*When You Look Like Us* by Pamela N. Harris – Notes by Ingrid

Jay feels like he has to take care of everyone, in one way or another - even protecting his friends by telling them he doesn't need help, because he thinks it is too dangerous for them to be involved. He is afraid to trust anyone - he can't tell his grandma because she doesn't need more stress, a teacher at school even gives him his home email, but he doesn't want to ask him for help either. He is so worried about what others think, not wanting them to feel sorry for him or think he's even more of a screw up because his sister is missing. Yet he is making assumptions about what is best for others, as well as about how they live and what they think of him.

We also see how there is a lot of judgement among blacks - not just how whites treat blacks, but how blacks living in different (better) neighborhoods treat blacks in Jay's neighborhood, how the black policeman tells Jay his sister is not a priority, especially since she's already chosen to hang out with a drug dealer. Everyone assumes she got what was coming to her, or that she just ran off - never that someone NOT in her regular circle has done something illegal and put her in danger.

At the start it seems especially like Jay hasn't even figured out what HE wants - case in point, his girlfriend. He has to work so hard to stay in her good graces, and does not especially enjoy that relationship, but he admired her from afar for so long he can't give up that idea. Much like many kids his age.

At the same time, it must be so hard for him - being judged by whites, by other blacks, even by other blacks at his church. Sometimes, most of all, he judges himself. He decides he can't do well on the SAT, he has no options since he doesn't play sports (that one is a big misunderstanding, not just his - sports are rarely the path to big college scholarships), he won't be able to afford college if he can even get in. People are telling him not to give up, but he thinks he knows better.

There are a couple times he sees a picture or reflection of himself and wonders "is that how I look?" because he's so anxious or tense al the time. And when we finally meet his sister, we discover that even while he thinks he takes care of her, it has often been her taking care of him. As is so often the case for anyone, his perspective is not the whole truth.

Of course, the difficulties of being black are a big part of the story - but there is a lot here that is universal as well.