

An Awfully Big Adventure Study Guide

An Awfully Big Adventure by Beryl Bainbridge

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Plot Summary

Stella lives with her Uncle Vernon and Aunt Lily in their boarding house in Liverpool, England. She is a willful young woman with a lively imagination. Stella is unable to complete her formal schooling due to her inability to concentrate on her studies. Uncle Vernon is sure that the theater is a perfect way to channel her imagination and her emotions. He uses his connections with the theater manager's brother to get Stella an audition.

Almost immediately, Stella is infatuated with the theater's handsome director, Meredith Potter, who hires her as an apprentice. She runs errands, works backstage, does a bit of acting and performs a number of other duties. The members of the theater company are soon charmed by Stella. She is very talkative and loves to tell stories. They enjoy her naive attempts at sophistication and her bright, bold spirit. Stella is delighted to be welcomed as a member of this creative family.

Although Stella's beloved Meredith seems oblivious to her romantically, several of the adult males in the company find her more than attractive. Two of them make inappropriate advances, but Stella takes it in stride. It occurs to her that it would be a good idea to practice so that she'll be a good lover when Meredith is ready for her. Because of this, she reciprocates when young Geoffrey makes some advances, but she really doesn't care for him and finally pushes him away.

The members of the company have many personal challenges, and - as one would expect with people of the theater - their personal lives are often melodramatic. In the midst of it all, the theater season is a great success until the lead actor, Richard St. Ives, breaks his leg just before the opening of *Peter Pan*. P.L. O'Hara, an excellent actor with a bit of fame in the repertory circuit, is called in to play the pivotal role of Captain Hook.

O'Hara has a long history with this company and with Liverpool. The memories it evokes for him are painful yet sweet. O'Hara finds himself drawn in a familiar way toward Stella. Stella realizes that he is the perfect person to give her some experience, and she easily offers him her virginity. O'Hara falls in love with her, but Stella makes it clear that she loves another and is just practicing with O'Hara.

O'Hara's passion for Stella leads him to the boarding house, where in a conversation with Uncle Vernon and Lily he realizes the awful truth. Stella is his own daughter by his long lost love from years ago.



Chapter 0

Chapter 0 Summary

The show is over, and the theater is quiet. Meredith walks across the stage and looks out toward the empty seats. He seems to expect something or someone, but there is only a deserted teddy bear still in its chair. Stella waits for him in the property room. As he approaches, she steps back as if frightened. Without looking at her, he states that no excuses will do. Stella tries to defend herself, saying that she is too young to carry the burden of blame and that she is not the only one at fault.

Meredith pushes past the girl and angrily strides into the corridor, looking for Rose. As they walk through the theater, Rose reminds him of Stella's youth and tells him that he shouldn't be so hard on her. Meredith asks if the note sheds any light on what has happened. Bunny, however, has burned the note. They may never know. Rose and Meredith stand quietly, gazing out the window. They watch Stella leave the building, speak to a man in the street and then head for the phone booth. Meredith is concerned about the Board, but Rose says that she can handle them. Rose could keep it out of the papers, but she won't. She knows it will be good for business.

Chapter 0 Analysis

This chapter is a flash forward. The author skillfully captures one's interest and curiosity by bringing the reader right into a drama at its height. The rest of the book leads up to this night. At first, the chapter implies that Stella has made a big mistake. In the paragraphs that follow, the reader learns that whatever happened was something scandalous and, as Rose says, good for business in a shameful way. Still, this chapter does not reveal the exact nature of the scandal, and suspense builds. The readers are tantalized and curious.

From the first sentence, the scene is set. Most of the book takes place in or is related to this theater, where Meredith is brooding about what has happened. Meredith is shown to be a person of stature and great importance. He also seems intimidating. Rose is revealed as a key theater administrator. She shows more understanding for the young woman, Stella. This chapter is short, intriguing and is just enough to make the reader eager to turn the page and find out what has happened.

The teddy bear left in a seat suggests that the play that was just performed is for children. Symbolically, the deserted teddy bear represents that performance. It should have been a happy occasion, but the joy is overwhelmed by a shocking event. The teddy bear also symbolizes the lost innocence of the protagonist, Stella.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Uncle Vernon has worked hard and pulled strings to get Stella an audition with the local repertory theater. Since she was a child, Stella has shown a flare for the dramatic. Now, at sixteen years old, she is prone to exaggeration and impressive flights of fantasy. Uncle Vernon is sure that the theater will be a perfect outlet for her natural tendencies. Stella has spent extra time working with her drama coach, Mrs. Ackerley, practicing her audition piece: the telephone scene from *Bill of Divorcement*.

Ten days before the audition, Stella mentions that she's changed her mind, but Uncle Vernon persists, saying it's too late to back out. He ignores Stella's moodiness, knowing that this is a great opportunity for her. Uncle Vernon would like to go to the audition with Stella, but she'll have none of it. She would feel embarrassed. Uncle Vernon is used to this and keeps his sense of humor about her bluntness. Uncle Vernon makes sure that Stella finds a taxi and waves his good wishes as she is driven away.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Stella, the protagonist, is introduced in this chapter. Readers see that she's youthful, headstrong and about to embark on a new adventure. At first, the reader may wonder if Uncle Vernon really understands Stella's creative spirit. Is he just trying to get rid of her? One sees that he's patient with Stella and has a sense of humor about the airs she puts on.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Stella is out of the cab and into the theater almost instantly. She announces herself rather grandly to the doorman. Two men appear and are almost out of the door when the doorman calls them back. One of them is Meredith Potter, who protests that he's just on his way to tea. "I'm exactly on time," Stella points out. Reluctantly, the men turn back and take Stella to the prop room. The other man is Bunny, the stage manager, who settles in near Meredith.

Both men seem distracted as Stella tells them proudly about her limited experience in the theater. Stella launches into her audition piece and continues confidently even when she notices that Meredith seems bored and distracted. As she recites her lines, he takes out his pocket watch to show Bunny the time. Meredith interrupts Stella. It's tea time, and he tells her to come along with them.

On the way to Fuller's Cafy, Meredith and Bunny ignore Stella as they converse intensely. At the cafy, Stella refuses to remove her coat since she is ashamed of her dress. All eyes in the cafy are on Meredith, a local celebrity. The manager quickly comes over to tell him that she has two Eccles cakes that she will gladly bring to him. Stella mumbles that she is not hungry. Stella is uncharacteristically tongue-tied at first, but she soon jumps into the conversation with stories of interesting characters she's met at the boarding house. Stella is sure that she's lost the theater job, but she enjoys the men's attention.

Back on the street, Meredith tells Stella that they'll meet her again when the season starts. She'll report to Bunny. The theater secretary will contact her with details. By the time they part company, Stella is completely infatuated with Meredith. She finds the nearest phone booth and calls her mother to tell her all about it.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Stella shows surprising self-confidence for one so young and inexperienced. The two older men do not intimidate her, but the handsome, aloof Meredith wins her heart. Ironically, Meredith is somewhat like Stella. Both are self-centered and self-serving. Because of these traits, people around them are often hurt. The difference is that Stella is so wrapped up in herself that she rarely realizes the pain she has caused. Meredith, on the other hand, is always aware of his affect on others and even enjoys manipulating them for his own amusement.

Stella tells stories of some men from the boarding house. They are men damaged in various ways by the war. Throughout the book, this theme will be reintroduced. The reader is made aware that the war has physically and emotionally wounded the people of Liverpool.



Readers are introduced to Stella's habit of finding a phone booth after every event to call and confide in her mother. One will probably assume that her mother is some distance away, and that is why Stella lives with her aunt and uncle. The phone call foreshadows the revelation that Stella's mother cannot be reached and that Stella's hold on reality is actually quite tenuous.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

As Stella begins her work at the theater, she is displeased to find that another apprentice, Geoffrey, has also been hired. Stella thought that she was one of the chosen few, and finding Geoffrey there too bothers her. Geoffrey is three years older than Stella and a bit of a snob. He often uses sophisticated words that are a mystery to Stella. George, the property master, is in charge of these two "students." Stella is disappointed that Meredith is in London, looking for costumes for the new season. She enjoys the atmosphere and new discoveries in the old building and feels very important taking care of different assignments for George.

One day, as Stella and Geoffrey work side by side, Geoffrey puts his arm around her and breathes heavily into her hair. Stella is about to shove him away, but then she thinks it would be a good idea to get some sexual experience, to practice before she gives herself to Meredith. Stella spends a little time with Geoffrey, groping, exploring and kissing. When she finds that he has opened his trousers, however, it is just too much for her. She pushes him away. This incident, where he's been so rude, actually makes Stella more at ease with Geoffrey, although she has no interest in him as a romantic partner.

When Stella gets home, she demands a bath even though it is not her bath night. Alone in the bathroom, she uses the mirror to practice talking to Meredith. She muses about what she imagines are Meredith's high birth and that Bunny surely comes from a working class family like hers. After the bath, Stella finds Uncle Vernon sleeping in his favorite chair by the hearth. Only when he can't hear her can Stella actually express her gratitude and affection. Stella whispers her feelings and kisses the air above his head. Uncle Vernon keeps his eyes closed and waits until she's left the room before stirring from his chair.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The feeling and, almost, the smell of the old theater are conveyed by the author's vivid descriptions. The reader learns about Stella's blossoming sexuality, curiosity and willingness to experiment with others before giving herself to Meredith. There's a certain calculated detachment as she allows Geoffrey's intimacy. She seems to take the adventure in stride, but something about it makes her need a bath when she gets home.

Stella's insistence on taking a bath when it is not the regular bath night gives readers an opportunity to find out what it is like to prepare a bath in those days in Liverpool. A lengthy description of everything Uncle Vernon must do so his niece can have her bath provides an appreciation for the challenges offered by even this simple hygienic event. During her bath, Stella's monologue shows some of the workings of her mind. She



attributes a high birth to Meredith, whom she admires, and a low birth to Bunny, who is lower in her esteem. Her ideas about other people are unrealistic, and she uses her fertile imagination to fill in gaps in her knowledge.

In this chapter, P.L. O'Hara is mentioned for the first time. Although he doesn't arrive on the scene until much later in the book, his name comes up many times before then. Every mention foreshadows O'Hara's arrival and his importance as a major character. By the time O'Hara comes to Liverpool, the reader will know that he is a war hero and a highly respected actor who has a history with this theater. The reader will know that O'Hara has had many romances and that Meredith respects and fears him.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

At Meredith's hotel, before and after breakfast, Meredith makes a phone call that is obviously not answered. He thumps his fist against the lobby telephone, prompting the landlord's wife to ask what's wrong. With a huff, Meredith heads for the theater. He keeps up an inner dialogue with Hilary. When he has time, Meredith intends to write Hilary about his frustration. Meredith will list the many acts of kindness he has offered Hilary even though Hilary abuses him by not responding. John Harbour, the juvenile lead, interrupts Meredith's mental grumbling by expressing his enthusiasm for this first professional opportunity. Does he have time for coffee before rehearsal? Meredith curtly gives a negative answer and gets some satisfaction from seeing Harbour's crestfallen slump.

In the hotel's private function room, rehearsals begin. Stella is so fascinated by the actors and the play that she forgets her job of the moment as script prompter. When Dotty asks for a prompt, Stella is flustered and blurts out, "It doesn't matter, go on, go on." Everyone laughs and is charmed by the young woman. During a break in the rehearsal, Meredith calls Stella to his side. He writes a note and asks her to take it to the General Post Office and send it as a telegram. He cautions her to be careful with it and not to change a word. After she departs, Bunny gently chides Meredith about his foul mood. Bunny suspects that his ill temper has to do with Hilary, and Meredith vents his frustration that he is not able to reach or hear from his lover.

Stella runs all the way to the Post Office, eager to take care of this errand for her beloved Meredith. As she starts to copy the note onto the telegraph form, though, her high spirits are dashed as she reads what is clearly a plea to a loved one: "Am in Hell. Does ten years count for nothing? You must ring. Reverse charges. Devotedly, Meredith." Choking with jealousy, Stella crumples the note and changes the wording. Her new telegram tells the recipient not to bother calling and that reversed charges will not be accepted.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Meredith's obsession with Hilary is introduced. The author plays with her readers and with Stella by giving Meredith's lover a name that could belong to either sex, so it is not surprising that naïve Stella thinks Hilary is a woman. Ironically, Hilary is a man, and Meredith would never be interested in Stella romantically.

The actors have arrived, each one a distinct personality. Although these players are certainly not caricatures, readers with theater experience will recognize the different types. Each actor has an interesting history, and relationships are already starting to add to the drama. Readers are easily brought into the excitement, and also the

boredom, of getting a repertory season started. Stella shows her ability to easily manipulate a situation to suit herself, while feeling no guilt. This trait will cause many problems and create conflict throughout the book - first for others and, ultimately, for herself.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Five days before opening night, the cast has access to the stage. There is a leak in the roof, and Rose is suing the builders. On the stage, the actors become more confident. The leading man, Richard St. Ives, has become uncomfortable with the affection of Dawn, another actor, for him. She offers him gifts and lights his cigarettes whenever possible. The lighting is being set, and the actors go back to the dressing rooms. Stella and Geoffrey stand in for the actors, moving about the stage with Meredith's direction as the lights are placed.

The actors look younger and brighter in their stage makeup. Stella's main job on this production is to sit in the prompt corner with the script, ready to help with any forgotten lines. She also prepares some of the props and arranges them on the prop table.

At seven o'clock in the evening, during a break in the dress rehearsal, Stella is sent out for sandwiches. As she returns to the theater, Stella realizes for the first time that it feels like she's coming home. The theater, not the boarding house, is her real home. When she hands Meredith his sandwich, he asks her opinion of the play. Although he proceeds to tell her that her opinion is wrong, Stella is flattered and encouraged by his interest in what she has to say.

Three men dressed in black enter the auditorium. Meredith, a recent convert to Catholicism, has invited these priests to observe rehearsals. Stella is taken aback. It has not occurred to her that Meredith could be a Catholic, and Stella's family has some very strong negative opinions of Catholics.

Uncle Vernon has waited up for Stella and kept her dinner warm, but she claims not to be hungry. Uncle Vernon notices how much she has changed. She is more confident now and looks prettier. He knows that the change is good for her, but he feels that he is losing her somehow.

The next day's dress rehearsal goes well, but Dawn is flustered. Meredith asks St. Ives to take her out for an hour or so. Dotty, the female lead for most of the company's plays, invites Stella to join her for afternoon tea at George Henry Lee's. Stella is flattered to be part of the group as Babs, another actor, joins them. Babs is distressed because she can't reach her lover Stanislaus. Dotty tries to console her by remembering her own romantic troubles with P.L. O'Hara. The conversation turns to gossip, and Stella realizes that she can get more information about Meredith's Hilary. As Stella asks about "her," Stella's companions become quiet and say as little as possible.

Opening night is a great success. There are six curtain calls. Because Stella is underage, she can't join the cast at the Oyster Bar to celebrate. Instead, she finds a



telephone booth and calls her mother. She chatters happily about all the events, and - the author tells the reader - "Mother said what she always said."

Chapter 5 Analysis

The vision of repertory theater in the 1950s in Liverpool expands as the reader experiences the tedium and excitement of the last days before a theatrical opening. Secrets of stage makeup - a red dot at the eye to make it appear larger - and making props appear real are revealed as readers share Stella's fascination for this new world. Several incidents show that Stella's youthful enthusiasm and her unintentional humor are winning the hearts of the adults in the theater. Meredith finds her amusing and enjoys her adoration of him. In this chapter, the reader might first realize that Hilary is a man rather than a woman. Stella's call to her mother and the statement, "Mother said what she always said," foreshadow Stella's phone call at the end of the book, when the reader learns that "Mother" is actually the recorded female voice that tells the time.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Two weeks into the new season, Meredith has decided to keep Dawn in the company. Rose wants to be sure there's a cut in Dawn's salary and also asks Meredith about Stella. How is she shaping up? Meredith is very pleased with the young woman and tells Rose that Stella has become quite a favorite of the company. Sometimes Dotty has to correct Stella's use of vulgarity. It always turns out to be a word with a meaning that Stella doesn't understand, something that she's picked up at the theater.

Meredith is in a wonderful mood these days. Hilary has sent him a letter begging his forgiveness and has been calling Meredith every day. The company is preparing *Caesar and Cleopatra*. Stella has been given the part of Ptolemy, the boy king. It's a great honor, and Geoffrey is jealous. He also resents the amount of time Meredith spends with Stella. Meredith has started keeping Stella at his side during rehearsals. He has her take notes. Stella's spelling is atrocious, and Meredith entertains Bunny in the hotel lounge at night by reading Stella's notes.

Stella, of course, is more encouraged than ever. She listens carefully whenever Meredith praises someone and alters her demeanor several times a day, trying to be what she thinks he admires. Geoffrey is even more jealous when he hears that a reporter from the *Manchester Daily News* will interview Stella, the local girl who has "made good." Stella is unimpressed with the upcoming interview. Bunny cautions her not to let herself be drawn into any gossip about the company.

The reporter walks with Stella to a snack bar in Clayton Square. He talks about himself the entire way, so Stella goes ahead and starts to tell him the story of how she began in the theater. Still, he seems only interested in eating and in talking about himself. His terrible wife does not understand him, he claims. The reporter buys tickets for the news-theater.

Inside, they sit in the back row as the newsreel goes on. Suddenly, the reporter seizes Stella's hand and pulls it inside his pants. Stella is astonished and tries to draw her hand away, but he holds it firmly in place. Wondering if she's done anything to bring this on herself, Stella muses about the way St. Ives pulls her into his dressing room, puts her across his knee and spanks her with a rolled up newspaper. Desmond Fairchild, one of the company's main actors, exposed himself to her once. She thinks these incidents and the reporter's actions are related, but she doesn't know how.

Back at the theater, Stella takes coffee and biscuits to Freddie Reynalde, the piano player. Stella wants to confide in Freddie about the reporter, to ask him what she should have done, but in the end, she only asks him about St. Ives' spankings. He's harmless, Freddie tells her. Freddie's advice is just tell the man not to do it anymore.



Stella stays for a long time after the play that night in case the reporter comes looking for her. The theater is dark when she leaves, but Stella is surprised to hear voices from the first floor. There is laughter and angry shouting. Then, Geoffrey storms through a door and out into the night. Meredith is telling someone not to worry, that Geoffrey will get over it by morning. She sees Meredith leave with his arm around Harbour's shoulders.

In spite of a disastrous dress rehearsal, *Caesar and Cleopatra* has a successful opening. Uncle Vernon and Lily have come to the performance and wait outside afterward to walk Stella home. Stella, of course, refuses to walk with them, running ahead part of the time or hanging back with others. Uncle Vernon and Lily talk about the changes in Stella and the traits that have always been there. Lily has found a small picture in Lily's room, a postcard of Jesus with a crown of thorns. Lily worries that Catholics are influencing Stella.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Ironically, Stella's revised telegram, rather than discouraging Hilary, actually leads him to apologize to Meredith and become more attentive than ever. Meredith has a real affection for Stella, although not the romantic affection she longs for. As Meredith explains *Caesar and Cleopatra* to Stella, the reader sees that he is describing himself, and excusing his actions, when he talks about Caesar. The reader might come back to this passage after finishing the book and realize that Meredith has unwittingly described Stella's relationships with him and with O'Hara. Meredith is Caesar. O'Hara is Anthony, and Stella, certainly, is Cleopatra.

Stella's sordid incident with the reporter reminds readers that she is truly innocent, though unintentionally seductive. When confronted by sexual advances from adult males, she simply doesn't know what to do. Geoffrey is having his own initiation with adults. The reader's first hint of this is when Geoffrey storms out of the theater while Meredith and Harbour laugh at him.

Stella's secret observation of the after-hours interaction among Meredith, Harbour and Geoffrey symbolizes the way homosexuality is clandestine and mysterious even in the theater. The photo Freddie keeps by his piano is of P.L. O'Hara. At this point in the book, Stella hasn't met O'Hara, but there is something about him that seems familiar. This foreshadows the fact that O'Hara is actually Stella's father.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

With *Caesar and Cleopatra* successfully running, rehearsals begin for *Peter Pan*. The actor Mary Deare has arrived to play Peter. Meredith tells the cast that he has no patience for the many symbolic interpretations of the play. Geoffrey is proud to have been cast as Mullins, one of the pirates. When Meredith asks Geoffrey to get him some cigarettes, Geoffrey asks bitterly what Meredith's last servant died of. Meredith smirks as John Harbour teases Geoffrey.

Bunny tells Stella that she will handle the light that is Tinkerbell. She will stand in the wings, directing the beam of a flashlight at a mirror onstage while ringing a little handbell. Stella is alarmed and tries to explain that flickering lights frighten her. Bunny offers no sympathy, nor does Freddie who explains that everyone has to get over unpleasant experiences.

Stella has become a much-loved part of the theater family. The actors help her dress and do her stage makeup. She is privy to their intimate gossip, although she doesn't always understand what is going on. St. Ives is having a terrible time with Dawn, who is becoming more amorous, appearing on his doorstep with flowers and other offerings. St. Ives considers telling Meredith that he must let Dawn go or St. Ives himself will have to leave.

Uncle Vernon and Lily have noticed a boil on Stella's arm, and she seems tired. At the theater, Stella faints in the prompt corner and is carried to Rose's office. There, Rose sees the boil on Stella's arm and also discovers a wooden crucifix wedged into her ankle sock. Rose knows that Stella's family would never approve. Stella explains to Rose that she finds the crucifix comforting. Stella is ordered to stay home the next morning, but she doesn't want Uncle Vernon and Lily asking questions. Instead, she wanders the streets for a while.

Arriving at the rehearsal room in the hotel, Stella finds that no one is there except Meredith, fast asleep in an armchair. She walks around whistling, but he doesn't stir. Stella is disturbed by his rumpled look and the sour smell around him. Desmond Fairchild arrives and explains that there was an incident last night. A drunken Meredith decided to be Peter Pan and fly out the window of the Bar Parlour. The hotel's landlord refused to let him back in. Stella notices a bruise under Fairchild's eye. Bunny appears, wakes up Meredith and commands Stella to have the waiter send black coffee, aspirin and a bucketful of ice cubes. After that, he says, she should go home until the evening performance.

When Stella returns to the theater, she finds Dawn in great distress. Stella tries to comfort her. Stella is sympathetic until Dawn begins to say how terrible Meredith is. He has fired her from the company. Stella leaps to Meredith's defense, telling Dawn that St.



Ives asked for her to be let go. During Act Four that night, Dawn disappears. Bunny tells Stella to go home as soon as she has finished her own scene on stage and tells her she is temporarily excused from her prop room duties for a few days. These are Rose's orders.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The sharp reader will notice suggestions of Geoffrey's attraction to Meredith and Meredith's mean treatment of the young man. Stella's hesitation to operate the effects for Tinkerbell reminds readers that there's something difficult in her past that is related to nightlights. Symbolically, Stella's buried past is being brought to light through her experiences in the theater. The emotional and physical stress is taking a toll on Stella. She is getting run down and isn't eating properly. This suggests that she is more delicate than she seems. The boil on Stella's arm is also symbolic. The long-suppressed secrets, poisons, of Stella's life are coming to the surface and will soon burst in an ugly explosion.

The reader gets more insight into the backstage world as the company prepares the production of *Peter Pan*. There are many unique technical aspects to this production, and they are woven throughout this chapter. There is also just a glimpse into Meredith's partying. Readers are reminded that Bunny always cleans up Meredith's messes.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Dawn is released from the hospital, and Bunny escorts her to the train station. She was discovered the night before collapsed in a phone booth. Half a dozen empty aspirin bottles were scattered around her. Bunny gets Dawn set up on the train and gives her some money. Dawn warns him that "that girl" is trouble, but Bunny politely ignores the statement. After the train leaves, Bunny opens the envelope she gave him for St. Ives. It contains a note and her musical lighter. Bunny burns the note and drops the lighter in a vase at the theater. The actor is already blaming himself for what happened with Dawn. St. Ives is grateful, though, that he did not ask Meredith to fire Dawn. Stella has told everyone that Dawn was quite cheerful earlier in the day. She reports that Dawn talked of her sister's new baby and never once mentioned St. Ives.

Christmas is approaching. It seems that everyone feels festive except Lily and Stella. Lily simply doesn't enjoy the season, but Stella is depressed because Meredith is ignoring her. When she brings him coffee, he smiles politely but dismissively. Stella now holds her tongue whenever Dotty or Babs criticizes Meredith, but she doesn't hesitate to lash out at Geoffrey.

Finally, one day when Stella and Geoffrey are out on an errand, Stella confides in him, wondering what she's done to upset Meredith. Geoffrey sniffs that she shouldn't put Meredith on a pedestal. He's not trustworthy, Geoffrey tells her. When Stella asks why he spends so much time with Meredith if he feels that way, Geoffrey is embarrassed and mutters that it's only a pub friendship. As they head back toward the theater, they witness a horrible accident. A boy carrying a sheet of glass slips, falls and lands on the broken shards. He has cut an artery and bleeds to death before their eyes. After the boy dies in the street, Babs observes that Stella always seems to be around when tragedy strikes.

Stella misses much of the rehearsal that afternoon because Mary Deare keeps sending her on errands. One request is for an evening paper. On her way back to the theater, Stella browses through the paper and sees her picture. She is dressed as Ptolemy, and a short paragraph describes her as "a touchingly pert example of a young and ambitious actress." Stella tears the picture out of the paper, puts it in her pocket and throws away the rest of the paper. Mary's next errand is a search for matches. Stella is, by now, feeling grumpy about being sent all over. She notices a lighter in a vase and starts back, but then she thinks it would be a good idea to try the lighter before taking it back to Mary.

St. Ives, coming down the stairs to make an entrance, hears the sound of the lighter playing *Come Back to Sorrento* and recognizes it as Dawn's. Disconcerted, he loses his balance, falls down the stairs and breaks his leg. St. Ives will be out of commission for six weeks. Rose and Meredith scramble, trying to think of an actor who can replace him



as Captain Hook. P.L. O'Hara is the right choice. Even though Meredith resists because of some unnamed unpleasantness with O'Hara in the past, Rose convinces him that this critically acclaimed actor, who has played Hook many times, is the only one who can step in at the last minute.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Once again, the reader is reminded that Stella will say anything to turn a situation to her advantage. She seems to have no concern about this. When Geoffrey confides that he often has doubts about himself and asks if Stella ever feels that way, she tells him that she never doubts herself, only other people. It appears that most members of the company have no idea that Stella manipulates them. Only Dawn seems to notice, too late, that Stella is trouble. Ironically, Stella's lie to Dawn sets in motion a series of events that leads to the entrance of O'Hara. As Dawn leaves, she gives her musical lighter to Bunny, asking him to deliver it to St. Ives. Bunny, who also manipulates situations, drops the lighter in a vase backstage. Stella finds the lighter and tries it just as St. Ives is about to make an entrance. He is startled by the sound of Dawn's lighter, falls down the steps and must be replaced. This chain of events opens the door for the entrance of P. J. O'Hara.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Rose has booked a room for O'Hara at the Adelphi Hotel, but she knows he will soon want to visit his old haunts. The second day he's in Liverpool, O'Hara rents his old basement room in Percy Street. The room hasn't changed. It is still damp and smells of turpentine. It comforts him. He lies on the bed and mentally sifts through memories from the years past. At the theater, O'Hara meets old acquaintances and makes new ones. He finds Stella especially intriguing, but she doesn't seem to have much time for him. Stella reminds him of someone, and O'Hara can't help feeling that he's met her before, although Freddie points out that it's unlikely.

Rehearsals go on with the usual technical glitches, but O'Hara is a magnificent Captain Hook. Everyone's spirits are lifted by the energy he brings to the play. Opening night is a huge success. Bunny praises Stella's work as Tinkerbell and invites her to join the company for a little party at the hotel. The bar is closed for the evening, so her age isn't a problem. Stella longs to go, but she is overwhelmed as she tries to decide how to get there and how to enter properly. She decides not to go to the party and is walking toward a phone booth when she hears the sound of a motorcycle. It's O'Hara, who invites her to ride with him.

As Stella enters the party, one of the young actors hands Stella a glass half filled with vodka. She downs it in one gulp and starts to cough. There are many toasts and much celebration. O'Hara offers appreciation for Meredith's fine work in difficult circumstances.

Stella is feeling quite confident and comfortable now. She sits on the arm of Meredith's chair, listening intently. Across the room, Babs is confiding in O'Hara. O'Hara is a kind listener, but he keeps looking at Stella. Finally, Stella asks Meredith why he stopped speaking to her and having her take notes. It was Rose's idea, Stella learns. When she discovered the crucifix in Stella's sock, she expressed that she thought that Meredith was an undesirable influence on the girl. He apologizes for making her unhappy but says clearly, "I am not for you." Stella doesn't understand, but before she can protest, she passes out on his lap.

Chapter 9 Analysis

P.L. O'Hara is introduced at last. His arrival is the inciting force that paves the way to the climax. In his room, O'Hara seems consumed by memories. His need to stay in his old room symbolizes that he lives in the past. Almost everything having to do with O'Hara involves the theme that history has a nasty habit of repeating itself.

At the theater, O'Hara can't stop thinking about Stella. She fascinates him, seeming strange and familiar at the same time. O'Hara looks at an old photo of himself and



muses that it reminds him of Stella, foreshadowing the revelation that he is Stella's father. In this chapter, readers see that Meredith is very aware of Stella's crush on him when he casually tells her he is not for her. Again, the reader is reminded that homosexuality is hidden during the time of the story. Meredith never explains to Stella exactly why she can never have him. She is drunk for the first time and doesn't get to pursue the subject with him.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Three days before Christmas, Meredith stops by the boarding house and invites Uncle Vernon to watch a New Year's Day football match between the repertory company and the pantomime cast of *Treasure Island*, playing at the Empire. Stella has been invited to a Christmas Eve party with members of the repertory company. Lily is thrilled about it and tries to get as much information as possible from the tight-lipped Stella. Will Geoffrey be Stella's partner for the evening? Lily has her eye on the nice young man. He would be perfect for Stella. With a little huff, Stella explains that it's not that kind of party. People do not have to be with partners. Lily asks if Meredith has a young lady, and Stella tells her to shut up. When she sees the tears in Lily's eyes, Stella feels bad about hurting her aunt, who cared lovingly for Stella after she was abandoned. Stella responds by jumping up to do the dishes and goes off to her room.

At the party, Stella manages to sit next to Meredith, but Geoffrey squeezes in between them. His full concentration is on Meredith as he pleads for them to talk. Geoffrey says he can't go on like this. Stella is sure this has to do with Geoffrey's frustration at not getting better parts in the plays. Geoffrey cannot eat and continues talking into Meredith's ear. Stella hears Meredith tell Geoffrey that he's too sensitive. Geoffrey uses the words "unfair advantage" and says that Meredith is ruining his life. Here, Stella feels that she must step in, firmly telling Geoffrey that he can't bully Meredith into giving him better parts.

Across the table, O'Hara watches Stella. He is disconcerted by how strongly and tenderly he is drawn to her. He asks Stella to dance, and Stella notices that Meredith is watching them on the dance floor. She is certain that Meredith will feel jealous seeing her with another man, and she plays it up as much as she can. She sits with O'Hara afterward.

Meredith and Bunny are off to midnight mass. Stella longs to be invited. Instead, O'Hara invites her to a ride home on his motorcycle. Stella leaps at the chance, hoping they will pass Meredith so he can see her with her arms around O'Hara's waist. O'Hara is staying only a few doors from the boarding house, and he invites Stella in for a cup of tea.

O'Hara kisses her but then says he should take her home. Stella tells him she would like to stay. She thinks that now is a good time to lose her virginity. During lovemaking, O'Hara whispers into Stella's hair the name Stella Maris. Afterward, Stella asks him about it. O'Hara says only that it is someone he knew long ago, that the name means Star of the Sea, although it isn't her real name.

O'Hara asks if Stella enjoyed their lovemaking. Stella replies, "Not really." She expects there's a knack to it and comments in a detached tone that it's very intimate. Inside, Stella feels that, if she says one kind word she will burst into tears. She decides to walk



home, stopping along the way to call her mother. After Stella leaves, O'Hara feels let down. He is certain that Stella has no idea how gentle and thoughtful he was as she lost her virginity to him. O'Hara misses the soft words he expected from Stella afterward.

Chapter 10 Analysis

At last, Stella finds the person to take her virginity. Still, she remains oddly detached from and unemotional about this major event. O'Hara, who has made love to many women, is strangely and deeply affected by the experience. Their sexual relationship introduces a conflict of people-against-fate that will result in O'Hara's death. It is symbolic that the assumed name of O'Hara's lost love means Star of the Sea. Eventually, he meets his death because of this relationship, falling into the sea. Stella confides in O'Hara more openly and easily than she has with anyone else in the novel. O'Hara imagines he could be a mentor to Stella in many aspects of her life. There's an especially poignant irony to this when the reader realizes later that O'Hara is Stella's father.

The reader sees a glimmer of compassion in Stella after she carelessly tells her aunt to shut up. Inwardly, Stella responds to Lily's pain. Unfortunately, she keeps it to herself. Stella usually manages to convince everyone, including herself, that she does not care much about others (except Meredith). In this chapter, however, the reader is shown more of Stella's heart. Later, after making love with O'Hara, Stella's emotions threaten to surface. O'Hara yearns for her to show that their involvement is not just mechanical for her, but only the readers see that she is deeply affected. Finally, one begins to understand that, because Stella was betrayed and deserted by her mother at such a young age, she has developed a thick layer of emotional protection. Stella will not reveal her true feelings to anyone and usually manages quite well to hide them from herself.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Geoffrey is missing at the next performance. O'Hara is discreetly attentive to Stella, who seems focused on other things. He notices that she's wearing a new string of cheap pearls, perhaps to impress him. George suggests to O'Hara that someone should keep a caring eye on Geoffrey.

O'Hara offers Stella a ride home after the show, but she says she'll walk. He's deeply disappointed, but he is soon surprised by her knock on his basement window. As she warms herself by the gas fire, O'Hara wonders why she doesn't wear the coat Lily gave her. It has a fur collar and, Stella explains, draws too much attention. It is best, she goes on, to "encase cheap goods in brown paper." O'Hara is stunned. He asks about her new pearls, and Stella says they were a gift from her mother, who left them on Stella's pillow wrapped around a rose. During this conversation Stella learns that Meredith comes from Liverpool. He is from the working class while Bunny has the more refined background.

O'Hara tries to give Stella tips about acting, but Stella keeps chattering about petty things. Finally, he simply embraces her just to keep her quiet. After they make love, Stella is more relaxed. O'Hara wraps her in a blanket, and she sits on his lap affectionately with her head on his shoulder. Stella is pleased that she is learning more about how to make love and comments that it just needs practice. Stella opens up more honestly with O'Hara than with anyone else in the book. She explains that she says whatever comes into her head and that she often "play-acts." She likes to rehearse bad things so she'll know how to behave when they actually happen. Stella openly tells him that she loves someone else, although O'Hara can't imagine who it would be. Stella firmly tells him that no one else should know about their relationship, and O'Hara is mystified. He is used to women being proud of his interest in them.

Uncle Vernon goes to watch the football match. Of course, Stella ignores him. During the match, Geoffrey attacks Meredith, giving him a bloody nose. O'Hara and Freddie pull Geoffrey away. Uncle Vernon, running to help Meredith, sprains his own ankle.

Before the evening performance, Grace, Dotty, Babs and Desmond ask O'Hara if he will speak with Meredith about Geoffrey. After all, O'Hara has confronted Meredith about his escapades before. O'Hara goes to speak with Meredith, who makes it clear that he could cause problems for O'Hara. He and Bunny have seen O'Hara with Stella, and she is underage. O'Hara confides in Freddie and tells him again that it seems he somehow *knows* Stella. In a photo of the young O'Hara, he looks very much like Stella.

In O'Hara's room, Stella angrily criticizes Geoffrey. O'Hara points out that she doesn't know the whole story and that Meredith has been emotionally damaging young men for many years. This is when Stella finally learns that her rival, Hilary, is a man. She is



confused and angry and accuses O'Hara of being jealous. She storms out, saying she's finished with him.

O'Hara feels he should apologize and thinks the best way to do this would be to surprise Stella at home and walk with her to the theater. The next day, he walks to the Aber House Hotel to inquire about Uncle Vernon's ankle. Stella isn't home, but Uncle Vernon and Lily are happy to entertain him. They tell him of their concerns about Stella. Although she's outgoing, she keeps her emotions locked inside. Her start in life was very hard. When O'Hara mentions that Stella is always calling her mother, Uncle Vernon explains that's impossible. They don't even know exactly where her mother is.

Stella's mother, Renye, was always free-spirited. Uncle Vernon and Lily never knew the identity of her baby's father, but they encouraged Renye to come live with them. She stayed nearby. They had no idea she was neglecting her baby until neighbors called one night to tell them that the baby was screaming and that knocks on the door brought no answer. Uncle Vernon broke into the darkened apartment. Renye wasn't there. The baby lay in a bed on the floor. She was surrounded by flickering nightlights, and a withered rose lay on the pillow next to her. Of course, Uncle Vernon brought her home. Shortly after that, Renye left town, and Lily and Uncle Vernon raised Stella as if she were their very own.

As the story unfolds, Lily busies herself dusting and rearranging photos on the mantel. A photo that was turned around now catches O'Hara's attention. The photo and the story make everything shockingly clear to O'Hara. He makes a quick exit.

O'Hara rides to the Pier Head and parks his motorcycle. He wants to howl his distress into the wind. Distracted, he walks along the pier, slips on some black oil and falls. The back of his skull strikes the edge of the bridge as he goes down. Just before he dies, the reader is told about the photo. It shows Stella Maris holding a baby. Now, only the readers know the terrible truth. O'Hara's lover, Stella, is his daughter.

After the police arrive to tell Bunny about O'Hara's death, everyone assumes it was suicide. Bunny looks through O'Hara's dressing room and finds the note he started writing to Meredith. O'Hara was demanding that Meredith stop torturing Geoffrey. Bunny burns the note. Others assume it was a suicide note.

One of the actors whispers to Stella during the performance, telling her what has happened. Her hands tremble as she holds the flashlight that is Tinkerbell. Finally, she drops the light and lets it roll across the floor. She breaks down, sobbing.

Now, the readers find themselves at the point where the book opened. While Meredith and Rose watch from a window in the theater, Stella asks a man on the street for change so she can make a telephone call. In the phone booth, she confides to her mother. For the first time, the reader realizes the truth about these calls. "'The time,' mother intoned, 'is 6:45 and 40 seconds precisely.'"



Chapter 11 Analysis

During Stella's second night with O'Hara, one sees the first indication that she thinks of herself as undeserving of anything good. The nice coat Lily has given her is too fine for cheap goods. She is shocked that her beloved Meredith comes from the same humble background as herself. Surely, he is too good for that. This is a major revelation about Stella. Readers have been given the impression that, with her grand airs and seeming self-confidence, she thinks highly of herself. Here, one finds that is all a front. Later in the chapter, when O'Hara visits the boarding house, one learns that Stella was actually abandoned by her mother. Stella's self-esteem is very low. Up until this point in the book, Stella has not been a particularly sympathetic protagonist. In this chapter, as Stella experiences and, therefore, shows more depth, the reader's heart goes out to the emotionally damaged young woman.

O'Hara's feelings for Stella deepen even as she tells him coldly that she loves another and is simply learning from their liaisons. He's startled by how quickly Stella learns about making love and that she unselfconsciously experiments. She doesn't mind that he's married. O'Hara is accustomed to women falling in love with him. Stella's detachment intrigues him. Only one other woman in his life has intrigued him in this way - Stella Maris.

Geoffrey's angry outburst at the football match makes it very clear to O'Hara that Meredith is repeating his old pattern of toying with the emotions of young men in the company. O'Hara isn't bothered by Meredith's sexual orientation, but he finds the way Meredith manipulates young men for his own amusement reprehensible. It is a situation that O'Hara cannot tolerate. Still, Meredith points out that O'Hara has his own dalliance with a young company member, Stella. Although this gives O'Hara pause, his sense of integrity won't allow him to let Meredith get away with it.

The crisis comes when O'Hara visits Uncle Vernon and Lily and sees the photo of Stella's mother. She is O'Hara's lost love Stella Maris. O'Hara has been having an affair with his own daughter. This precipitates a terrible internal conflict for the noble O'Hara. The climax soon follows when, in his distress, O'Hara is careless and has a terrible fall that kills him. Everyone in the repertory company assumes it was suicide caused in some way by his relationship with Stella. At last, the reader sees Stella's true feelings for O'Hara when she begins to sob in the wings of the theater. Ironically, she will never know that the man she mourns was her father.

Stella has often exasperated the reader during the novel, but she is shown finally as the fragile, sad and lost soul she is when the reader finds out that the "mother" she calls is simply the recorded female voice telling the time.



Characters

Stella

Stella is sixteen years old and full of self-confidence. A gifted mimic with a vivid and dramatic imagination, Stella seems perfect for life in the theater. She has trouble concentrating in school and doesn't complete her formal education.

Stella is nothing if not adventurous, bold and ready to consider herself on an equal level with everyone else, even those much older and more experienced. She expresses herself with bravado and appears fearless, but she does have an odd fear of flickering lights. Stella is also prone to daydreaming. Some people in the company have noticed that Stella is often nearby when tragedy strikes. Sometimes Stella has unwittingly caused the tragedy, and, other times, she is simply and innocently present.

Stella's love interest is the temperamental Meredith, although this love is unrequited. Romantically inexperienced, Stella is quite ready to explore the world of sexuality. She thinks it would be to her advantage to "practice" with other men so that, when she and Meredith consummate their love, she will be experienced and ready to please him. Stella is quite manipulative and easily lies to change a situation to her advantage. In spite of this, Stella also can be brutally honest. Without hesitation, she tells O'Hara that she doesn't love him and makes it very clear that she is only using him sexually to learn and experiment.

Although Stella could certainly be called emotional, she never speaks of her true emotions. She seems disassociated from her true self. Renye, Stella's mother, left her with Uncle Vernon and Lily when Stella was a baby. Stella maintains a fantasy relationship with her mother, running off to call her from phone booths almost every evening. Only at the end of the book does the reader find out that Stella is confiding not to her mother, but to the recorded time announcements.

Meredith Potter

Meredith, the theater's director, is self-absorbed, self-serving, spiteful and manipulative. In spite of this, he is often charming. Meredith enjoys Stella and treats her almost like a favorite pet. Meredith's manner is quite grand, and not many know that he grew up in a working class family right there in Liverpool. He never knew his father, and his mother worked in a typing pool.

A thin man who often wears a monocle, Meredith often has a slightly bored air about him. Watching others in emotional distress amuses Meredith, and he often helps create it. His own emotions depend very much on his young male lover, Hilary, who has left Liverpool to care for his sick mother. Hilary is often out of touch with Meredith for long periods of time, leaving Meredith feeling desperate, frustrated and in a nasty mood.



When he is in contact with Hilary, Meredith is bright and chipper. When he hasn't heard from Hilary, Meredith tends to be morose and mean.

Meredith's love for Hilary doesn't stop him from seducing other young men and playing with their emotions. Harbour is his cohort in these games, and Geoffrey is one of the main victims. There's a certain veil of secrecy regarding Meredith's sexual orientation. Even in the tolerant artistic community, in the setting of the 1950s homosexuality is rarely directly mentioned.

P.L. O'Hara

O'Hara is somewhat of a star in the repertory circuit. A dashing war hero who rides a motorcycle, he has left many broken hearts along the way. During the war, he was a captain in the Royal Navy. O'Hara knows Meredith, Rose, Dotty, George and Freddie from their youth in the theater in Liverpool. He and Dotty were lovers for a while. Married, O'Hara remains a philanderer, but he pines for his one great love - Stella Maris, a mysterious young woman who loved him and left him almost seventeen years ago. O'Hara knows that he got her pregnant, but when he tried to find her to "do the right thing" she had disappeared. She had given him a false name.

O'Hara is a great actor and a down-to-earth, likeable person. He is very kind and patient, sympathetically listening to the troubles of others in the company and being sweetly affectionate with his former lover Dotty. When he returns to the Liverpool Repertory Theatre to play Captain Hook, O'Hara is immediately attracted to Stella. There's something about her that makes him think they've met, although that is impossible. Eventually, O'Hara tenderly seduces Stella and then falls in love with her.

O'Hara and Meredith have had some unpleasantness in the past, but the reader is never told exactly what happened. It seems to have had something to do with the nasty way Meredith has treated the young men who've fallen in love with him. O'Hara is a great protector of wronged people. In the end, his strong moral fiber combines with his love for Stella to provide his undoing.

Uncle Vernon

Kind and gentle Uncle Vernon looks out for Stella and her future. He is the one who realizes that the theater is a perfect outlet for her, and he goes out of his way to let her thrive with the repertory group. Uncle Vernon is a simple man and very loving. He cares deeply for Stella, as if she were his own daughter. Uncle Vernon is at once hurt by and respectful of Stella's desire to be independent of him and Lily. Like many of the men in this book, Uncle Vernon served in the war. Certain types of music on the radio stir his war memories and bring tears to his eyes.



Bunny

Bunny is the stage manager and Meredith's best friend. He is a kind man, always ready to give something to those less fortunate. Although Bunny comes from an upper class family, he doesn't care much about how he dresses, and Stella thinks he must have a working class background. Bunny often finds himself in the situation of cleaning up Meredith's emotional messes.

Geoffrey

Like Stella, Geoffrey is an apprentice at the theater. He tries to impress Stella and others with his sophisticated vocabulary and his supposed knowledge of the world and the theater. Geoffrey is nineteen and is the nephew of the governing board's chairman. He was attending a military academy but had to leave after firing a gun at someone. Stella has her first, beginning exploration of sexuality - some backstage petting - with Geoffrey. It's a one-time event, though. Geoffrey becomes a plaything for Meredith, getting more and more emotional as Meredith toys with his affections.

Rose

Rose is the manager of the repertory company. She has worked her way up from humble beginnings. As a girl, she was the slop-girl at Kelly's Melodrama Theatre in Paradise Street. For reasons she never reveals, Rose stills likes to spend time in the repertory theater's upper circle, where she once worked in the bar. There, she stands at the window and gazes out onto the street below. Rose was a close friend of Meredith's mother. Now, she's highly regarded and is obviously a very competent businesswoman. Rose is sharp, intelligent, caring and practical. Her great love is this repertory theater.

Lily

Lily is the sister of Stella's mother and is, of course, married to Uncle Vernon. She is, however, never called "Aunt Lily," just "Lily." Perhaps this is because Uncle Vernon takes the greatest interest in Stella and shows the most patience for her. Still, Lily cares deeply for her niece and wishes Stella would show more appreciation for all Lily and Uncle Vernon have done for her. Lily is a no-nonsense kind of person who works hard to run the boarding house.

Richard St. Ives

The theater's leading man, St. Ives has an eye for the ladies. This has gotten him into trouble many times. He, like several men in the repertory company, is drawn to Stella, although he keeps his advances to a strange flirtation, turning Stella over his knee and giving her a little spanking before each performance.



Dorothy Blundell

"Dotty" is the female lead for most plays in the company. She is a kind woman who helps Stella with stage makeup and other aspects of theater life. Dotty was romantically involved with P.L. O'Hara years ago.

Babs Osborne

Babs is the character juvenile actor for the company. She pines for her Polish lover. Although he professes love for her, the others in the company think he is stringing her along.

John Harbour

Harbour is the juvenile lead. Thrilled to be working with the repertory company, Harbour is a bit star-struck. He has big blue eyes with long eyelashes. This is his first professional job, and he's nervous about it in the beginning. As the season progresses, he spends much of his time with Meredith and joins him in baiting Geoffrey.

Dawn Allenby

Dawn is a woman in her thirties who has been engaged only for the first production. Within the first two days of her arrival, Dawn falls for Richard St. Ives. Dawn tries to hide her drinking with peppermints. She often smells too strongly of cologne. Her drinking accelerates as her relationship with St. Ives deteriorates.

Grace Bird

Grace has spent the past twenty years in supporting roles in West End productions. She's known to be a consummate professional. Everyone likes Grace, who recently has been left by her husband.

Mary Deare

Mary is a star of repertory theater and is especially known for playing Peter Pan. She is slender and boyish, but offstage it's clear that she is past middle age. She has the air of a star, always asking others to perform little errands for her. Her offstage voice is soft, barely above a whisper, but it carries a peculiar authority.



George

George is the property master and is Stella's main supervisor. At age fourteen, he went straight from school to the Royal Court Theatre to shift scenery. His first real job was in the celebrated production of *Richard II* with P.L. O'Hara in the lead. Except for his time in the Merchant Navy during the war, George has been dedicated to the theater ever since.

Renye

Renye is never seen in the book, but her presence is certainly felt. She is Stella's absent mother. The family doesn't know where she is now, although they're aware she is in America. At the end of the book, it's revealed that she is O'Hara's long lost love Stella Maris.

Freddie Reynalde

Freddie plays the piano during intermission. He didn't serve in the war because of his principals, so he was forced to do laboring jobs instead. Freddie claims that his hands were ruined by the work.

Desmond Fairchild

Desmond is one of the company's main actors. He becomes Dotty's lover.

Harcourt

Harcourt is the rich owner of a hotel supply company. Uncle Vernon frequently speaks with him on the phone, confiding about Stella.

Mrs. Ackerley

Stella's voice and acting coach, Mrs. Ackerley works with Stella to prepare her for the theater audition.

Prue

Prue is the theater's wardrobe mistress.



Objects/Places

Liverpool Repertory Theatre

The Liverpool Repertory Theatre is the theater where Stella is hired as an apprentice.

Aber House Hotel

The Aber House Hotel is the boarding house Uncle Vernon and Lily run and live in with Stella.

Fuller's Cafy

Located not far from the theater, Fuller's cafy is one of Meredith's favorite places for tea.

Commercial Hotel

Meredith and Bunny have rooms at the Commercial Hotel during the theater season. A garden next to the building honors the memory of some long-forgotten hero.

The Oyster Bar

The Oyster Bar is a favorite drinking spot for the theater people. Stella is underage and cannot join them there.

George Henry Lee's

George Henry Lee's is one of the spots where cast members go for tea.

The Private Function Room

The Commercial Hotel's private function room is used for rehearsals while the carpenters prepare the stage set.

O'Hara's Room

The old room in the front basement of a house in Percy Street is dank and unpleasant, but it holds special memories for O'Hara.

Dangerous Corner



Dangerous Corner is the first play of the season.

Caesar and Cleopatra

The company's second play of the season is *Caesar and Cleopatra*. This is also Stella's stage debut as she plays the part of Ptolemy, Cleopatra's brother and husband.

Peter Pan

The play *Peter Pan* by James Barrie is a great favorite and, therefore, a guaranteed moneymaker at the theater. This play brings P.L. O'Hara to Liverpool for the role of Captain Hook.

Dawn Allenby's Lighter

Dawn's musical lighter plays *Come Back to Sorrento*. The tune is heard at several pivotal points in the story. Unexpectedly hearing this tune, the lead actor falls down the stairs and breaks his leg so that P.L. O'Hara must take over the part of Captain Hook.

Telephone Booths

Telephone booths play a vital role in the story. At the end of each day, Stella searches for the nearest one so she can confide in her mother.

Pearls

Stella wears a string of false pearls, which she says her mother left for her on a pillow wrapped around a rose.

Flickering Lights

Stella reacts strongly and negatively to flickering lights. This ties back to her abandonment as a baby.

The Photo of Renye

When O'Hara sees a photo of Stella's mother, Renye, he realizes that he is actually Stella's father.



Themes

Life Repeats Itself

Uncle Vernon first says this, and O'Hara echoes it later when he states, "Life is full of conflagrations. We can never be sure when we'll be consumed by the past." Many of the characters are perfect examples of this.

Rose spends time in the upper levels of the theater, staring out the window and remembering times that have passed. Dotty dreams of her days with O'Hara and recreates, with Desmond, that feeling of love during the repertory season. Mary Deare, though aging, comes back repeatedly to play her most successful part. Ironically, it's Peter Pan, the boy who won't grow up. Uncle Vernon and Lily fret about Stella, thinking of her mother's mistakes and hoping that Stella won't repeat them. Meredith is in a continuous loop of seducing young men and breaking their hearts for his amusement.

O'Hara longs for his lover from his young days in the Liverpool Repertory Theatre. From the moment he returns, he is pulled into a whirlpool of memories that combine with the present in strange and unexpected ways. Stella seems to be very much in the present, but the reader comes to realize the ways in which the past haunts and, eventually, rules even Stella. In the end, O'Hara is, indeed, consumed by the past.

Hidden Events and Hidden Meanings

Throughout this book, there are events and meanings that are hidden from the characters but that drastically affect their lives. The theater itself is a place where things are hidden and disguised. The actors use tricks to make props look real and makeup or costume to change appearances. Even the plays themselves have hidden, symbolic meanings.

Stella herself is the epitome of hidden things. She hides her emotions from the outside world, and she play-acts instead. She uses this as a shield against the injuries of the world. Ultimately, though, things that are hidden cause troubles and difficulties. Meredith's hidden sexuality causes misunderstanding. Stella's hidden birth causes O'Hara's shame and death. Stella's hidden emotions and faked phone calls to her mother do not bode well for her future happiness.

Communication for Healing

The effects of the war are felt throughout the book. Liverpool is devastated by bombings in the Second World War. Her people have suffered terribly. Now, in the 1950s, they are barely beginning to heal. There are many structures that have been bombed but not torn down. Almost every adult male has been damaged emotionally and/or physically by the war. Even Meredith served in the military, although he didn't see any real action.



The characters tell war stories, many of them about horrors, and one of the ways to heal is to tell these stories again and again. Communication and story-telling stands opposed to hiding feelings and emotions, as a positive and healing force. While the world of the theater is about hidden things, it is also about expression and creative force, so the two ideas - hiding emotions and communicating them - exist side by side in the novel. There is no feeling of glory in tales of the war. Instead, an immense weariness seems to pervade the city and her people. No one is living in luxury. Poverty is everywhere. Almost everyone has to make adjustments in expenses. Many are homeless, trying to find ways to survive. One can't help loving Bunny, who always puts his hand in his pocket to bring out some money as soon as he sees someone struggling.

Throughout the novel, characters show their understanding by listening to each other's stories and by small, often subtle, acts of kindness. Stella shows the sweetness in her heart by the way she patiently and kindly listens to the older men's stories. The people, like the city, have not yet begun to rebuild.



Style

Points of View

The novel is written in the third person and is mostly from Stella's point of view. At various times, however, the reader experiences the thoughts of Uncle Vernon, Meredith and especially O'Hara.

Being in Stella's mind is not easy for the reader. One often wants to shake her. She blocks her own feelings or memories and misses subtleties. Although one can see the reasons for her manipulative and insensitive decisions, one doesn't like it. Readers, however, can't help liking Stella herself. Her inner dialogue is often amusing or touching. One is reminded how young and inexperienced, how childlike she is.

Uncle Vernon's point of view allows the reader to see what a truly sensitive fellow he is and how deeply he loves his niece. One witnesses him carefully planning how he can help her along without getting in her way. Uncle Vernon has the best understanding of how Stella suppresses her feelings. He thinks, wisely, that the theater might help her find ways to express the many conflicting emotions that run through her.

By experiencing O'Hara's point of view, readers understand his compassion for others and his nobility. One feels his fascination with Stella and experiences his hurt that his affection is not returned. It is especially powerful when readers realize the terrible storm in his mind that is brought on by the revelation that Stella is his daughter.

As for Meredith, the reader gets only glimpses from his point of view. It is enough to remind one that he is extremely self-centered, self-serving and cares little for the pain of those around him.

Setting

The time is the 1950s, and the reader enters Liverpool, a city recovering from the Second World War. Within that city is a second world, the world of the repertory theater. The author, Beryl Bainbridge, has based the Liverpool Repertory Theatre on the real Liverpool Playhouse, where she worked as a young woman. Bainbridge grew up in Liverpool and lived there during the 1950s. Her descriptions of the city are vivid and very real. Readers easily join her in the midst of this time and place. She understands the hardships people endured then, and she makes these clear to her readers. The street scenes, the cafes and bars and the wonderful old theater are alive in this novel. Readers can almost smell the environment.

Readers enter the all-consuming world of the theater. It becomes clear why actors are often called gypsies. Here, even those who have some fame move from place to place, never knowing when they'll work together again. In fact, they never know when they will *work* again. Romances bloom for the season and die when it finishes.



The reader experiences the intimate family a theater company quickly becomes. They spend day and night, until very late, together. They fight with each other, support each other and use their offstage troubles and passions to give fire to their performances. Everyone does their best to protect this temporary family and to keep the theater going.

That does not mean that there's any lack of gossip. In fact, the company seems to thrive on it. Because their lives have intersected many times and in many circumstances, members of the company know quite a bit about each other. This is a topic for discussion at tea, in the bar and at parties.

Readers are given an education about what it takes to run a small theater company. It never prospers. Rose must stay on top of the publicity and the receipts, and she must manage relations with the board. She also has the difficult job of trying to keep Meredith's extravagance under control. The company must be kept as small as possible, with actors sometimes playing several roles within one play. Readers who know the modern theater will enjoy comparing and seeing the similarities with earlier days. There have been many advancements, yet many aspects remain the same.

Without making her characters stereotypes, the author provides many recognizable types from the theater of those days. Through the action, she shows all the preparations that go into producing each play. One enters the private world backstage and sees how the dramas continue offstage. There are extra hardships because of the difficult financial circumstances that a small theater faces, and the reader comes to understand this.

The Aber House Hotel, Uncle Vernon and Lily's boarding house, is typical of the time. Bainbridge shows the challenges of running the boarding house and introduces readers to the interesting boarders, many recovering - just like the city - from the war.

Language and Meaning

Each character has a distinct voice. Their vocabulary ranges from the simple and unsophisticated to the very sophisticated and worldly. The author does not use dialects that might slow one's reading and obscure the meaning, but she naturally uses some British terms that will be new to an American reader. Americans are used to the spelling "theater," whereas the author uses the old traditional spelling "theatre." A "torch" is a flashlight. A "motorbike" is a motorcycle, and a "mantelpiece" is a mantel. There are other, similar, examples throughout the work. Often, the reader can figure out what the term means. If not, this is a wonderful opportunity to do a little research and expand one's vocabulary.

Bainbridge also uses the universal language of the theater to make it come to life. Stagecraft, makeup, costuming and characterization are all very much part of the story. In a dialogue that O'Hara has with Stella, one gets a glimpse into the way a fine actor approaches and prepares a role for the stage.



A reader in the twenty-first century might wonder at the way the author only lightly suggests Meredith's homosexuality, but, in doing so, she gives one an understanding of what it used to be like when this was a hushed subject.

Structure

The book is written in eleven chapters, a prologue and an epilogue. Interestingly, the prologue is called Chapter 0. It opens the book with the promise of a scandal. There is just enough information in that first little chapter to whet the reader's appetite for more. The epilogue brings the reader back to the conclusion of the scene from Chapter 0.

Except for Chapter 0, the book proceeds chronologically. Background information is given through dialogue or through a character's memories. There is a great deal of humor in the book. Still, it is not truly a comedy.

The title of the book is very significant. It is a famous line from the play *Peter Pan* when Peter says: "Death will be an awfully big adventure." The entire book is about Stella's big adventure. From a rather narrow, sheltered environment, Stella bursts into the world of the theater. In addition to this new world, Stella experiences love, sex and increasing glimpses into herself and her past. Symbolically, Stella's big adventure leads to death - the death of O'Hara and the death of Stella's innocence.



Quotes

"At first it had been Uncle Vernon's ambition, not Stella's. He thought he understood her; from the moment she could toddle he had watched her lurching towards the limelight. Stella herself had shown more caution. 'I'll not chase moonbeams,' she told him."
Chapter 1, p. 5

"Debating anything with the girl was a lost cause. She constantly played to the gallery. No one was denying she could have had a better start in life, but then she wasn't unique in that respect and it was no excuse for wringing the last drop of drama out of the smallest incident." Chapter 1, p. 11

"The stage manager perched himself on the brass rail of the fire-guard and stared transfixed at his galoshes. Meredith lit a cigarette and, flicking the spent match into a dark corner, closed his eyes. It was plain to Stella that neither man liked the look of her."
Chapter 2, p. 18

"As Meredith advanced between the tables a little shiver of excitement disturbed the room." Chapter 2, p. 21

"Meredith appeared to be listening, but Stella could tell his mind was wandering. She had the curious feeling she reminded him of someone else, someone he couldn't put a name to." Chapter 2, p. 23

"Love, she told herself, would be her staircase to the stars and, moved as she was by the grand ring to the sentiment, tears squeezed into her eyes." Chapter 2, p. 27

"It was odd Geoffrey sounding clever on account of words when in other respects he was clearly pig-ignorant." Chapter 3, p. 31

"Until then, in the hope that Meredith would stumble across her, Stella had wasted the best part of three days hunched on the stairs turning over the pages of a library edition of Shakespeare's tragedies. She had combed her hair so often in anticipation she imagined it had grown thinner." Chapter 3, p. 31

"It was inconvenient, Stella coming home and wanting a bath. As Uncle Vernon pointed out, it was only Wednesday." Chapter 3, p. 40

"In the mirror above the wash-basin she spoke to Meredith. 'Good evening. I'm Stella Bradshaw. I don't expect you'll ever want to love me.' It was only make-believe but her mouth trembled at the suggestion. She thought she looked haunted, as though there was a demon standing at her shoulder." Chapter 3, p. 41

"He had wanted her to alter, had himself at some sacrifice to his pocket jostled her onto the path towards advancement, and yet he sensed she was leaving him behind. He hadn't realized how bereft he would feel, how alarmed." Chapter 3, p. 45



"He was neither willing nor ready to die, not until he had strangled Hilary." Chapter 4, p. 48

"His brush with John Harbour had soothed him; it was always satisfying to the senses, however diminishing to the soul, to wield power." Chapter 4, p. 51

"'You lack consistency,' said Bunny. 'You blow with the wind.' Meredith couldn't deny it. Often he suspected he hadn't the capacity to sustain either love or hate." Chapter 4, p. 60

"She experienced such a choking sensation of jealousy - she thought it must be like parachuting from an aeroplane, in that she couldn't breathe and the world dropped away - that she scrumpled up both scraps of paper and flung them into the metal basket beneath the counter." Chapter 4, p. 62

"Stella had been brought up to believe that Catholicism was a plague rather than a religion." Chapter 5, p. 71

"For a moment he saw her as someone outside of himself, another person, a stranger passing in the street with a face blazing with secrets. He felt uncomfortable; her eyes shone so." Chapter 5, p. 73

"Afterwards Stella waited in the passage until she heard Meredith coming downstairs. She would have picked out his padding footsteps among an army of marching boots." Chapter 5, p. 78

"As for Cleopatra, she was an uneducated girl and deluded if she thought Caesar gave a pig's bonnet for her. It was Anthony whom she had enslaved, never Caesar. To Caesar all women were the same." Chapter 6, p. 85

"Stella compromised by walking behind them. Every time Vernon looked back she was striding with her chin tilted theatrically, her eyes fixed on the smoky heavens. 'I can't take much more of this,' he confided to Lily, and she told him to shush. 'It's not as if she's ever been any different,' she said. Chapter 6, p. 96

"She wept and spoke at the same time - uttering fragments of sentences, half completed threats, pieces of swear words, repeating the name Richard over and over with the intonation of a child calling for its mother." Chapter 7, p. 117

"Stella thought the play peculiar. Considering it was meant for children it was surprising how many of the characters were unpleasant." Chapter 8, p. 130

"He sought, self-consciously, now that he once again walked those familiar streets, to catch up with that other, vanished self who, at this distance, seemed more real than the person he had become." Chapter 9, p. 143

"There was nothing so cozily malicious, once it was mutually accepted, as dead love." Chapter 9, p. 147



"Why couldn't she slide out of herself and be someone else, if only for the ten seconds it would take to push open the door of the hotel and step across the threshold?" Chapter 9, p. 151

"I have my whole life in front of me, she thought. I can't be hamstrung by sentiment." Chapter 10, p. 164

"If it would have caught Meredith's attention she wouldn't have minded a bone lodging in her gullet, but then there was always the risk he might think she was merely coughing - she could choke for nothing." Chapter 10, p. 167

"She didn't care about anything; she just wanted Meredith to see her on the back of the Prince's white charger. Perhaps, when he realized he was in danger of losing her, he and O'Hara would exchange a hostile, challenging glance." Chapter 10, p. 170

"It was unusual, that was for sure. She felt a certain sad excitement, a little discomfort and much embarrassment, the latter concerned with the removal of clothing." Chapter 10, p. 172

"Afterwards she was more friendly. He put a record on the gramophone and she sat on his lap, wrapped in a blanket, and lolled affectionately against his shoulder. She said she thought she was beginning to get the hang of it. It was no different from learning the piano or the ukulele; it just needed practice." Chapter 11, p. 182

"He couldn't make her out, or himself for that matter. What had started as an unimportant if rather shameful seduction had become something altogether more painful. He had lost his heart and was in danger of losing his head." Chapter 11, p. 186

"'Life is full of conflagrations,' O'Hara said. 'We can never be sure when we'll be consumed by the past.'" Chapter 11, p. 200



Topics for Discussion

What was Liverpool like after the war?

Name three characters from this novel who are affected by the war and explain how it affects them.

How do you feel about Stella? With what aspects of her do you identify? Why?

Why do you think Stella has blocked her emotions?

Why does Meredith treat people the way he does? If you were O'Hara or Rose, what would you do to try to change him?

What is the difference between Lily and Uncle Vernon? Why do you think Lily, who is after all Stella's aunt, is just called Lily?

What are some of the ways Uncle Vernon has found to take care of Stella without her knowing about it?

How does Stella relate to her blossoming sexuality and the way men are obviously attracted to her?

Sexual politics and awareness of harassment are very different today than they were in the 1950s. What are some of the situations in the book that remind the reader of this? How would they be handled today?

What do you wish Stella did differently?

Why does O'Hara have such a strong reaction to seeing the photo of Stella Maris on the mantel in the boarding house?

This novel is sometimes referred to as a comedy. Do you agree with that? Why or why not?