn questions his family relationships. He is bothered by his own communication with his father and his father’s adversity towards his father. Readers of this novel are at the age when they begin to question their relationships with family members. It is a time when they become aware of their own parent’s shortcomings and frailties. They are developing autonomy and their wills are strong to stand up to and question their parent’s expectations and demands.

Naomi has the burden of running her household since her mother’s death. There will be readers of this novel who share that same responsibility of house, sibling and parent care. Naomi sometimes considers jumping into the river. She is contemplating suicide. It is important that the end of the book resolves with a lightening of her load. She is taken out of her home and is given another chance to be a child. Teenagers need to see that they too will grow-up, that siblings grow up and one day, they too will leave behind many of their burdens. This can be used to teach that one should not give into despair because it is most likely a temporary despair.

Friendship is always an applicable subject to our students. Hirum wants to be friends with Emmett Till but when he stands by and watches his white friend torture Emmett, he is ashamed of himself and all chances of friendship are caboshed. RC is the redneck whom Hirum really doesn’t want to be around but because of their history together, he feels obligated to hang with him.
There are some strong and apparent issues of bullying in this novel. And, as every human being is continuously faced with doing what is right or failing to do what is right, this is an affective issue.

There are two deaths in the novel. One is the tragic murder and the other is the natural passing of an aged grandparent.

**Vocabulary Issues**

Mississippi Trial is written in easily understood language. Chris Crowe has chosen to spell some words such as grandma and grandpa as gramma and grampa. There is a minimal amount of southern vernacular such as *Sisbaby* (197), and Hillbilly talk but it is still easy reading. Emmett Till’s spoken words are written as if he stuttered. The word been is spelled *b-b-been(49)*. Both of these variations of language would make an interesting study.

**Background Issues**

It is imperative that students have an understanding of slavery, segregation, Jim Crowe laws and the facts of the Emmett Till murder trial. Questions that could be answered with a few history lessons are: Why were attitudes concerning blacks and whites so different in the south and the north? How did southerners get away with miss-treatment of blacks? Why did southern blacks tolerate such injustice? What role did the Emmett Till case have on the Civil Rights movement? What was the Civil Rights movement? Who were Emmett’s family members? Friends?

**Implications for Students of Diversity** - Diversity and the lack of tolerance and acceptance are blaring issues in this novel. This is not only pertinent to African American and other diverse students but to all students because of how it affects our nation, our communities and our selves.

Students will also confront the treatment of others who are diverse not because of ethnicity but because of preferences and actions that separate them from the *norms* of society.

**Gender Issues** - During 1955 women weren’t allowed to be on juries. Naomi is regularly beat up by her father. She was also put into female caretaker role because of her mother’s death.

That these white men felt empowered and even felt it was their right as white men to subjugate, beat-up and even murder black men could be looked at as a gender issue.

There is some question if the Remington brothers have gender issues. Students may question that they are called *faeries* in the text.
The Central Question of Enduring Issue

There are many issues and questions that arise from the exploration of this novel. At the crux of our narrator’s heart and mind is the turmoil of wanting to help his family, his neighbors, his friends and his enemies, and not knowing how or the limitations of his abilities to help. For that reason the enduring question centers on how far can we, should we and must help—“Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Research Issues/ Project Ideas

1. Interview a person who is not of your race or background-find out where you differ and what makes you the same?
2. Pick any aspect of the Civil Rights movement and apply towards a research paper, media presentation or other creative endeavor.
3. Pick any of the real characters and present a real –life character sketch. Present the situation from your character’s point of view.
4. Try writing a chapter in the point of view from one of the characters in this book.
5. Research the Jim Crowe laws-the origin, history and/or effect on the southern states.
6. Report on any of the injustices that occurred in the southern states: Ku Klux Klan, lynching postcards, etc.
7. Research recent racial, crimes, trials or injustices.
8. Read and report on one of many non-fiction accounts of the Emmett Till tragedy.

Informational Functional Texts

1. If we are to apply the lessons of Mississippi Trial to our modern day, the Southern Poverty Law Center is an excellent place to track 20 and 21st century injustices. They also have an invaluable program of teaching tolerance. “Teaching Tolerance.” 2005 Southern Poverty Law Center. September 24, 2005. <http://www.splcenter.org/center/tt/teach.jsp>.
2. There are several books written about Emmett Till. Only two of many are listed: Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America by Mamie Till-Mobley and Christopher Benson. Getting Away with Murder by Christ Crowe
3. Over 265,000 websites are listed with information about the Emmett Till murder. There is even an Emmett Till blog. emmett-till.blogspot.com/
   An ET slideshow put to the Bob Dylan song about ET. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QjfGcRM35xg
   A sight dedicated to the boy’s memory
4. A copy of the Jim Crow laws would be interesting.
5. Slave narratives.
7. It would be interesting to search for newspaper articles from Mississippi during the 1950’s.