

# **Afternoon of the Elves Study Guide**

**Afternoon of the Elves by Janet Taylor Lisle**

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# Plot Summary

Afternoon of the Elves is the story of a special friendship between two girls, which blossoms because of a "magical" elf village created in the backyard of one of the girls.

Hillary Lenox is nine years old, and the protagonist of the novel. She has an ideal home life, she is obedient and kind, and she is well-liked at school. She strikes up a unique friendship with Sara-Kate Connolly, eleven years old, who is in many ways the opposite of Hillary. Sara-Kate dresses oddly, she is gruff and short-tempered, she is disliked by Hillary's classmates, and she behaves in eccentric ways.

Sara-Kate shows Hillary what she claims is a magical elf village built in the backyard of her home. There are tiny homes made of leaves and twigs, a well with a bottlecap for a bucket, and a Ferris wheel made out of two bicycle wheels. Hillary is enchanted by the prospect of a community of magical elves. Over the next weeks, Hillary aids Sara-Kate in observing the village, gathering food for the elves, and other duties. Though Hillary never sees an elf, she swears they exist. Sara-Kate is full of wisdom about the habits and culture of the elves, but alarmingly secretive about her own life, especially her never-seen mother. The girls grow close in their mutual passion for the village.

One day, Sara-Kate doesn't show up at school, and after some time, Hillary dares to creep into Sara-Kate's home, a place into which she has never been invited. There, she discovers Sara-Kate clutching her sickly mother in a rocking chair. The sight traumatizes Hillary, and Sara-Kate yells at Hillary to leave and never come back. Hillary attends school like normal for a time, but can't shake the image of Sara-Kate.

Hillary returns to Sara-Kate's home, not mentioning the mother, and they decide to repair the elf village, which has been destroyed by neglect and a snowfall. The two work hard and restore the village. Sara-Kate reveals a lack of money, and therefore of food, and Hillary volunteers to help. Hillary steals money from her mother's purse, buys groceries, and steals a pack of bologna from the grocer. The two girls have a party in Sara-Kate's living room making bologna sandwiches.

Mrs. Lenox knocks at the door, wondering where Hillary is. She sees the alarming neglect of the home, and demands to see Sara-Kate's mother. The physical and mental illness of Mrs. Connolly is exposed. As Hillary sadly watches from her own home, Sara-Kate's home is invaded over the next days by many strangers, who clean it up and eventually sell it to another family. Rumors in the newspapers claim that Sara-Kate has moved away to Kansas, and that her mother has been institutionalized.

Still clinging to the magic of the elf village, Hillary tells her mother that she intends to rescue the elf village, and build it in a weedy patch of their own backyard.



# Chapters 1 and 2

## Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

Chapter 1: A girl named Hillary Lenox sees the elf village for the first time one afternoon. A girl named Sara-Kate Connolly is showing her. The elf village is a miniature village apparently populated by tiny elf people living in Sara-Kate's backyard, though the elves hide when people come. They have built intricate houses out of twigs and leaves, and even have a water well. Hillary can't believe her eyes, and wonders if the village was made by mice or if there is some other explanation.

Sara-Kate seems an unlikely person to be associated with such a magical village. She is a bland, unkempt, even homely girl, who is made fun of at school for her wrinkled clothes and slovenly appearance. True to form, Sara-Kate's backyard is equal parts junk and grass, with bits of glass and rope strewn about, and a wholly unlikely place for magical elves to make their home.

After seeing the village, Hillary goes to her tidy home and tries to convince first her mother and then her father about the elves. They are both too busy, and are only half-listening to Hillary. Mrs. Lenox is more concerned about Hillary going over to odd Sara-Kate's house in the first place, while Mr. Lenox is too busy admiring and cleaning up his own perfect backyard to pay much heed to his daughter.

Chapter 2: Hillary goes to sleep obsessing about the elves, and when she gets to school the next day, she explains the strange village in Sara-Kate's backyard to her two friends at school, Jane and Alison. Jane and Alison, like most of the kids at school, are dismissive and cruel to Sara-Kate, and they figure Sara-Kate built the village herself. They also spread a rumor that Sara-Kate stole a bicycle, and that she is not to be trusted. Convinced by her haughty friends that Sara-Kate is not someone with whom she should associated, Hillary forgets about the village.

A couple days later, an excited Sara-Kate surprises Hillary in the hall and urges her to come to the elf village, since they have created an amusement park, with a bicycle wheel for a Ferris wheel. Hillary is excited, but she remembers how disliked and weird Sara-Kate is, and she agrees only to come "just for a minute." Hillary also states that her mother doesn't want her to hang around Sara-Kate. This enrages Sara-Kate, who retracts her invitation and yells at Hillary, along with several other students, before she runs away. Hillary thinks she looks like a "cartoon elf" as she runs awkwardly away.

## Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

The story starts at a rapid clip, mentioning the elf village almost casually, as if the reader had a familiarity with the subject. This creates questions in the reader's mind concerning the nature of the elf village and whether or not it is real or a figment of someone's imagination. This tension continues throughout the story.



Hillary and Sara-Kate are characterized as opposites. Hillary has an ideal home life, is good-natured and sweet, does well in school, dresses nicely, and has a lot of friends. Sara-Kate's home is in disarray (one of the chief tensions of the book), she is short-tempered and sharp with her words, and she acts and dresses in ways that are eccentric, causing the kids at school to make fun of her and dismiss her as a kook. The author forges a connection with Sara-Kate and her backyard—both are "unkempt" in a way, and both are seemingly weird and to be avoided. This sets up a theme of "don't judge a book by its cover" that echoes throughout the narrative. Sara-Kate is, for Hillary, a refreshing, tantalizing break from her everyday mundane existence. The "magic" of the elves is the magic of a hard-worn friendship with a special person.



# Chapters 3 and 4

## Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

Chapter 3: Despite Sara-Kate's unusual behavior, Hillary is captivated by the idea of the magical elves, and especially by the notion of a miniature Ferris wheel. After school, at about three in the afternoon, Hillary creeps over to the Connolly's backyard. While her friends' warnings are echoing in the back of her mind, Hillary is too tempted by seeing the elf village again to stop.

Hillary finds Sara-Kate sitting, slumped on a pile of wooden planks. Sara-Kate immediately lights up when she sees Hillary, and displays none of the anger or hurt she had at school. Sara-Kate introduces Hillary to the Ferris wheel, and Hillary is indeed impressed. Its main structure is made from two bicycle wheels without rubber, and popsicle sticks are hanging from strings to act as long seats. Sara-Kate says she can't figure out how the elves are able to power the wheel: it must be magic. Sara-Kate gives the wheel a spin, and it offers a beautiful kaleidoscopic effect. Sara-Kate invites Hillary to spin the wheel, which she does.

Hillary wonders how the world must appear to the tiny elves, calling them strange and little. This angers Sara-Kate, who won't have elves insulted in her presence. Sara-Kate makes Hillary promise she will put herself in the position of the elves from now on, and not be so judgmental. After all, size as well as strangeness are relative terms.

Hillary gets a tickling sensation that tells her an elf or elves may be watching them, and Sara-Kate confesses she gets the very same feeling. Hillary believes in the elves, but wonders why they don't appear, since Hillary and Sara-Kate mean them no harm. Sara-Kate theorizes that elves have been hurt by humans in the past, and as such they are very mistrustful. Still, Sara-Kate hopes the elves will come to trust them.

Chapter 4: Hillary spends the next days obsessing about the elves and trying to think like them. She spends much of her time with Sara-Kate, who always has a wealth of information about the habits and culture of the elves. This fixation angers Hillary's friends, Jane and Alison, who figure Sara-Kate is tricking Hillary or maybe has put a spell on her. Jane and Alison make fun of Sara-Kate's "white mush" lunch, which is actually Cream of Wheat cereal Sara-Kate eats because she apparently has allergies to many "normal" foods. Jane and Alison also believe Sara-Kate's father is in jail because of armed robbery, but Hillary disputes this. Hillary spends almost every afternoon with Sara-Kate at the elf village.

One day, a rainstorm wrecks two of the leaf-roofed houses of the village. Hillary bends down to repair them, but Sara-Kate orders her to stop: only the elves can build the houses right. Instead, Sara-Kate and Hillary go about finding proper gifts for the elves. Everything in the ugly, brambly yard turns out to be ideal food for the magical elves according to Sara-Kate, from mushrooms to berries and other strange plants. Hillary



wonders whether they should give the elves any presents to protect them from the cold, but Sara-Kate says the elves have very thick skin and prefer being outdoors no matter the weather.

One afternoon, Sara-Kate says that her mother wants her to come inside, and she goes inside the house. Hillary catches a glimpse of a very pale and very frightening face in the window, and figures it must be Sara-Kate's mother.

## Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

Sara-Kate's world of the elves captivates Hillary, and several passages are devoted to the psychology of Hillary's anticipation over coming to Sara-Kate's home again and discovering more things about the elves. Sara-Kate's mesmerism is not colored as bullying or deception; she appears completely genuine in her long discussions about the habits and culture of the elves. It is made increasingly clear that the value of the elf world lies in its ability to bring these two girls together. They are very different girls, and all of Hillary's friends and family members are lukewarm to the prospect of Hillary hanging out with the strange Sara-Kate, so the ability for the elves to instigate a friendship between the two is its own kind of magic. Moreover, like the elf world and the backyard village, the girls' friendship is secret and special, and unknowable to outsiders who may not be perceptive enough to understand or appreciate it.

The author hangs on several details of the village. Among them are the hypnotic beauty of the spinning Ferris wheel, and all the odd mushrooms or plants the girls gather as food for the elves. These are two examples that provide a child-centric view of the universe. To adults or the dull girls at school who don't understand, the yard is simply a tangle of brambles and junk that needs a good cleaning and mowing. But to the open-minded Hillary and Sara-Kate, the yard is a fantastic world full of possibilities. In addition to the theme of "you can't judge a book by its cover," a related theme emerges, one urging the reader to appreciate what they have, and to find magic in the ordinary world.



# Chapters 5 and 6

## Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

Chapter 5: The weather turns unusually warm, which puts everyone in a good mood. Mr. Lenox works on his yard outside, and he has a funny habit of talking to his plants. Hillary and Sara-Kate observe this behavior and share a laugh. Over the course of the days and weeks, Hillary and Sara-Kate develop a friendship. Sara-Kate shows Hillary where the worst poison ivy is in the yard, and how to avoid it. Mrs. Lenox still doesn't understand why Hillary insists on associating with weird Sara-Kate, but she lets the girls be. Hillary comes to regard Sara-Kate as less and less ugly and strange, though her personality is still abrasive. In particular, Sara-Kate snaps when asked anything about her mother, lashing out in anger or changing the subject.

The elves have apparently started a network of roads, but Sara-Kate explains that road-making is not their strength, so the girls decide to help the elves build the roads. Using knowledge from school, Hillary becomes a map-maker, charting out the various areas and landmarks of Sara-Kate's extensive backyard. Hillary comes to enjoy finding all the unique crevices of the yard, and all the interesting plants and pieces of junk. Of course, Hillary also enjoys finding more evidence of the elves' presence, which is everywhere.

Hillary wonders why they never hear the elves talking, and Sara-Kate responds that they probably use language that sounds just like the natural sounds of nature, like birds chirping and wind rustling. Hillary also wonders at the purpose of an old tin pan filled with water and strange little wooden blocks. Hillary thinks the pan is a swimming pool, with the tiny wood blocks the equivalent of water rafts, but Sara-Kate responds that Hillary is thinking too much like a human. For all they know, the structure could be a magical device to capture starlight to use to power the city. Hillary loves this idea, and thinks Sara-Kate is very imaginative and clever.

The weather turns significantly colder, but Sara-Kate never wears any extra layers of clothing, just like the elves, who Sara-Kate says have thick skin.

Chapter 6: The narrator begins by noting that Hillary has never been inside Sara-Kate's house, nor has she ever been invited. Sara-Kate never seems to want to break for a snack; instead, Hillary has caught Sara-Kate eating berries in the yard on several occasions. Jane and Alison at school continue to mock Sara-Kate, calling her an elf. They ask why Hillary is being so "stupid" by hanging out with weird Sara-Kate, and Hillary tells them to shut up.

Beyond the day Hillary had caught a glimpse of Sara-Kate's mother in the window, Hillary has never seen the woman. But Hillary knows she exists, because Sara-Kate is constantly running errands for her. Hillary has even started to accompany her to places like the drugstore to pick up a prescription or the store to pick up milk. Hillary is amazed at Sara-Kate's maturity in handling money and making adult transactions.





One day, Sara-Kate and Hillary go to the telephone company because Sara-Kate's phone has been turned off. A customer service person questions Sara-Kate about where her mother is, and Sara-Kate says she is sick. That fact is about the only scrap of information Hillary gets about the mother.

Only about the magical elves is Sara-Kate talkative, and the two girls continue their adventures in the backyard. Sara-Kate claims that one has to train oneself to see elves, since they are so clever and evasive. Hillary learns to stare at trees and bushes for long periods of time and, sure enough, she swears she could see a flash of an elf foot or elbow. Meanwhile, winter is coming, and vegetation is starting to die. Hillary's father's own garden is shriveling and browning.

Hillary's parents don't want her to spend so much time with Sara-Kate; they'd rather have Jane and Alison over to the house for a sleepover. One day in November, Hillary visits Sara-Kate, but she's not in the yard. In fact, Sara-Kate had not come to school for three days, and the elf village lay in disrepair and neglect. Hillary bravely knocks on the door of the house, but there is no answer. The door is unlocked, and Hillary steps into the house.

## Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

These middle chapters involve two divergent narrative streams. In the main plot and the main interest of the novel, Hillary and Sara-Kate's friendship, Hillary comes to regard Sara-Kate more as a friend as the weeks progress and they spend more time together. Hillary learns to cherish, instead of mock, fear, or avoid, Sara-Kate's numerous eccentricities; indeed, these unique traits make Sara-Kate even more special and endearing. Hillary's virtuous tolerance and personal growth, seeing the good in Sara-Kate, instead of the odd girl everyone else sees, is meant to be emulated by the young reader in his or her own dealings with children at school or elsewhere.

On the topic of Hillary's personal growth, her journey is also evident in a sort of increased perception with respect to Sara-Kate's backyard. Whereas in the beginning, Hillary could only see junk and weeds, Hillary comes to discover all sorts of evidence of elf life. Some of this evidence has been planted by Sara-Kate, but some of it has been invented by Hillary in her mind. Naturally, and especially given Hillary's young age and impressionable nature, this perception is not characterized as the product of a deluded mind. It is the author's call to the reader to embrace his or her own creativity, to remain optimistic about the possibilities of the world and about the beauty of nature.

At the same time that Hillary and Sara-Kate grow close, outside circumstances continue to pressure and threaten the newfound relationship. Mrs. Lenox continues to dislike the notion of Hillary spending so much time at Sara-Kate's, something Hillary must strongly resist. The girls at school, Jane and Alison, continue to insult Sara-Kate and question Hillary's friendship with her. Finally, there is also Sara-Kate's secretive nature, particularly with respect to her phantom-like mother, and her anger or aloofness whenever Hillary questions Sara-Kate about her home life. All of these factors conspire

to threaten the relationship, creating plenty of dramatic conflict to oppose the continuation of the friendship.



# Chapters 7 and 8

## Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

Chapter 7: The house seems just as mysterious and odd to Hillary as the elf village does. The place is disheveled, with random furniture gathered in a circle in the living room, and everything disassembled and rearranged. There is a fine mist of dust on everything, and the house seems abandoned. Hillary figures Sara-Kate and her mother took off for Florida or somewhere else.

The second room Hillary enters is completely bare of furniture. Insect bodies litter the floor and cobwebs cover the ceiling, as if the room has been that way for years. Hillary discovers the staircase leading to the second floor, but she gets a chill and decides not to climb the stairs.

However, the sound of a strange rolling or knocking comes from the upstairs. Hillary knows she should run, that the situation seems dangerous and wrong, but she is frozen. She recalls Sara-Kate telling her that elves never go inside unless they have to, from intense cold. Hillary thus figures that the knocking upstairs is the sound of the magical elves.

Overwhelmed by curiosity, Hillary climbs the stairs, readying herself to truly see these elves for the first time. At the end of the hallway upstairs, yellow light pours from a room, and Hillary wonders if the light is magical. Hillary turns the knob and opens the door.

Sara-Kate is seated in a rocking chair in the room. On her lap is her ailing, pale mother, in a horrific scene. Hillary, in her shock, tells herself that the elves heard her coming, abandoned the room, and substituted this bizarre scene to confuse her.

Sara-Kate reacts with surprise and fury at Hillary's arrival, yelling at her to get out and go home. Hillary tries to protest. Sara-Kate carefully lays her mother in the rocking chair and then confronts Hillary. Sara-Kate tells Hillary to forget what she saw here, never tell anybody, and never come back, or it'll be "the end of you." Hillary runs out of the house horrified.

Chapter 8: Initially, the shocking scene in the house seems like a fantasy or dream to Hillary, and she is able to push it out of her mind. School and home life continue as normal, and Sara-Kate is soon forgotten. Everyone figures Sara-Kate moved, and everyone is fine with that.

However, Hillary is soon haunted by the memory of Sara-Kate and her sick mother. She is torn between the notion that it must have been an elf-made illusion, and the notion that it could have been real. Hillary sometimes mutters for the memories to stop, slightly alarming Jane and Alison.



Hillary has a chat with her father. Mr. Lenox is going to build a trellis for some of his plants for next season. The subject of Sara-Kate comes up, and Hillary finds herself defending the good qualities of her friend, despite what everyone around Hillary tells her. However, Hillary does not divulge her secret about what she witnessed in the house. Mr. Lenox remarks that he saw Sara-Kate a few days ago, running an errand for her mother. Hillary is incredulous, but Mr. Lenox insists he saw the girl on a drive home. He witnessed Sara-Kate running home.

## Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

By Chapter 7, the forces pressuring the girls' relationship become too much, and the bond is broken in spectacular fashion. Chapter 7 turns sharply into horror territory, with Hillary discovering the inside of Sara-Kate's home. The foreshadowing before this point—Sara-Kate's mother's ghostly visage in the window, Sara-Kate's odd behavior, the trip to the telephone company during which Sara-Kate revealed her mother is sick—all contribute to a sense of impending horror and dread, beginning with the disconcerting arrangement of furniture in the living room, and culminating in the shocking reveal of Sara-Kate in a rocking chair clutching her sickly mother in her lap. Honestly, there is confusion at that point as to whether Sara-Kate's mother is even alive or dead, compounding the horror of the scene.

Again paying particular attention to psychology, the author has Hillary dealing with her encounter like a victim of serious trauma. With the scene perhaps too difficult to fully comprehend, Hillary concocts a scenario in which the elves have conspired to create the illusion of Sara-Kate and her mother. Afterward, in Chapter 8, Hillary seems to temporarily disavow the scene entirely, retreating back into her normal life instead of addressing what she saw. The town's inhabitants also seem to disavow the very existence of Sara-Kate, and soon no one is talking about her and she is but a distant memory. But the trauma is too great to be repressed, and soon Hillary is struggling to make it through the day without her mind being bombarded with images from the house. The psychology of this entire episode is finely-wrought, and quite layered for a children's book.



# Chapters 9 and 10

## Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

Chapter 9: Struck by her father's revelations about seeing Sara-Kate on the street, Hillary goes to her room at bedtime but guiltily sneaks out of the home in order to observe Sara-Kate's house. A large storm is coming, and the temperature is quite frigid, but Hillary is determined to watch the house to see if there is even the faintest sign of activity. She recalls her mother's uncanny ability to catch her reading with a flashlight under her covers after bedtime, and knows that she could see even a little light coming from Sara-Kate's house.

Hillary waits and waits, but nothing stirs. She is about to give up when she spies a figure—Sara-Kate—emerging from the home. Sara-Kate walks across the yard and through the wrecked elf-village, and then bends to pick up and right the fallen Ferris wheel. Hillary becomes brave enough to approach Sara-Kate and say her name. Sara-Kate seems to have lost much of her anger, and she invites Hillary to come over tomorrow to help clean up and renovate the elf village. In the darkness, Sara-Kate spins the Ferris wheel, and Hillary swears the wheel moved by itself because of elf magic. Still enchanted, Hillary agrees to help Sara-Kate, still believing in the magic of the elves.

Chapter 10: Hillary runs back to her home, and manages to slip back inside her bedroom before her mother notices she is gone. Her head racing, Hillary decides that Sara-Kate is an elf; it's the only explanation for her strange behavior, her fast running when Mr. Lenox saw her, her eating of berries in the yard, and her lack of a coat outside in the cold. Hillary believes that Sara-Kate is the head elf for a community of elves she protects.

The next morning, the blizzard has hit, and there is no school. Mr. Lenox is hopelessly fumbling in the yard, looking for a screwdriver, and before he can plow the drive, Hillary is off to Sara-Kate's house. The elf village has become completely buried in snow. Sara-Kate and Hillary get together to excavate the village, so to speak. Hillary is disappointed that there is little in the way of elf magic, and lots in the way of hard work, involved in rescuing the village from the snow. But after hours of tedious excavation, the village starts to take form again. They uncover the village well and many houses and roads.

The shadow of Sara-Kate's mother appears in a window, and Sara-Kate says she must go inside. But before she does, she nervously asks Hillary if she has any money for groceries. Sara-Kate has been struggling to provide for herself and her mother. Hillary replies she can get some money.

## Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

After a period of "repression" and a return to mundanity, Hillary's overactive imagination again wins out, and she finds herself doing the unthinkable—sneaking outside without



her parents' permission. Sara-Kate, and the fantasy and adventure she promises, has broken through Hillary's insular home life and perfect obedience. In a prevalent scenario in children's novels, the straight-laced protagonist's world has been turned upside down by a strange outsider, who teaches the protagonist to view the world in a different way. Hillary will never quite be the same, because Sara-Kate has opened up a new way of seeing.

So entranced is Hillary by Sara-Kate, Hillary believes Sara-Kate to be an elf herself, using all the new powers of perception Sara-Kate has instilled in her. The act of Sara-Kate spinning the Ferris wheel shows how Hillary's perceptions have been altered, when Hillary is utterly convinced the spinning had been done with magic. Hillary has rejected the ordinary world—the world of Jane and Alison, of school, of her family—in favor of the fantasy world she shares with Sara-Kate. Implicitly, then, Hillary has also devoted herself to Sara-Kate and their friendship.

This devotion immediately finds itself being tested with the hard, boring work in the cold that is necessary to bring the dilapidated elf village back to life. But Hillary, showing the determination that is a hallmark of her character, passes the test.



# Chapters 11 and 12

## Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

Chapter 11: Honoring her promise to get Sara-Kate and her mother some food, Hillary breaks several rules she never would have considered breaking before her time with Sara-Kate. Hillary steals ten dollars out of her mother's purse, and then goes to the supermarket without an adult. She grabs several items Sara-Kate said she wanted, and the total comes to \$13.05. Having to put something back, Hillary pretends to return a package of bologna to the cold case, but instead she pockets it, shoplifting. Hillary returns with an armful of groceries, and Sara-Kate is very pleased.

Sara-Kate invites Hillary inside to have lunch with the new food. Giddy with the prospect of food, Sara-Kate yells and plays as she makes bologna sandwiches, and the two girls have fun eating in the living room. Sara-Kate amuses Hillary by imitating "Pierre the Package," a man with no arms and legs Sara-Kate had seen in the newspaper. Sara-Kate tucks her hands behind her body and laps up milk from a glass.

Sara-Kate reveals that she is the chief steward of the household, taking care of all the bills, buying all the food, and fixing or otherwise addressing every issue that comes up. Hillary realizes Sara-Kate is truly independent, and is not just doing things her mother tells her to do. Sara-Kate has gotten by with the little bit of money her absent father sends in an envelope.

Chapter 12: Hillary asks Sara-Kate how she ever manages to keep the house in order with so little money and with a sickly mother. Sara-Kate further reveals how she steals sometimes to make ends meet. Hillary tells Sara-Kate she should ask for help, and not just try to do things alone. Sara-Kate responds that if the world knew how she lived, they would invade her home and separate her from her mother. Sara-Kate feels that she is not like Hillary, and that she can never be a part of Hillary's perfect world. People like Sara-Kate have to live on the fringes of society.

Hillary asks Sara-Kate if she is an elf. Sara-Kate seems ready to confess, but before she can say anything, Hillary's mother is at the door knocking and yelling for Hillary. Hillary rushes for her coat and rushes to the door in an attempt to allay any suspicion and keep Mrs. Lenox from the truth of Sara-Kate's situation.

## Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

The events of Chapter 11, including Hillary stealing from her mother, going to the grocery store alone, and stealing from the store, represent a coming of age for Hillary, a maturation. Sara-Kate has had to grow up too fast because of her mother's illness, and in support of her friend, Hillary has now embraced growing up as well. Understanding Sara-Kate's desperate circumstances, Hillary is mature enough to break the rules in order to get Sara-Kate the food she needs. Hillary's devotion also manifests itself in the



girl's refusal to tell anyone about Sara-Kate's plight. Like the elf village, Sara-Kate's circumstances are their little secret.

However, the fantasy world Hillary has erected begins to crumble a bit when Hillary presses Sara-Kate as to how she is able to maintain the household. Sara-Kate's answers—stealing, sneaking into movies, faking her mother's voice on the telephone and signature on documents—are certainly not the stuff of fantasy or adventure. Hillary further matures when she realizes Sara-Kate is in trouble, that she doesn't live the life of freedom and ease she thought. Chapter 12 ends on a cliffhanger, with Mrs. Lenox banging on the door. The very continuation of Sara-Kate's living arrangement, not to mention the girls' friendship, is at stake should Mrs. Lenox discover them. The chapter thus concludes with a high degree of tension.





# Chapters 13, 14, and 15

## Chapters 13, 14, and 15 Summary

Chapter 13: Hillary answers Sara-Kate's door, and Mrs. Lenox scolds her for not coming home sooner. Hillary tries to keep the door closed to prevent Mrs. Lenox from seeing inside, but she fails and the door creaks open. Mrs. Lenox sees Sara-Kate, and the disrepair and general chaos of the house. Concerned, Mrs. Lenox asks Sara-Kate where her mother is. Sara-Kate adopts a very polite demeanor, and tries to convince Mrs. Lenox that her mother is only sleeping upstairs, and that the house is in such disorder because they are getting it renovated.

Mrs. Lenox does not believe her, and she demands to see Sara-Kate's mother. Sara-Kate asks her to leave, and Hillary begs her mother not to intrude, but Mrs. Lenox is undeterred, marching up the stairs to the mother's room. Sara-Kate, defeated, slumps down on the staircase step, while Hillary tries to get her to do something. Upstairs, Hillary hears Mrs. Lenox talking to Sara-Kate's mother.

Chapter 14: As Mrs. Lenox continues to talk to Mrs. Connolly, Hillary regards Sara-Kate in a new light. She is not the magical elf she saw before, but simply a frightened child. Mrs. Lenox comes back down the stairs, and assures Sara-Kate that everything will be okay. Then Hillary and Mrs. Lenox leave.

In the days afterward, Sara-Kate's home becomes a hotbed of people and activity. All sorts of workmen arrive to clean. Hillary must hear everything about the home and about Sara-Kate second-hand, and she is treated to sensational news reports and rumor mongering. The newspapers report that Sara-Kate has been sent to an orphanage or a mental asylum, and that Sara-Kate's mother is in the hospital and relatives have come from Kansas. Hillary is not sure what to believe. Eventually, plumbers and electricians also come to fix the home. Hillary warns amused workmen not to trample on the elf village.

Worse rumors circulate about Sara-Kate, about how she stole things and treated her ailing mother badly. Mrs. Lenox tries to convince Hillary that maybe Sara-Kate was never really her friend, that maybe Sara-Kate used her and told her lies, but Hillary doesn't believe it. One day, Hillary hears that Sara-Kate has moved away to Kansas to stay with relatives, and she is sad that they never got to say goodbye. Hillary also believes Sara-Kate now hates her because it is Hillary who had gotten her caught.

Chapter 15: Many days pass, and Hillary misses Sara-Kate. Considering her an innocent victim, everyone at school treats Hillary very kindly, including her teachers and Jane and Alison. Jane and Alison are condescending and smug, and Hillary yells at them, blaming them for what happened to Sara-Kate.



Hillary finds herself angry at Sara-Kate, for not saying goodbye and for abandoning the precious elf village. Hillary thinks about her time with Sara-Kate, and more and more things make sense with respect to Sara-Kate's odd behavior. Hillary observes that Sara-Kate had eaten Cream of Wheat at lunch because that had been the cheapest thing that would fill her up. And she realizes that Sara-Kate had only been secretive and strange because she had been afraid the situation with her mother would come to light. Maybe Sara-Kate is not an elf after all.

Still, Hillary finds herself caring about the elf village. Sara-Kate's house is completely renovated, and soon real estate people come to sell it to another family. Hillary informs her mother she will move the elf village to their yard, to a patch of weeds about which her father won't care.

## Chapters 13, 14, and 15 Analysis

Chapter 13: Sara-Kate and Hillary's fantasy world finally crumbles when adulthood intrudes in the form of Mrs. Lenox. Generally speaking, Mrs. Lenox's intrusion into the home is symbolic of each girl growing up, of facing reality.

The rampant rumor mongering that occurs in the local press with respect to Sara-Kate's situation is typical of the adult, ordinary world portrayed. The cruel world does not understand the value of Sara-Kate, and the specialness of the friendship between the two girls. This includes Hillary's own mother, who tries to convince Hillary that she had been bullied or deceived. No one has Sara-Kate's unique perspective on the world, a perspective she shared with Hillary. The ordinary world is unable to perceive magic, as personified in the elves.

In the end, Hillary goes through a period of doubting Sara-Kate, understanding Sara-Kate's behavior in light of her dire circumstances, and finally embracing fantasy and imagination once again by restarting the elf village in her own yard. Hillary's choice to make the village in the most bramble-covered, weedy section of the yard displays the wisdom she has accumulated. She knows that magic can be found in the most unlikely of places, as with Sara-Kate.



# Characters

## Hillary Lenox

Hillary is nine years old, and the protagonist of the novel. She is sweet, good-natured, intellectually curious, and young enough to still believe in magic. She has two friends at school, Jane and Alison, and is a good and obedient student. She has a to which family she is very close, including Mr. and Mrs. Lenox.

Hillary's maturation begins when she meets Sara-Kate Connolly and is introduced to the elf village in Sara-Kate's backyard. Hillary is enchanted and entranced by the notion of magical tiny elves living in the yard, and she enthusiastically helps Sara-Kate build, improve, and maintain the village. Hillary shows herself to be of strong character and will when she repeatedly refuses to listen to others' opinions about Sara-Kate. Others believe Sara-Kate is weird and will only lead Hillary to trouble, but Hillary remains stubbornly loyal to Sara-Kate. In the span of a few weeks, Hillary grows close to Sara-Kate, considering her a better friend than the superficial Jane and Alison.

From Sara-Kate, Hillary learns to pay closer attention to her surroundings. Ostensibly, this enhanced perception is used for the purpose of detecting elves, but in a broader sense, Hillary learns to appreciate life and, especially, nature more. When Sara-Kate's mentally ill mother is located, Hillary grows through a process of sadness, anger, and denial, before finally settling on a reaffirmation of magic, vowing to continue Sara-Kate's legacy by staging the elf village in her own yard.

## Sara-Kate Connolly

Sara-Kate is eleven years old, two years older than Hillary. At school, she is regarded as a weirdo. She eats strange things at lunch like Cream of Wheat cereal, she sulks and is anti-social, and she dresses in strange, mismatched clothes. Students like Jane and Alison make fun of Sara-Kate for her eccentricities, and she is not well-liked.

Sara-Kate befriends Hillary and shows her the elf village in her backyard. Sara-Kate is gruff and short-tempered with Hillary, but Hillary is persistent and she tolerates Sara-Kate's oddness and abuse. Sara-Kate teaches Hillary to be very observant in the yard, for one never knows where and when an elf may appear. Sara-Kate is a walking encyclopedia of wisdom about the elves, and she speaks at length about their customs. By contrast, Sara-Kate is evasive about her home life.

In reality, Sara-Kate's mother is very sick, physically and mentally, and Sara-Kate has been the leader of the household, buying groceries, paying bills, and dealing with adults. Her mother's illness has forced her to grow up too quickly. Sara-Kate has transformed the family home to deal with issues, like the failing furnace and her mother's infirmities.



In the end, Sara-Kate's living conditions are exposed, and she is forced to move away to Kansas with her relatives. Her legacy lives on, however, in the form of the elf village which Hillary transfers to her own yard.

## **Mrs. Connolly**

Mrs. Connolly suffers from both physical and mental illness, and she is sickly and confined to her home. Sara-Kate has stepped up to handle household duties in her mother's absence. Mrs. Connolly's inability to work has created a financial crisis in the household.

## **Mr. Lenox**

Mr. Lenox, Hillary's father, provides a bit of comic relief in the novel. He is always absentmindedly puttering around his prized garden. He regards Sara-Kate's backyard with disdain, because he fears its weeds will infest his own perfect yard.

## **Mrs. Lenox**

Mrs. Lenox is Hillary's mother. Like the rest of the town, Mrs. Lenox is suspicious of Sara-Kate, and thinks her daughter should not be spending time with the strange girl. It is Mrs. Lenox who forces her way inside the Connolly home to investigate Sara-Kate's living conditions.

## **Jane**

Jane is one of Hillary's classmates and friends at school. She is very suspicious of Sara-Kate, and mocks the girl for her eccentricities. Along with Alison, she urges Hillary not to spend time with Sara-Kate.

## **Alison**

Alison is one of Hillary's classmates and friends at school. She is very suspicious of Sara-Kate, and mocks the girl for her eccentricities. Along with Jane, she urges Hillary not to spend time with Sara-Kate.

## **Customer Service Representative**

The customer service representative receives a check from Sara-Kate to restore phone service. The representative probes Sara-Kate about the whereabouts of Sara-Kate's mother, and Sara-Kate responds that her mother is ill.



## **Grocery Store Clerk**

Hillary fools the store clerk by pretending to return a package of bologna to the cold case, only to shoplift it by shoving it in her pocket.

## **Connolly Family Relatives**

Family relatives fly in from Kansas after news breaks of Sara-Kate's mother and the condition of the home. Sara-Kate winds up living with these relatives and moving to Kansas.



## Objects/Places

### The Elf Village

Sara-Kate creates a tiny elf village from the junk and weeds of her backyard, and invites Hillary to help improve it and care for it. Over their passion for the magical village, the girls develop a strong bond.

### The Ferris Wheel

The most spectacular feature of the elf village is a Ferris wheel made with bicycle wheels for the structure and popsicle sticks for the seats.

### Sara-Kate's Backyard

Sara-Kate's backyard is the site of the elf village. It is neglected and full of weeds and old junk, but it becomes the perfect playground of the imagination for Sara-Kate and Hillary.

### Hillary's Backyard

In contrast to Sara-Kate's backyard, Hillary's backyard is impeccably preened by Mr. Lenox. The garden reflects Hillary's own ordered, restricted life.

### Sara-Kate's House

Sara-Kate's house becomes a source of wonder and fear for Hillary, as she is never invited inside. The inside is a neglected mess of overturned furniture and junk because Sara-Kate repurposed furniture to suit her own needs.

### Cream of Wheat cereal

Sara-Kate brings Cream of Wheat cereal to school for lunch. The kids make fun of her, and there are rumors that Sara-Kate has allergies to "normal" foods. Hillary later reasons that Cream of Wheat had simply been the cheapest thing Sara-Kate could buy to fill her up.



## **Berries**

Hillary catches Sara-Kate eating berries from bushes in her yard. Hillary figures this is elf-like behavior, and that Sara-Kate is an elf, but she later reasons that Sara-Kate had been starving and had eaten berries out of desperation.

## **Bologna**

Hillary steals money from her mother to pay for groceries, and she doesn't have enough money for a package of bologna. Rather than putting the bologna back, she pockets it, shoplifting.

## **Rocking Chair**

In a startling scene, Hillary discovers Sara-Kate in a rocking chair, rocking her sickly mother in her lap.

## **Tiny Roads**

Sara-Kate reveals that elves are not very good at road making, so the girls spend much time mapping out the backyard and creating a system of roads for the elf village. Through this activity, Hillary and Sara-Kate grow closer.



# Themes

## Appearances Can Be Deceiving

Throughout the narrative, the author stresses that appearances can be deceiving, and that many things—be they situations, nature, or people—deserve close scrutiny to discover the beauty or value within. This theme is presented first with the elf village, and secondly with Sara-Kate herself.

The elf village is built from the junk and brambles of Sara-Kate's backyard. While people like Mr. Lenox would quickly dismiss the place as a weed patch that needs a good mow, Sara-Kate is able to show Hillary the magic and beauty contained in the seeming ugliness. From ordinary objects like popsicle sticks, leaves, and bicycle wheels, the girls are able to create a wonderland to explore.

Closely related to the village is Sara-Kate. Like her brambly backyard, she is odd and ugly, and no one is able to see the value in the strange girl. But Hillary gives her a chance, and Hillary is able to get beyond the surface to see the valuable friend underneath the mismatched clothes and strange behaviors.

This theme is echoed in the final passage in which Hillary decides to rebuild the elf village in a brambly, neglected patch of weeds in her own backyard. No doubt she has acquired the wisdom necessary to realize the beauty where others see only ugliness.

## The Danger of Rumors

Afternoon of the Elves shows the danger of spreading rumors and creating false impressions about people. Sara-Kate is ridiculed at school about her odd behavior. As someone who is "other," Sara-Kate is the victim of malicious lies and rumors. Jane and Alison spread a rumor about how the new bike Sara-Kate had ridden last spring was stolen. This causes Hillary to think of other minor missing items—a pencil case, and missing equipment from art class—and to blame Sara-Kate for their disappearance. Rumors are shown to have a snowball effect, raging out of control to the point they no longer reflect reality.

Rumors return when Sara-Kate's mother is discovered and Sara-Kate is tended to by authorities. The newspaper revels in spreading sensational and, most likely, untrue rumors about Sara-Kate, how she was given to an orphanage, or how she caused her poor mother to go insane. This time, however, Hillary has acquired enough perspective to reject these spurious claims. She has learned that a person's reputation is not always true, and that one must judge a person or thing first-hand, not second- or third-hand. Rumors damage Sara-Kate because they create incorrect perceptions that lead to harsh judgments, ostracization, and hurtful insults. A wise person does not allow unfounded rumors to cloud one's judgment.





## Community Versus the Individual

Afternoon of the Elves weighs the various advantages of the individual versus the community. Clearly, remaining an individual provides a certain freedom. Sara-Kate is able to move about the town as she pleases, and she gets to order the home and spend her time however she wants. Sara-Kate is also able to create the elf village, showing that the individual has a unique capacity to dream. By contrast, the community is quite stifling. Hillary is unhappy with the lack of freedom from which she suffers in her insular family and school environments. And the community frowns upon individual expression and creativity in the form of the elf village. No one but Hillary can see the beauty and magic in Sara-Kate's brambly back yard.

However, the issue is not black and white. It is equally clear that Sara-Kate is suffering in her isolation. Despite her freedom, Sara-Kate is agitated, lonely, and directionless. Without the help of a family or community structure, Sara-Kate can barely scrape by, and she lives in what amounts to a dilapidated shack.

In the end, Hillary appears to strike the right balance between individual expression and the need to conform to the community. She settles back into ordinary school and home life, but she insists on maintaining the elf village—that is to say, she insists on maintaining her individuality—in a small but significant section of her yard.



# Style

## Point of View

Afternoon of the Elves is told with third-person limited perspective. The reader is very closely allied with the character of Hillary Lenox. The reader is privy to Hillary's thoughts and emotions, and the reader discovers events and facts along with Hillary. For example, the reader learns about the reputation of Sara-Kate through Hillary thinking about the girl. The fact that the reader is restricted to Hillary's sphere of knowledge is important for some of the dramatic revelations of the story. For example, only gradually does the reader, right along with Hillary, realize the nature of Mrs. Connolly's condition, and how desperate Sara-Kate's situation is.

Allied so closely with Hillary, narration approaches subjects with a child-like innocence. The elf village is regarded with wonder, and to Hillary's mind, the whole situation is entirely plausible and real. Sara-Kate is also regarded as a kind of magical figure, and Hillary invents scenarios in which Sara-Kate is actually an elf herself. Hillary absorbs all of Sara-Kate's information about the elves like a sponge, and so the reader is exposed to all the different rules that govern the elves.

Author Janet Taylor Lisle betrays a love for nature throughout the narrative. The seasons, as well as the flora and fauna in Sara-Kate's backyard, are described in loving detail.

## Setting

The novel takes place in modern day, though the novel has a timeless quality, and it does not date itself by referring to technological gadgets, current world events, or similar things. As for the location, the exact place is never revealed. The lack of time-frame specificity, along with the lack of location specificity, result in a timeless quality to the narrative.

While the exact location and time are not revealed, a few particulars make the setting very important to the story. The passing of the seasons is very definite, with the beauty of fall and its variegated leaves giving way to the deep chill and snow of winter. The narrative follows a similar pattern with respect to emotion and plot. That is, Hillary and Sara-Kate's friendship is colored as fragile and doomed to end, much like the leaves falling from the trees in autumn. With winter, the true desperate state of Sara-Kate's living arrangement becomes clear, and the friendship ends in the dead of winter. In this scenario, Hillary's promise to renew the elf village in her own backyard is a redemptive spring to the rest of the novel's fall and winter.

Setting is further defined by a small-town sensibility, such as the vicious rumor mongering that goes on at the school and in the local papers. Caught in a picket-fence,



middle America mundanity, Hillary yearns for something more, and gets it when Sara-Kate shows her the brave new world of the elves.

## Language and Meaning

Author Janet Taylor Lisle's descriptions of natural objects in the backyard are particularly evocative, demonstrating a love for the beauty of nature that is imparted in the text. One of the primary themes of the book involves finding beauty in ordinary or even "ugly" circumstances, so it is appropriate that Lisle uses a certain lyricism when describing the elf village and its environs, mirroring Hillary and Sara-Kate's own enchantment about that world. Lisle is also extremely sensitive to the passing of seasons, incorporating many vivid descriptions about the weather into her narrative.

Lisle is also adept at using language to penetrate Hillary's mind and expose the underlying psychology behind her perspective and some of her choices. Lisle is able to address complex psychological issues perhaps usually reserved for adult books, such as the trauma Hillary suffers when she sees Sara-Kate's sickly mother, or the resulting repression of that scene when Hillary attempts to erase Sara-Kate from her mind, and state these issues in an accessible, no-nonsense manner, a manner free of psychological jargon which young readers will be able to understand.

Lisle trusts in her readers' intelligence, and there is little evidence that she "dumbed down" the vocabulary of the novel to suit a younger reader with a limited vocabulary. Vocabulary would be appropriate for a reader in middle school, and likely a challenge for a student in elementary school.

## Structure

Afternoon of the Elves is divided into fifteen untitled chapters. The novel proceeds in chronological order, beginning with Hillary's first encounter with the elf village in Sara-Kate's backyard, and culminating in Hillary's decision to remake the elf village in her own yard after Sara-Kate has been taken away. Chapter divisions usually come with logical breaks in the story narrative. For example, Chapter Seven deals with Hillary's first frightening experience in Sara-Kate's home, and Chapter Eight deals with the immediate aftermath of that encounter. Chapters often end with tense cliffhangers that help spur reader interest and help propel the reader forward. For example, Chapter Twelve ends with Mrs. Lenox knocking at Sara-Kate's door, threatening to expose the circumstances of Sara-Kate's living arrangements. And Chapter Four ends with Hillary glancing up to see Sara-Kate's mother's ghostly face in the window, creating many questions in the reader's mind.

The novel smartly builds in obstacles that threaten the relationship between Hillary and Sara-Kate, culminating in Mrs. Lenox exposing Sara-Kate's living conditions. These obstacles include Jane and Alison mocking Sara-Kate and urging Hillary not to befriend her, Mrs. Lenox advising Hillary not to spend so much time at Sara-Kate's, Sara-Kate

not showing up for school, and similar events. These obstacles preserve dramatic conflict about the friendship.

## Quotes

"Hillary looked at [Sara-Kate] suspiciously then. It wasn't that she didn't believe so much as that she couldn't right away put Sara-Kate on the side of magic. There never had been one pretty thing about her. Nothing soft or mysterious." (Chapter 1, page 2)

"'Nobody sees them [the elves],' Hillary said. 'Not even Sara-Kate. They go away when they hear people coming. Elves are very private persons. Sara-Kate said they used to be seen in the old days, but not now because there are too many people around and they're frightened. Elves haven't been seen for a hundred years.'" (Chapter 2, page 12)

"Sara-Kate was too strange. Her house was too shabby. Hillary should have stayed home, safe in her kitchen. She should have read a book or baked a cake with her mother. There were ten other things she might have done, but, by the thinnest thread of enchantment, the elf village was drawing her." (Chapter 3, page 16)

"Short of being ordered away, Hillary wouldn't have stopped coming to the yard for anything. The place fascinated her, and she liked the idea that she was beginning to know its parts: the stumps, the rocks, the junk heaps, and the hidden places where the tiny weed flowers bloomed." (Chapter 5, page 35)

"Sara-Kate almost never spoke about herself. She never told stories about her family. If Hillary forgot and questioned her too closely on some personal matter, Sara-Kate snapped at her. Or she was silent, as if she had not heard." (Chapter 6, page 43)

"Hillary did not believe what she saw. She looked again and again and could not understand. Then she understood. The elves had played a trick on her after all. They had sensed her coming at the final moment and vanished through the walls. They had substituted another scene to confuse her." (Chapter 7, page 55)

"Evidence can have several different meanings [...] It can add up to different answers depending on how it is looked at. And that seemed the only way the problem could be resolved. For when Hillary added up the evidence on one side, it came to one unmistakable answer: elves! But when she looked at the facts from another point of view, there was no possible explanation but that Sara-Kate and her mother had been in that room all the time." (Chapter 8, page 62)

"Hillary stayed awake for hours that night. When she slept at last, she entered dreams that were filled with magic and the impossible possibilities of things, dreams that, oddly



enough, were not so different from what was happening to her in her real waking life at that moment." (Chapter 10, page 76)

"In fact, [Hillary had] felt the opposite of fear: a slow-rising excitement. The day was so bright, the snow was so deep. There was a lawlessness in the air, a sense of regular rules not applying, of their being canceled, like school." (Chapter 11, page 85)

"Hillary could never finally decide who this small, fierce person [Sara-Kate] was. She could never decide if she was cruel or warm-hearted, magic or ordinary, thick-skinned or fragile, a friend or a fraud." (Chapter 12, page 96)

"Hillary could stand guard over the elf village but she could not protect Sara-Kate from the things that people continued to say about her. She could not stop the whispered stories, the mean remarks." (Chapter 14, page 109)

"[Hillary] would glance toward the Ferris wheel and see again how it had glowed and spun on that extraordinary night, and hear the bird cry that had sounded when it seemed least possible. She would remember how Sara-Kate had trusted her and been betrayed, how she had revealed herself and been hurt, and how every single thing Sara-Kate had taught her about elves had turned out to be true about the thin girl herself." (Chapter 15, pages 120-21)

## Topics for Discussion

What about Sara-Kate makes her eccentric and "weird"?

What are the features of the elf village? What is its geography? How do Hillary and Sara-Kate improve the village?

What are some characteristics of the elves, as Sara-Kate describes them? How might these characteristics relate to Sara-Kate herself?

Why doesn't Mrs. Lenox want Hillary to associate with Sara-Kate? Why don't Jane and Alison want Hillary to associate with Sara-Kate?

What kinds of things does Sara-Kate do to maintain her household?

How does the town respond to the revelation about Mrs. Connolly's mental and physical illness? Why are Hillary and the author critical of this response?

How does Hillary respond to seeing Sara-Kate in the rocking chair with her sick mother? In the days that follow, with what does Hillary mentally struggle?