

For the Life of Laetitia: Laetitia Johnson

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Laetitia Johnson, known as Lacey, is the narrator and protagonist of the novel. She is fourteen years old and the first person in her family to attend secondary school. Her story is told entirely in her own voice, and the reader experiences every event through her perception, her judgements, and her silences. This is an important structural choice: Hodge does not describe Laetitia from the outside; she builds her from within. What we see is not just what happens to Laetitia but how she understands it, and that understanding is remarkably clear-eyed for someone her age.

The novel's central question is whether Laetitia will survive, intact, the forces that work to reduce, confine, or break her. Those forces include her father's household, the prejudice of certain teachers, the grinding poverty of her friend's situation, and ultimately grief. She is not untouchable. She rebels, falls into bad habits, suffers a breakdown. But she is never changed into something she is not. By the end of the novel the question has its answer, and the answer is earned.

Who She Is

Laetitia's most defining quality is her secure sense of identity, rooted in Ma's household, in Sooklal Trace, and in her family's way of life. When her social studies teacher puts up a poster of a white nuclear family and tells the class to draw a Happy Family, every other student reproduces the poster. Laetitia spreads her drawing across two pages of her notebook: Ma, Pappy, Uncle Leroy, Mammy Patsy, Tantie Monica, Uncle Jamesie, herself, her sister, her brother, Carlyle, and all her first cousins, with more still to come. The teacher tells her it looks like the family of the Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe. Laetitia does not think it worth her while to explain anything to this woman, and waits for her to move on. She is not defiant for its own sake; she simply recognises that the teacher has nothing to teach her about her own family.

She is also, from the first chapter, a reader. She arrives at her father's house with a suitcase and a box of books. Books are not decorative; she reads them, carries them, defends them, and teaches with them. Her relationship with her half-brother Michael, whom she gradually brings from chaos to genuine affection, is built largely through the reading of stories. Her friendship with Anjane is cemented on the first day of school by shared curiosity. Education is not something Laetitia pursues out of duty or social ambition; it is an extension of who she already is.

She is perceptive about the adults around her in ways that are sometimes uncomfortable. She reads the atmosphere at Mr. Cephas's house immediately: the low radio, the tiptoed

mornings, the polished table set before a man who does not arrive until quarter past three. She understands Miss Velma's situation before Miss Velma articulates it. She also understands, even when she is too young to fully name it, that what her father calls pride in her is really the use of her as a social asset, someone to boast about to his boss, a replacement for the son who has disappointed him.

She is not perfect. She is capable of stubbornness that tips into self-sabotage, and she has a period during which she falls in with Doreen Sandiford's circle, skips classes, and deliberately performs below her ability to deny her father the report he wants. These choices come from real frustration, but she has to recognise that she is hurting herself more than him, and she recognises it.

Her Arc

Sooklal Trace to La Puerta. The novel opens mid-journey, with Laetitia in her father's car on the way to his house in La Puerta. The car ride is uncomfortable not because of the road but because of who is driving. The estrangement is already established. Before the present-tense story begins, Hodge provides the background: Laetitia wins the Common Entrance scholarship; Ma interrogates Mr. Cephas and withholds her answer until Mammy Patsy writes from New York to approve; the arrangement is made. The move to her father's house is practical, intended to make the daily commute to school possible.

Mr. Cephas's house. Laetitia arrives to find a household organised around one man's comfort and moods. Miss Velma creeps around the house, keeps her radio at near-zero volume, and does not eat until her husband sits down, however late he arrives. When Laetitia begins teaching Michael to wash dishes, Mr. Cephas storms in and invokes the full vocabulary of sexism. When Laetitia brings home a strong report, Mr. Cephas wants to keep it to show his boss. When she spends Christmas at Ma's instead of his house, he is privately furious because it exposes his lack of control over her. The household is a sustained lesson in how patriarchy functions in a domestic space, and Laetitia's presence inside it, unwilling to be absorbed into it, is a source of low-level constant tension.

School and Anjane. At La Puerta Government Secondary, Laetitia is placed with Anjane on her first day, and the friendship is immediate. Together they sit on their log at lunch, share food, give the teachers nicknames, and protect each other. Laetitia is at the top of her class academically and, unlike some of her classmates, is not afraid of Mrs. Lopez. When Mrs. Lopez mocks Anjane, Laetitia answers back. When the class finally rises together and pushes their maths instruments off their desks in collective protest, it is Laetitia's single act of defiance that gives them the permission to do it.

Watching Anjane disappear. The middle section of the novel is dominated by Anjane's progressive deterioration. She arrives late, then absent, then sick, then absent for days at a

stretch, selling vegetables in the market to fund her own taxi fare while her brothers and father refuse to contribute. Laetitia tries to help: tutoring after school, checking on her, sharing textbooks. But Anjanees is disappearing under a weight of domestic labour and family hostility that Laetitia cannot lift. The moment when Laetitia snaps at her, everybody learned this for Common Entrance, you should have learned it already, and sees Anjanees cry is one of the novel's most painful sequences. The care and the cruelty are inseparable because Laetitia is frightened and frustrated, and she takes it out on the only person she cannot bear to lose.

The spiral and the breakdown. Increasingly unable to go home for weekends, increasingly angry at her father, Laetitia spends a period with Doreen Sandiford's group, skipping classes and visiting the Plaza during school hours. The suspension that follows is handled through Miss Velma rather than Mr. Cephas, but the damage to her schoolwork is real. She resolves to turn herself around, but the recovery is interrupted by Anjanees's absence stretching into days. The morning Laetitia hears the news from another student, drink poison, she already knows before the name is confirmed. She has had the dream, the knot in the stomach, the heavy weight on waking. She walks home through La Puerta telling herself it is not Anjanees, knowing it is. The breakdown that follows puts her in hospital and then in bed at Ma's for weeks.

Recovery. The final chapter finds Laetitia in Ma's kitchen before sunrise, drinking coffee with Ma and Pappy, kneading flour for bakes. She says: I was glad to be in the world again. The recovery is not triumphant; it is quiet, gradual, and grounded in the ordinary rhythms of the household she has been fighting to return to. She understands that she will now have to make the same sacrifices Anjanees made: early mornings, long journeys, work at home before and after school. She accepts this without complaint. Anjanees used to have to wake up four o'clock in the morning to go to school. Anjanees's struggle, which Laetitia was unable to fully save, becomes the standard she holds herself to. The novel ends with her preparing for a thanksgiving celebration, still living, still going back to school.

Key Quotes

Quote	Location	Significance
"Spread over two pages of my notebook were: Ma, Pappy, Uncle Leroy, Mammy Patsy, Uncle Jamesie, Tantie Monica, me, my sister, my brother, Carlyle, and all my first cousins."	Social studies class	Laetitia refuses to reproduce the white nuclear family ideal. The detail of the drawing spreading over two pages suggests abundance, not deficiency.
"I didn't think it worth my while explaining anything to this woman, so I just sat and waited patiently for her to move on."	Social studies class	The phrasing captures Laetitia's composure under ideological pressure. She does not argue; she simply refuses to internalise.

"She must have done it because I let her down!"	After Anjanees death	The misplaced guilt is psychologically precise. Laetitia's breakdown is triggered not only by grief but by this belief that her betrayal caused the outcome.
"I was glad to be in the world again."	Final chapter	The opening of the recovery section. Simple, direct, final. The novel's whole emotional arc resolves in these seven words.
"Anjanees used to have to wake up four o'clock in the morning to go to school."	Final chapter	Laetitia converts grief into commitment. Anjanees hardship becomes the measure she sets for herself.

Narrative Techniques

First-person narration as intimacy and limitation. The entire novel is filtered through Laetitia's consciousness. The reader is never given access to what other characters feel unless Laetitia observes it or infers it. This creates a particular kind of dramatic irony: the reader often senses the danger in situations, particularly around Anjanees, slightly ahead of what Laetitia is willing to acknowledge. Hodge uses the first-person voice not to make Laetitia all-knowing but to show the edges of what she can bear to see.

The two households as structural contrast. Ma's house and Mr. Cephas's house are set in deliberate opposition throughout the novel. Ma's house is crowded, warm, demanding, and unambiguously home. Mr. Cephas's house is cleaner, quieter, better furnished, and profoundly cold. Laetitia keeps her books unpacked at first because she has already decided this is not a permanent stay. When she finally returns to Ma's after her breakdown, the first thing she notices is the narrowness and the smell of damp, and she does not mind. The contrast is not between poverty and comfort; it is between belonging and alienation.

Anjanees as mirror and foil. Anjanees and Laetitia are placed next to each other on the first day of school and remain next to each other for the whole novel. They come from different ethnic backgrounds, different village distances from school, and different family structures. But both are scholarship girls, both love school, and both face forces that want to take that away from them. Anjanees trajectory is what Laetitia's could become if she loses her footing; Laetitia's recovery in the final chapter is shaped by the knowledge that Anjanees never got the chance to make it.

Foreshadowing through the body. Hodge anchors Laetitia's emotional state in physical sensation throughout the novel. The knot in the stomach, the heavy weight on waking, the belly ache that worsens as the news travels through the school: these are not metaphors in the literary sense but the actual texture of how Laetitia experiences dread. By the time the news

about Anjanees breaks, the reader has been prepared by a sequence of somatic signals that something final is happening.

Ma Zelline as alternative model. Ma Zelline, Ma's macommère in La Puerta, functions as a living counter-image to every compromised woman in the novel. She has neither husband nor children by choice, tends her own garden, cooks on her own schedule, and speaks her mind without apology. Her advice to Laetitia, to take the chance she has and not throw it away, carries particular weight because she is proof that a woman's life can be structured on her own terms.

Thematic Significance

Laetitia is the novel's argument in human form. She embodies what the novel claims education can do, which is not simply open a door to employment, but give a person the resources to know their own worth without requiring external permission to feel it. Her confidence in her family, her resistance to the social studies poster, her refusal to be absorbed into Mr. Cephas's domestic order: none of this is the result of her scholarship. It comes from Ma's household, from Pappy's quiet dignity, from Uncle Leroy's jokes that carry real faith in her, from Mammy Patsy's letters from New York insisting that the chance is worth fighting for. The scholarship gives her the circumstances to exercise what she already has.

The relationship with Anjanees gives the novel its tragedy and its moral weight. Laetitia can read, navigate institutions, hold her ground in a classroom. Anjanees has all the same intelligence and more determination than almost anyone in the book. What Anjanees lacks is not ability but structural support. The novel forces the reader to recognise that education as a path to liberation requires resources the state gives unevenly and families withhold for reasons rooted in patriarchy, poverty, and tradition. Laetitia survives because enough people around her want her to survive. Anjanees dies because nobody in her household does.

Exam Tip

Laetitia works well for questions about identity, education, gender, or survival. For identity: the social studies notebook scene is the clearest single illustration of how she maintains her sense of self under pressure. For education: trace the contrast between what school offers and what it costs, using both Laetitia's arc and Anjanees's. For gender: place Laetitia alongside Miss Velma and Mammy Patsy to show three generations of women navigating the same structures differently. For survival: the final chapter is decisive; show how the recovery is grounded not in individual resilience alone but in the community that holds her. Always note that Hodge uses first-person narration, which means the reader understands everything through Laetitia's perception.