

John : Major character in the primary plot of the story that spans about a 24-hour period from the time he awakens on a Saturday morning in March, 1935 — his 14th birthday . John is going through a very difficult time in his life. As if adolescence alone were not traumatic enough, he is confronted by a number of other dilemmas. First and most important in John's life and in the novel is his relationship with his father, Gabriel, who appears to harbor some sort of hostility toward John. The reasons for Gabriel's hostility have little or nothing to do with John; rather they are prejudices based on Gabriel's own past experiences and regrets that he projects on to John.

John does what he can to avoid what he perceives as his father's tyranny, and, when he realizes that his father will never be able to control him completely because he is reputed to have a good mind, John happily rationalizes that his intellect will someday lead him from his father's house. John is also bewildered by his lack of understanding of the biological (especially sexual) changes that are happening to him.

Gabriel: Hard, religious man. Despite his pious mother's prayers and beatings, Gabriel was wild and sinful—until he was born again at the age of 21 and became a preacher. In a dream, God promised him that his descendents would bear His seal. He married Deborah, had an affair with Esther, and endured the early death of his unacknowledged son, Royal, from a distance. His son by Elizabeth, Roy, is his new hope. John, his stepson, must bear the brunt of Gabriel's sublimated wrath and guilt.

Elizabeth: John's mother and Gabriel's wife. Elizabeth accepts her life in Gabriel's shadow because of her past misfortunes and her desire for redemption. Although a source of comfort, she is a constant puzzle to John because of her silence.

Florence: Florence has resented her brother Gabriel since he was born—resented him their mother's favoritism, which he received at her expense; resented his sudden, newfound holiness; resented the way he treated his first wife, Deborah, and now Elizabeth. Florence knows she is ill and doesn't have much time left to live. But she is determined to knock Gabriel down a few pegs so that he cannot tower in his righteousness above Elizabeth and John.

Roy: Roy is John's younger brother. He is outspoken and much less concerned with the metaphysical questions that plague John. He closely resembles his father, Gabriel, as he was in his younger days and also shares many traits—as well as a first name—with his half-brother Royal (Gabriel's unacknowledged son).

Sister McDonald: Esther's mother

Elisha: John's role model. A young leader in the congregation and a saved man.

Deborah: Florence's friend and Gabriel's first wife and spiritual companion. She was brutally raped as a girl by a group of white men. Unable to bear children, she died fairly young.

Father James, Deacon Braithwaite, Ella Mae, Sister McCandless (mean), Sister Price (nice),

Praying Mother Washington: Members of the Church of the Fire Baptized.

Ruth and Sara: Gabriel and Elizabeth's daughter, They are John's half-sisters.