Another Brooklyn Study Guide

Another Brooklyn by Jacqueline Woodson

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Woodson, Jacqueline. Another Brooklyn. Harper Collins, 2016.

Twenty years after the events that defined her childhood, August returned to Brooklyn to bury her father. The novel opens with her having a meal with her younger brother, who is a follower of the Nation of Islam. As they ate, he encouraged her to turn back to faith as she savored the bacon on her plate. On the subway ride back to clean her father's apartment, August saw Sylvia, a woman she was close friends with as a child. The unexpected meeting threw her into a panic, and she left the train long before her stop. Seeing Sylvia again brought up memories of her girlhood, and the narrative then flashes back to the summer of 1973, when August was eight and her mother started hearing voices.

August spent her youngest years on family land called SweetGrove, in Tennessee. Following the death of her brother Clyde in Vietnam, August's mother began hearing his voice and sleeping with a butcher knife. August's father eventually moved himself and the two children to Brooklyn, New York, where he grew up. Ten-year-old August and her six-year-old brother spent their days believing that their mother would come for them. They spent that summer watching the streets of their Brooklyn Neighborhood from the closed window of their third-floor apartment. As they watched life go on outside their window, August saw three girls: Sylvia, Gigi, and Angela. It was during this time that her father was approached by someone from the Nation of Islam. Their summer of solitude continued, until August's younger brother pushed his hands through the window in an effort to open it or escape.

After they are permitted to go outside, August wandered the streets looking for and thinking of her mother. She and her brother still believed that she would come for them, and tried to find her on their daily walks. When they returned to school, August was welcomed into the group of girls she saw from the window. Sylvia, a beauty with reddish brown hair who reads Hegel and Marcel in French, arrived from Martinique a year before. Gigi, a multi-ethnic girl with a long, dark braids came to Brooklyn from South Carolina with her 21-year-old mother. Angela seems to have always lived in Brooklyn; she told them she has no history and refused to open up.

August recounted the summers her family spent at Coney Island and explained that at the time, they did not understand the type of poverty they lived in. It is only her reflection and memory that helps her to understand it. Her recollections, however, revealed that they lived in a changing neighborhood, with a woman who was most likely a prostitute downstairs, heroine addicts in the stairwells, and Vietnam veterans homeless on the streets. All the while, August believed that her mother was coming back for them.

Without her mother, August depended on the close friendship she forged with the three other girls. Together, they thought of their own mothers, dreamed of the future, and were a haven against the world outside and the sadness within themselves. When Gigi was

molested by a homeless veteran in her building's stairway, the girls went together to buy razor blades and practice using them. As they grew closer, their differences emerged. Angela was tight-lipped about her mother and home life, even as she dreamed of being a dancer, but it became clear that Sylvia's family was well-off and her father did not approve of the other girls.

As the girls grew into teenagers and with the development of hips and breasts, Brooklyn became a more dangerous place. Boys at school and men in their lives began to take notice of their sexuality, even as the girls themselves clung to the last vestiges of their childhood. At this point, August began asking her father whose ashes are in the urn he keeps in their home.

The blackout of 1977 functions as a turning point in August's narrative. The white people in her neighborhood had almost all moved away, her brother no longer needed the fantasy of his mother returning for them, and her father began seeing other women. August still could not accept her mother's death, even as she dreamed of a new family with one of these women. Her father converted to Islam at this time. At home, August observed Muslim customs, but outside, she did not. At this time, Sylvia's father refused to allow her to see the other girls and August began dating a boy named Jerome.

By the time the girls are 13, the girls became more sexually aware, and August recognized the often tragic fates of women in her neighborhood. In December, a woman was found dead on the roof of a building in the projects, and they realized that it is the mother Angela had been hiding from them. The girls at first refused to believe the reality of Angela's life--where she lived, who her mother was--and August compared this to her own mother's refusal to believe in Clyde's death. Just as her mother began disappearing after Clyde's death, the girls' friendship started to fade after Angela's mother's death.

When August is 15, she refused to allow Jerome to have sex with her. Not long after, she saw him in the park with Sylvia. August began pulling away from the group, and three months later, August saw Sylvia again. Her friend was pregnant and would probably never accomplish all that her father had planned for her. By then, they were no longer close friends. August was buried in studying for college exams and planning on her own escape from Brooklyn. Gigi invited them all to her performance in Jesus Christ Superstar, but overwhelmed by the memories of the past, August could not make herself go. She learned later that none of the three friends went, and later that night at the cast party, Gigi jumped off the eleventh floor of the hotel.

The novel then flashes forward, to August (now Auggie) in college, sleeping with white boys and, later, women, traveling the world, and still sleeping with her hands in fists. In her first year at Brown, August saw Angela on TV and knew that at least one of them has made it out. The novel ends with a memory of revisiting Sweet Grove when she was 16. She, her father, and her brother walked out to the water's edge, where her mother drowned, and August saw that all of life is a long traveling home, where everything will eventually fade to memory.

Chapter 1

Summary

The first chapter of Jacqueline Woodson’s novel introduces the major players and events of the story without fully explaining their significance. The story is narrated past-tense using first-person point of view from a point 20 years after the major events. August had returned to Brooklyn from abroad to bury her father and clean out her childhood home. As she talked with her younger brother over dinner at a local diner after the services, she remembered snippets of their shared childhood. They talked about her brother's wife and his soon-to-be-born child, and he gently urged her to return to the Islamic faith he lives by.

We learn that their father raised them, presumably after their mother’s death, but we do not know when or how long ago their mother died. Their shared childhood was not tragic as they experienced it, but now, examining the memories made it appear more so for August. However, they each survived the childhood almost whole. Her brother depended on his faith in the Nation of Islam, and August depended on her friendship with three girls: Gigi, Sylvia, and Angela.

On her subway ride back to her childhood home, August saw an adult Sylvia across from her. The unexpected meeting brought back memories of the last time she saw Sylvia, a pregnant teenager 20 years before. It also triggered memories of Gigi, and August indicated that whatever happened to Gigi was tragic enough to send August into a silent depression. To help her, August’s father took her to Sister Sonja, a therapist who helped her to look back at her childhood and healed from her losses, including her mother's and Gigi's deaths.

Interspersed within the flashes of past and present in Chapter 1 are facts about death rituals from different cultures, as the adult August was an anthropologist who studied death and funeral rites. Death, she claimed does not bother her, but the thought of Brooklyn left her throat tight.

Analysis

The first chapter of Another Brooklyn reflects Jacqueline Woodson's investment in the poetry and lyricism of her previous works. Rather than directly narrating the actions of her life, August’s narrative is episodic, and often almost dream-like, as it weaves between her past and present, recovering memories and dealing with traumas she had all but forgotten. Like poetry, the first chapter depends on the white spaces of the page to separate and juxtapose the individual images, memories, and sections. The spaces and emptiness between sections function as importantly as the words themselves. As in poetry, what is not explicitly stated or what is only implied is as important as what is described.

The individual paragraphs and sections replicate the experience of memory itself. Just as we often interrupt our reminiscence with suddenly remembered details, or as one memory can trigger another, the first chapter in Another Brooklyn is non-linear, hinting at characters and events to come without fully revealing their importance. “This is memory” (2, 16), our narrator says, which will be a refrain that will recur throughout the novel. “This is memory,” August (and Woodson, in turn) argues, not the straightforward story of who we once were and who we then became, but the twisting and often difficult piecing together of events to make sense of the whole. As August tells the reader, “I know now that what is tragic isn’t the moment. It is the memory” (1). The form of the novel, and especially of this first chapter, makes that idea concrete. The individual moments themselves are filled with quiet beauty, but put all together and connected by a single narrative thread, the action of remembering and creating memory creates something more tragic.

While the individual sections might at first seem unconnected, a closer examination reveals that one image or memory will often trigger another that is connected in August’s own mind. For instance, the mention of August’s brother’s wife and her pregnancy makes August remember her own birth, a two-day labor that left her mother "crazed" (6). August's chance meeting with Sylvia brings to mind her forgotten memories of the other girls. The links between sections and paragraphs in Chapter 1 give the reader a clue to how important these characters and events are to August, and how they have shaped who she has become. However, the lack of explanation or transitions to link these ideas indicate that at the beginning of the narrative, August has not fully dealt with or understood the importance of these individual events for herself.

This first chapter establishes many of the central questions, themes, and motifs of the novel. In the very opening line, August tells the reader, "For a long time, my mother wasn't dead yet" (1). At the beginning of the novel, the reader is not aware of when or how long ago her mother might have died, but the idea of death as being an ongoing process and the experience of death and loss as something people need to process over time becomes a central idea in August’s story. Most of the main characters have lost mothers or have absent mothers. The lack of mothers and the people and things that replace (or fail to replace) them becomes a central theme in the story, connecting characters and events. Her mother’s not being dead yet also parallels the 30 days August spent by her father’s deathbed, waiting for him to pass.

In this opening chapter, August also introduces the motif of music. Music and songs will recur throughout the novel, and many of the most important moments in August’s childhood and adolescence will have songs attached to them. However, more importantly than simply using music, Woodson indicates that certain types of music and art have exceptional power. August asks, “If we had jazz, would we have survived differently? If we had known our story was a blues with a refrain running through it, would we have lifted our heads and said to each other, This is memory again and again until the living made sense?” (2). Both jazz and the blues are African American art forms, and in them they contain the imprint of a larger history, which goes back to slave work songs and spirituals. The history running through this music, August indicates, might have supplied support and a sense of belonging for these characters when they

are most lost. Rather than jazz or blues, August and her friends and family had only Top 40. It should be noted, however, that the empty pop melodies of Top 40 music are not only insufficient, they are also often watered-down and co-opted versions of black musical traditions, like the blues and jazz.

The mention of jazz and the blues here functions to draw attention to the improvisational quality of Chapter 1 and the novel as a whole. Like a jazz melody, the narrative has a sense of freedom and an improvisational quality. Woodson's narrative in this opening chapter uses its non-linear narrative to recreate jazz. Just as August compares her relationship with three girls -- Sylvia, Angela, and Gigi -- to a sort of improvisation, the narrative itself improvises on the August's story, darting between past and present, like the notes of an improvised jazz solo. Like the blues, the narrative returns to a single refrain: This is memory. The book rejects the linear, commercial narratives as ill-equipped to handle the complexities of her story in the same way that August recognizes that pop music was never able to encapsulate the four of them or their stories.

In this first chapter, the reader also gets the first sense of the ambivalent relationship August has with the Nation of Islam. Her brother made it through their childhood "halfway whole" because he had "the faith my father brought to him," but Islam did not provide August with the same comfort (3). She purposely ate her bacon (an unclean food) slowly, savoring it in front of her brother, and showed no interest in renewing her faith or in becoming a wife and mother. However, she respected that faith, responding to his praise of Allah without hesitation. August also reveals that it was a therapist in a black hijab, Sister Sonja, who helped to bring her out of a silent depression when she was 15. Any time throughout the book that her memories become too oppressive and threatening, August will often return back to her time with Sister Sonja.

Finally, the first chapter introduces the theme of death and dying. We see that her mother "wasn't dead for a long time" and her father spends a month dying (1). The book opens after August's father's funeral, and Chapter 1 ends with a sense of Gigi's loss. Interspersed within Chapter 1 and throughout the book are insertions of anthropological facts about death rituals in the novel. The adult August is an anthropologist who has spent her life traveling the world and studying death. Many of her memories cause her to consider other, seemingly unrelated, facts about how other parts of the world deal with their dead. But each of these facts makes a subtle argument about her own dealings with the dead. For instance, she juxtaposes the rites of Hindu people in India spreading ashes on the Ganges and the Caviteño people of Bali burying the dead in tree trunks with her experience at her father's own grave. While these other civilizations cherish the dead and take time over their bodies, August does not stay to watch her own father's coffin be covered by dirt. She instead goes off to eat pork, a meat her father would not have consumed, in a diner.

The chapter ends with another of the death rituals that the adult August studies. In Indonesia, families keep their dead in their houses and do not bury them until money is saved to pay for a funeral. Until then, the dead are treated as though they are still living, cared for and loved. This suggests that the entire narrative will be an attempt to do just

that — to take the dead out, wash and dress them, and care for these memories lovingly until she is strong enough to bury them as they deserve.

Discussion Question 1

August says that her brother "looked like a figure out of history. Malcolm maybe. Or Stokely" (11). How does the Chapter 1 compare history to memory?

Discussion Question 2

How does the disjointed nature of the opening chapter contribute to Woodson's understanding of and interrogation of memory?

Discussion Question 3

Why might Woodson choose not to give two of the most important characters -- August's father and brother -- names?

Vocabulary

kufi, ensemble, refrain, bodega, anthropology, hijab

Chapter 2

Summary

Chapter two takes the reader back 20 years, to the summer of 1973, when August was eight years old. Her mother started to hear voices and her father moved her and her brother to Brooklyn by the time August was ten. Chapter 2 proceeds along a more linear track, covering the summer that she and her brother spent trapped inside their third-floor apartment, watching life happen on the streets below.

For August, the streets of Brooklyn were a new word, where “the people were all beautiful in some way” (17-18). Watching from the window, August saw three girls about her own age: Sylvia, Gigi, and Angela. Their unity confused August, because her own mother taught her that she should not trust other women. She and her brother were often left alone while their father was at work.

At this point, they were still Christians “wondering what it was like to walk the edge of holy,” (23) but by the end of Chapter 2, her father had been introduced to the Nation of Islam. August, however, was already questioning both religions and women's places in them.

At the end of Chapter 2, August's younger brother put his hands through their window and was rushed to the hospital. August believed her mother would come for sure now, but she did not.

Analysis

Chapter 2 brings the reader the first real glimpse of the three girls who so much of the narrative revolves around: Sylvia, Gigi, and Angela. For August, who grew up on rural land with only her immediate family around, the girls represent something new. Their sense of togetherness is "deeply unfamiliar" to August, whose mother taught her to distrust other women and keep her "nails long" to fend off their attacks (19). Still, August is drawn to them. She tells the reader she was "longing to be a part of who they were, to link my own arm with theirs and remain that way forever" (19). This is the beginning of her understanding the girls as a single unit. When the three come together, they become a single entity and something new. August's desire to be a part of this stems in part from her missing her own mother, who had been her other half in a house full of men. She recognizes that the people in her family are different from this one-ness the girls seem to have. She tells the reader that her father and brother had a "fluid connection, a something I was on the outside of" (20), and she believed that when her mother returns, she would have that same connection with her. August also desperately yearns to be on the inside of the three girls' connection.

For August, the connection forged between the three girls signals strength. "How safe and strong they looked. How impenetrable," she thinks, as she watches them from three

stories above. As a young girl who has seen tragedy in the loss of her uncle and her mother, the sureness these girls broadcast by the way they walk hand-in-hand down the street represents a possible replacement for the security August felt with her mother. However, this illusion is briefly shattered when August's brother nearly dies by putting his hands through the window. August believes that, certainly, her brother's injuries will finally bring her mother to them, and when it does not -- when her mother remains away -- August is not able to deal with the possibility of being part of the girls. Her world and expectations shatter along with the glass.

Another important thematic development in Chapter 2 is August's father's relationship to the Nation of Islam. At the beginning of the book, August's brother is a devout muslim, but when they first move to Brooklyn, August is only familiar with the Christian faith. When she was younger, her mother took the family to a small church in Tennessee, and even as a very young child, August had questions about faith and holiness. When she heard the well known refrain, "For God so loved the world...he gave his only begotten son," August wondered, "But what about his daughters...What did God do with his daughters?" (23). Later in her childhood, her father, a Vietnam War veteran with two missing fingers, does not seem immediately interested in religion until he is approached by a man from the Nation of Islam. The man appealed to August's father as "my beautiful black brother" and called August a "black queen" (25). August remains skeptical of religion throughout the story, but it is clear that her father -- and later her brother -- are drawn to the Nation of Islam and away from the vision of Jesus "white and holy" (25).

Chapter 2 further interrogates the very idea of memory in August's remembering of the incident with the window. We do not know for sure whether her brother intended to break the glass, or he was simply trying to put up the window. In her description there is no sense of intention: "Then my brother's palms were against the window, pushing it out instead of up, shattering it, a deep white gash suddenly pulsing to bright red along his forearm" (27). However, the description is stark and clear, a crystalized image of a single moment when bone flashes white before it is covered by blood. What happens after is also a mystery, lost to memory. "How did my father suddenly appear, a thick towel in his hands?" she asks, not sure whether he was close by or watching from the ground below. In this instance, her remembering of the events is silent. The visuals of the crowd and the flash of the ambulance's light is clear, but they remain silent, like a photograph or a video on mute. "This is memory," she reiterates, imperfect and incomplete (28).

Finally, in Chapter 2, the reader gets a sense of August's desperate need of her mother, and her mother's own character. In a story such as this, it would have been easy enough to craft her mother's character as a throwaway plot point -- a madwoman relegated to the edges of the story, even as she is the center. Woodson, however, is careful to draw distinctions between August's own experience of loss and her mother's. We learn that when her mother received the telegram about Clyde's death, she refuses to believe it. "They had the wrong man. So many brown and black men, who could know?" her mother insists. If would be easy enough to dismiss this as a mental break, but Chapter 2 juxtaposes it with August's experiences in the hospital. Her mother

insisted that Clyde was fine, so when the nurse tells August that her brother will be fine, August does not believe it. Her mother insisted that Clyde would return to them, refusing to believe in the finality of his death. So too, her daughter believes that she will return, refusing to believe in the finality of their break. While August's brother seems to heal from his wounds, August herself is still struggling to accept that deeper wound of her mother's abandonment.

Discussion Question 1

In Chapter 2, August tells us that "the Benguet of the Northern Philippines blindfold their dead then sit them on a chair just outside the entrance to their home, their hands and feet bound" (30). How does this image relate to the events within Chapter 2?

Discussion Question 2

Images of darkness and light, shadow and light, or whiteness and blackness appear throughout Chapter 2. How does this particular motif help us to understand August's experiences in this new city on a more symbolic level?

Discussion Question 3

August herself never appears to be overly devout in her religious beliefs, but those of her family affect her life. How does Chapter 2 contrast the Nation of Islam and the Christianity August's mother brought her up with?

Vocabulary

continuum, wafted, begotten, medallion

Chapter 3

Summary

In Chapter 3, August's father gave her and her brother increasing freedom to go out of the apartment after the accident, until they were free. August often roamed the neighborhood looking for signs of her mother, who she had begun to realize must be changed by now. When they began school that fall, the girls were not her friends, but she loved to watch them and learned who they are by the sound of their voices and they way they move. She still believed the girls were impervious to pain and did not have any "ghost mother" in their pasts (36).

On the day they finally became friends, Sylvia approached August and asked what she saw when she looked at the three of them. "I see everything," August told her (37), and when they asked if she was the one without a mother, she denied it. The girls accepted her as one of them easily, and it was only much later that August realized that beneath their confident exteriors, each of the girls had a past and problems of their own.

Analysis

Chapter 3 marks the movement of August from being focused on her brother and family to her new circle with the girls. At the beginning of Chapter 3, she is still with her brother, first because her father demands that they go out together and she hold his hand, but then because she begs him to go out looking for their mother. August going to school marks a movement away from the home and into the public sphere, and with this movement, the narrative moves to a more intense focus on her relationship with the girls.

The sadness August feels at turning 11 is related to the book's overall interrogation of the moment when childhood gives way to adulthood. The trauma of leaving behind childhood is doubled by her missing mother, but the girls represent a new beginning for her, "an anchoring" (36). As they move toward the open sea of adolescence, it is clear that the four of them together will represent a safety that alone they would not have

Without reservation or question, the girls take her in, and that mutual coming together is underscored by the mutual need each individual girl. As August recognizes, "we saw the lost and beautiful and hungry in each of us. We saw home" (38). It is only after being brought into the group that August begins to understand that individually, the girls are not so impervious as she might have believed.

By having the other three girls represent diverse experiences within their small Brooklyn neighborhood, the novel is able to show both the difference between individuals and the overarching experience of being a girl turning into a woman. Sylvia comes from perhaps the most stable family, with a successful father and mother who is still in the home. Gigi was the daughter of a teenage mother, who came to Brooklyn a year before on her

mother's whim. Angela is the most enigmatic. Beneath the surface she is angry, represented by the way she curls her hands into fists. She refuses to reveal her past to the others, no matter how close they become. "I don't have a history," she tells them. "Just you guys. Just right here, right now" (40). None of the girls seem to have mothers who are present in their daughters' lives in any concrete way. Although August is the girl whose mother is literally absent, a status she denies at first to the girls, they share a common experience. They replace the mothering they might have craved with a devotion to each other.

Discussion Question 1

How might each of the individual girls represent a type? How does the information we receive about them defy stereotyping them?

Discussion Question 2

August repeatedly thinks that she wants what these girls have. How does her coming to understand them as individuals change or reenforce this desire?

Discussion Question 3

Angela tells the group, "I don't have any history" (40). Compare this with August's recognition that her (adult) brother looked like "a figure out of history" (11). How does her statement redefine what history is? How does the novel as a whole seek to understand histories both personal and public?

Vocabulary

patois, digits

Chapter 4

Summary

Chapter 4 returns to the more disjointed narrative structure of the beginning, taking the reader from the night August and her family left Tennessee to the prostitute that moves into the apartment below them in Brooklyn. Chapter 4 does not follow a clear linear progression, but instead jumps between the early years of her childhood in both SweetGrove and Brooklyn.

The chapter opens with the night August's father took the children from Tennessee two years after her mother began speaking to Clyde's ghost. Later, Chapter 4 reveals more specific details about their home in SweetGrove. At one time, the farm was a large tract of land with a house in disrepair, but by the time August left it, most of the land had been reclaimed by the government for failure to pay taxes.

Another thread running through Chapter 4 is the reality of their new life in New York. With trips to Coney Island and the arrival of a prostitute named Jennie in the apartment below them, August reveals the specifics of a childhood growing up poor.

Analysis

Chapter 4 returns the reader to the style of Chapter 1, where seemingly disjointed scenes and images vacillate between different periods in her very young girlhood. Although these instance might first appear to be disconnected, thematically they explore the idea of memory as an excavation and re-examining of the past.

Chapter 4 focuses especially on they way an adult August is able to re-see the places of her childhood through her active remembering. SweetGrove is an idyllic memory to the young August, but as August describes the land, it becomes what it has always been--an unworked parcel of acres with a house in "a state of disrepair" (51). Though a very young August and her brother "moved through the house...without seeing the ways in which it was sagging into itself," the adult August can see it's "water-stained ceilings, splintered hardwood floors" and broken appliances as they are" (51-2). It is essential to note that seeing and acknowledging the reality of the property does not lessen its importance to August -- either then or in the present of the novel. In fact, SweetGrove becomes almost symbolic of her Uncle Clyde, both once belonged to the family and both were taken by the government.

The trope of revealing truth through memory is reinforced by August's memories of her childhood in Brooklyn. She tells the reader that on Saturdays, her father took the siblings to Coney Island. To an 11-year-old and an eight-year-old, the lights and excitement of Coney Island must have been a wonderland, but an adult August recognizes, "we didn't understand the kind of poverty we lived in" (42). This adult August, remembers, too, the "stringy-haired women half naked and fighting against

heroine-induced nods" (42). To the adult August, remembering these weekends, both the wonder and the seedier underbelly of the experience coexist. The same can be said for her memory of her childhood. The children were well fed and always clothed, but the adult August is aware of the hand-me-downs and castaway clothing. "We had seen the truly poor kids, the hard bones of their knees and ankles, the raggedness of their clothes," August claims. "We were not them. Most days, we had enough" (43). Again, the act of memory transforms the experience of the event.

These moments of realization are included along with a description of Angela's fingers and a woman staggering down the road, clinging to a stop sign to stay upright. These images seem unrelated to the very personal descriptions of August's own history, but later in the text, it will be more clear that they belong thematically. Just as the very young August did not see the truth of her childhood poverty or SweetGrove's imperfections, so too do all of the girls miss the connection between Angela's response to this woman and her anger. Later in the novel, August will understand that the stumbling woman is Angela's mother. The theme of what is missed in the lived moment of the event versus what can be revealed in the memory helps to understand the overall structure of Chapter 4.

Finally, Chapter 4 begins to examine the larger historical moment of the narrative. We get in this chapter a more complete description of the moment in 1973, when August's mother learns of Clyde's death. This is contrasted with Miss Dora, the elderly woman across the street who braids August's hair every two weeks. Miss Dora also lost a son in Vietnam, and her acceptance of that loss stands in direct contrast to August's mother. Where the children of the neighborhood take bets on which heroine addicts will fall over for entertainment, Miss Dora sees her son in those men. "As the damage of the war staggered, strung-out and bleary-eyed along out block, Miss Dora greeted every ex-soldier who passed" (49). The kindness she shows to these men indicates a future that is possible with the acceptance of her own son's death, but her personal tragedy indicates a larger national tragedy. These "bleary-eyed" and "strung-out" men are the very same who populated the heroine-addled New York City of the late seventies and eighties, but the narrative exposes them not as criminals but as victims of a war and a country that left them bereft.

"This is memory" the narrative insists again (54), piecing together seemingly unrelated moments of the past to draw out a more complete picture through the act of remembering. "The government owns the pecan trees now," the adult August tells the reader. "What had once been my family's has been taken. By the government" (54). In a few stark lines she draws a connection between the war and all that has happened to her, to her neighborhood, and to her family.

Discussion Question 1

How does the specter of Vietnam overshadow Chapter 4 and this story as a whole?

Discussion Question 2

The narrator disavows "the truly poor kids" and claims that while they lived in a sort of poverty, she and her brother were not them. Why does she cling to this need to be separate from the other children who are "truly poor"? What does this tell us about both the younger and the adult August?

Discussion Question 3

Tennessee and SweetGrove often functions as a foil to August's grittier life in Brooklyn. How does Chapter 4 undermine the contrast between these two sites of her childhood? What is at stake in recognizing the similarities between these two spaces?

Vocabulary

dappled, balm, bleary-eyed, hypodermic, sawflies

Chapter 5

Summary

Chapter 5 does not resume the linear narrative, but reveals each girl's background through a series of past and present images about their mothers and themselves.

Gigi's mother attempted to impart a belief in the "curse" of her dark skin when Gigi was only six years old by standing her in front of a mirror and telling her that her great-grandmother was a mixture of Chinese and a "mulatto." Gigi wrestled with this, believing at times that her skin was that of a monster and other times was beautiful. Her dream was to be on screen or stage. Her beauty was also a curse, drawing a homeless and drug-addicted veteran to molest her in the stairwell of her apartment building. The girls bought razor blades and promised to help her kill him.

Angela had light skin and a sadness that the other girls did not understand. She took dance classes, because her mother was a dancer, but Angela continued to remain silent about her mother.

The girls were jealous of Sylvia, who had a pink bedroom and read French philosophers. Sylvia, however, had to deal with the pressure of her family, who believed she must be a lawyer first.

Analysis

Chapter 5 uses the impressionistic images of the three girls' lives to compare and contrast their ideas about each other to the realities of their lives. Where August saw the three as impervious to damage in the earlier chapters, these short vignettes about Gigi, Angela, and Sylvia's lives reveal the often hidden and secret traumas and weights the girls carry with them through life. The beauty of Gigi, for instance, is revealed to be a danger when she is assaulted by an addicted veteran in the stairwell of her building. The seemingly stable and privileged life of Sylvia is shown to be a prison where she does not even know what she loves because. Angela has the light skin that Gigi's mother approves of, but even with her talent with dancing, she bears a silence she refuses to speak about. By juxtaposing these glimpses into the girl's life, the text is able to tease out the complexities of girlhood.

In Chapter 5, Woodson uses a technique that she has been employing throughout the book: the use of italics to represent speech instead of quotation marks. Because Chapter 5 features so many voices--those of both the girls and their mothers--the technique highlights the disembodied quality of remembered voices. Without the italics, it is unclear whether these voices are actual speech or imagined speech. Rather than simply speak, these voices almost haunt the narrative and the girls.

Chapter 5 begins with the line, "We came by way of our mothers' memories," and what follows is a series of vignettes and images that explore the relationships between mothers, the pressures on girls and female sexuality, and the mistakes we all make by misunderstanding the surface veneer of people's lives (55). Through these interspersed narratives, Chapter 5 reveals the experiences of Gigi, Angela, and Sylvia. Just as August begins to learn more about her three friends, so too does Chapter 5 allow the reader to pull back the veil and examine the complexities and small tragedies of each girl's life. It is important to note that August's own story is missing here, just as her mother is missing from the narrative.

Gigi's story demonstrates the devastating affects of feminine beauty and the impact understandings of race has on them. With her long, heavy braids and her slightly slanted eyes, Gigi could be considered the beauty of the group, but her story here exposes the pitfalls of beauty standards. The text emphasizes how young the pressure to be beautiful begins by showing Gigi's mother standing her in front of a mirror when she is only six years old to explain the source of her features. "Those eyes, her mother said, were your great-grandmother's eyes. She came to South Carolina by way of a Chinaman daddy and a mulatto mama" (55). Implicit in this description is the mark of race. Her daddy being described as a "Chinaman" immediately makes him, and Gigi as well, other.

The emphasis on a "mulatto mama" in her mother's explanation resonates with a long history of the mulatto as a tragic figure. Mulatto's, historically, were incorrectly believed to be sterile, and American literature (especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) often used the trope of the tragic mulatto. The tragic mulatto is an archetypal figure that appears in many well known texts, such as Nella Larson's Passing and many of Charles Chesnutt's novels and stories. She is most often a woman who is forced to exist between two worlds. She is often light enough to pass, but her black blood always puts her at risk in the white world. Woodson turns the tragic mulatto figure on its head with the character of Gigi, because unlike most of the stereotypical figures, she has dark skin. "The only curse you carry, her mother said, is the dark skin I passed on to you. You gotta find a way past that skin. You gotta find your way to the outside of it" (56). Her mother has internalized racist notions of darkness being a curse, very much as the tragic mulatto trope might, but there is a significant difference in Woodson's novel: Gigi does not completely accept it. She tells the reader that the mirror was cracked, and "I guess that should be a sign. Broken-ass mirror and my crazy mama making promises" (55). She does not seem to have completely internalized the self-hatred her mother has, either. She recognizes that her skin is dark, but she also sees other colors in it: "it's got red and blue and gold in it. I look at my arms sometimes and I'm thinking skinny-ass monster arms... And sometimes, she said, they look so damn beautiful to me. I don't even know which thing is the truth" (56). Her resistance to believe her mother's narrative is important here, but so is the effect these beauty ideas do have on her. Torn between, she is the representation of a girlhood trapped in a world she did not create and cannot safely navigate.

Woodson further revises the tragic mulatto trope with Gigi when she is assaulted by the drug-addled veteran who lives in her building's stairwell. In the usual use of the trope,

the figure finds herself isolated and without community because she is neither fully black nor fully white. However, when Gigi is assaulted, the other three girls do not reject her. In traditional uses of the trope, the tragic mulatto figure ends up alone because of some weakness in her very blood. Both communities will turn away. In Woodson's novel, Gigi is surrounded by a group of girls who do not turn away, at least not at this moment. However, it should be noted that these are still only girls. Before they come into their own as women, they are able to support their friend and form a community around her that protects Gigi, and each other, from the dangers of the outside world. As the novel progresses and the girls move from girlhood to womanhood, though, these relationships will change. As the world begins to impinge on their senses of self and outside forces pull at the group, they will not be there to support Gigi, who will meet a tragic end.

Like Gigi, Chapter 5 also focuses on the skin tone of Angela. This attention to skin color alludes to a more prevalent issue of racially structured beauty standards, where whiteness in American culture is seen as more beautiful. Historically and in literature, light-skinned African Americans could more easily hold places of authority within the black community. We see this earlier in Woodson's novel when August tells the reader that Angela reminds her of the "high yellow" girls who were the daughter of the preacher at her mother's church. In Chapter 5, Angela becomes a part of a longer, creative tradition. Angela had "seen Josephine Baker and Lena Horne and Twyla Tharp on television" and dreams of being like them, even as she mimics their movements. These three historical figures stand in for the mother she will not speak of or discuss, and although they seem very far removed from Angela's actual life, they will provide for her examples of what is possible for a black woman.

Sylvia's skin is a "sweet copper." For August, Sylvia's skin is not so important as what she is. "Still, it wasn't the skin or the eyes or the voice I wanted. I simply wanted to be Sylvia, to walk through the world as she did, watch the world through her eyes" (62). For August, Sylvia's confidence is more important that her lighter skin or green eyes. However, while Sylvia appears so thoroughly confident and self-possessed to the group, she is less so internally. Her father demands that she study law and then "everything I love can follow that" (63), and because of the pressures on her from a family that should read as more stable and economically secure than any of the others, she does not know who she is. This weakness will prove in the end to be just as dangerous as Gigi's beauty or August's own inability to deal with her past.

Finally, Chapter weaves all three of the girls' stories together through an understanding that their futures are the result, at least in part, of their parents' pasts. "Maybe this is how it happened first for everyone--adults promising us their own failed futures" (63). Just as the adults in each girl's life impart dreams in them that may or may not be the best thing for the individual girl, so too does Chapter 5 a whole reveal something about August herself. The information that she selects to narrate in this chapter conveys a sense of what she sees herself -- or her childhood self -- as missing. Even as it points towards those smaller jealousies and longings, however, the way that Chapter 5 indicates growth with the way it is bookended by the idea that the stories adults hand down are not necessarily the ones we need.

Discussion Question 1

What arguments is the narrative posing about the impact of race and class on female beauty standards?

Discussion Question 2

Many of the girls seem to want fame or to pursue creative lives that involve performance. Why might these girls gravitate toward futures that are more creative? How does Sylvia's lack of that dream or desire make her different than the others?

Discussion Question 3

How do these small vignettes about each girl expose the power family memory can have? Why might August be missing from Chapter 5?

Vocabulary

mulatto, coils, quickening

Chapter 6

Summary

Chapter 6 begins with a flashback to 1968, when a group of Igbo peoples in Nigeria attempted to form the country of Biafra. August found a Life magazine of the event in their Brooklyn apartment, but it is not clear if it was the child version of August or the adult August, who was cleaning out her father's home after his death. August then compares her own childhood with the starving children on the cover of the magazine and concludes that they were not poor in the same way.

The second half of Chapter 6 concerns two other children -- the children of Jennie, the prostitute who lived in the apartment below them. August remembers that Jennie seemed happy to see her children, but when she went out to get them food, she did not return. Instead, August and her brother fed and cared for the two children until Jennie returned.

Analysis

Chapter 6 uses the juxtaposition of the starving children of Biafra and the two children of Jennie, the prostitute who lives in the apartment below to explore the dangers - both public and private - that children face.

To understand Chapter 6, it will be important to have a brief understanding of what Biafra was. From May 30, 1967 to January of 1970, a group of Igbo people attempted to break away from Nigeria and establish their own government. Their succession resulted in the Nigerian civil war, in which more than three million Biafran citizens died from starvation due to the total blockade by the Nigerian government. Whether August finds the magazines as an adult or as a child, their very existence in her father's Brooklyn kitchen indicates the importance of the event to her parents. After all, even if she finds the magazines as a child, it means that her father has moved them from Tennessee and kept them for more than seven years in their small apartment.

In Chapter 2, August's father uses the example of Biafra to explain why the children are unable to go out of their apartment without him. "'Look at Biafra,' he said. 'Look at Vietnam'" (24). In Chapter 6, we see that August's mother also uses Biafra as an example for her children: "Eat your peas, there are children starving in Biafra" (65). The children of Biafra become a warning of how bad things might be for August and her brother, but August does not understand the truth of the stories until she is confronted with the images.This mirrors so many instances in the book where stories and memories do not become real until the truth is confronted by the character.

These images, much like the images and stories that populate the novel as a whole, are not static pictures, relegated to the past. August tells the reader, "long after Biafra melted back into Nigeria, the country from which it had fought so hard to secede, the

faces and swollen bellies of those children haunted me" (65). She asks the reader, and herself, "How do we dream ourselves out of this?" (66). The book functions, at least in part as an answer to that question. Just as the images of the starving children haunt August, so do all of her memories of her childhood.

The story of the tragedy of Biafra is juxtaposed with a smaller, personal tragedy in Chapter 6 -- the life of Jennie's children. The appearance of Jenny's children with a woman in a blue suit reminds the reader of the novel's opening paragraph, about how there was "seldom a happy ending" when children end up in protective services (1). Jennie's children may not be dressed in white rags and they may not be emaciated, but they are hungry and as silent as the children on the cover of magazines. Even though Jennie runs out to get the children food, she comes back empty-handed, "sleepy-eyed, scratching at her arms and legs" (69). Her intentions are overshadowed by her addiction, and her children suffer because of it.

In this novel of childhood and motherless children, both the children of Biafra and Jennie's children stand as foils to August's own experience. Here are examples of other types of poverty, other types of suffering, and August recognizes that her own childhood did not include the severity of the poverty that the children of Biafra received or the unsettled neglect of Jennie's children, but she is careful to point out that pain and tragedy does not need to be ranked. "No we were not poor like this...but still" August argues (66). Her own pain is no more or less important in some ways than the pain of children who get a magazine cover or of unseen, uncared for children who will disappear into the system.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Woodson include such a little known historical instance as the succession of Biafra in the novel? What argument does the story make about the relationship between public and private tragedies?

Discussion Question 2

August and her brother know almost naturally to feed and care for Jennie's children. What does this detail tell us about their own home life and the job their father is doing to raise them?

Discussion Question 3

At the end of Chapter 6, August turns up the radio so she cannot hear the children downstairs crying. How does this mention of music work with the opening chapter's claim that things might have been different if they had known jazz or the blues?

Vocabulary

Biafra, admonition, genderless, distended, devoured

Chapter 7

Summary

Chapter 7 is a collage of images from the summer of August's twelfth year. The chapter begins with the girls listening to music and talking about their futures as they hang out in one another's homes. As the summer progressed, the girls began to develop sexually. As Chapter 7 progresses in a series of distilled images, we see them becoming more aware of the world around them. At the end, August asked about the ashes in the urn, the first indication that her mother had died.

Analysis

Chapter 7 unfolds in a series of scenes and images that encapsulate August's twelfth summer. At the beginning of the summer the girls are still girls, but as Chapter 7 unfolds, they begin to develop and become more aware of the dangers posed by the men who walk the streets of Brooklyn. "The world was ending," August realizes. "We had been girls, wobbling around the apartment in Gigi's mother's white go-go boots and then and then and then" (70). Womanhood remains unstated in the sentence, just as it remains unstated in Chapter 7, but the reader can sense that the girls are on the precipice of a new part of their lives.

The narrative is clear, however, that sexuality itself is not something new to the girls. "At eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, we knew we were being watched" (71). From the shoe repair man on Gates Avenue who would try to pay the girls to look up their skirts to the boys on the streets who called out the girls' names, to the pastor in Gigi's church, to the altar boys at Sylvia's church, unwanted sexual attention is not anything new. What is new is their developing bodies that "suggested more to strangers than we understood" (74).

Chapter 7 emphasizes the importance of the girls' bond and the danger of going through their world alone. "We pretended to believe we could unlock arms and walk the streets alone. But we knew we were lying" (74). Their world is too full of dangers and they have "long lost our razor blades and none of us had ever truly stopped chewing on our nails" (75). Still, even as the girls want to believe their friendship is unyielding, Chapter 7 foreshadows what is to come. Already, they understand that they will grow apart from one another.

Chapter 7 also reveals the importance of the novel's title, Another Brooklyn. As August and her brother dream about who and what they will become, she recognizes that "everywhere we looked, we saw people trying to dream themselves out. As though there was someplace other than this place. As though there was another Brooklyn" (77). The drug addicts they watch from the safety of their apartment, the girls August is friends with, even her refusal at the end of Chapter 7 to recognize who the ashes in the urn

belong to all point toward this idea of dreaming, or fantasizing, another reality and another present and future.

Discussion Question 1

Chapter 7 follows the revelation that Gigi has been sexually assaulted. How does it build on the theme of sexual danger for women?

Discussion Question 2

Why is August unable to understand or accept who is in the ash-filled urn? What would that realization mean for the young August?

Discussion Question 3

Often childhood is figured as a type of innocence. How does Another Brooklyn challenge this vision of childhood through what the children see, understand, and experience?

Vocabulary

kitchenette, go-go boots, conceited

Chapter 8

Summary

Chapter 8 marks a turning point in the story. Set against the backdrop of the July 1977 blackoutin New York City, Chapter 8 details some of the large changes in August's life. The blackout summer marked the time when most of the white people in her neighborhood moved out for good, and the neighborhood changed. Her brother discovered math and had accepted his mother's death, while August was unable to. Jennie's children were taken away from her again.

Perhaps the biggest change after her mother's ashes arrived at their apartment is that August's father started dating and converted more fully to Islam. Sister Loretta, a woman from the Nation of Islam, took the family on as a project and transformed their diets and their lives. Even as Sister Loretta tried to convince August to cover her head and her body, August was not yet convinced about her beliefs.

Analysis

Chapter 8 is much longer and more involved than the chapters that preceded it. By using a series of events during the summer of 1977, Chapter 8 continues the novel's larger motif of pairing the public and traditionally historical with the private to uncover the unexpected complications and resonances of both. The changes in August's private world are set against the backdrop of the July blackout and the white flight from August's Brooklyn neighborhood. While August herself has not recognized or accepted her mother's death, the reader is aware that it has happened because of the urn of ashes from Chapter 7 and because her father has started to date and convert to Islam in Chapter 8. For August's home life, things are very, very different.

Chapter 8 uses images of food and family meals to underscore the changes in August's life. Where before, they would have gone to the corner store for pickled pig's feet and pork rinds drenched in hot sauce, now Sister Loretta cooks them "clean" food. "The food you are eating is the white devil's plan to kill our people," Sister Loretta argues (89). Later she calls it "slave food" (91). These arguments are in contrast to the emotional connection August has with memories of food. Far from being dangerous or dirty, the experience of eating her traditional southern cuisine or ham sandwiches from the corder store brings the young August comfort in the face of a missing mother and complicated childhood.

Still, despite the changes, August likes, maybe even loves, Sister Loretta. She dreams of her making their family whole, even as she denies her mother's death. As this happens, the subjects of the earlier chapters all but disappear. "The children of Biafra faded into the news images of children starving in the ghettos of Chicago, Los Angeles, New York" (94). The three girls August is close friends with are completely absent in

Chapter 8 and in the changes to her private world. She becomes one person in her house, praying to mecca and cleaning without argument next to Sister Loretta, but she knows even as she agrees with Sister Loretta's words that she is lying.

These changes in her private world are set against the backdrop of the white flight from her neighborhood. Throughout earlier chapters, August has made the reader aware that white families do move out of the neighborhood, but here, "the last of the white people began fading" (81). In a neighborhood where the children seem to run free and know so many people, there are still divisions. August does not know the German woman's name or "the Italian family or the Irish sisters who dressed alike" (83). They do, however "know their moving vans" (83) as they "fled" the neighborhoods. Even young August understands that their flight stems from fear of the brown-skinned boys, the result of misunderstandings and not knowing one another. This juxtaposition shows the relationship between the public and private once again. Just as the neighborhood will never be the same as it once was, so too will August's family after her father's conversion.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of Sister Loretta's appearance in Chapter 8? How well does she function as a replacement mother?

Discussion Question 2

Why is August's reluctance to completely convert to Islam important to her character?

Discussion Question 3

What is the story's take on the white flight in August's Brooklyn neighborhood?

Vocabulary

blackout, hawkers, pi, jive, linoleum, Mecca, kosher, cornrow

Chapter 9

Summary

Chapter 9 contrasts the lives of August as her family became more devout to the teachings of the Nation of Islam and Sylvia, whose family expected great things from her. Chapter 9 details August's relationship with Sister Mama Loretta, who became a more a part of her family after August's mother died, even as August insisted on believing that her mother was not dead. Also during this time,her relationships with the three girls changed, and she remembered her mothers advice to never be friends with women. We see in Chapter 9 the beginning of the plot involving a boy named Jerome, whom August had known since she was nine years old.

The Chapter compares the changes in August's home life to that of Sylvia. Sylvia, on the other hand, was raised in a house filled with the French of Martinique, art depicting great historical figures from African history, and endless lessons about decorum and manners. Sylvia's house was very different from August's small apartment, with it's portraits in a sitting room and refrigerator that dispensed ice. Sylvia's family had money and standing, and they expected their youngest daughter to fulfill their expectations. Sylvia's family looked down on August and the rest of the girls, and it was at Sylvia's house that August wished she did wear the head covering and loose clothing Sister Loretta had tried to get her to adopt. Still, when August kissed Jerome for the first time, it was Sylvia she tells.

Analysis

In Chapter 9, the reader sees August as her family more fully embrace Islam. The chapter compares her reluctance to accept the hijab and other trappings of modesty with her pain at being exposed as unacceptable by Sylvia's family. In Chapter 9, she tells the reader, "My Muslim beliefs lived just left of my heart. I was leaving space for something more promising" (97). This idea of "something more promising" is directly alluded to when we see the life Sylvia leads in this same chapter. Here is the girl who seems to have everything, including a refrigerator that dispenses ice, and it is in Sylvia's house that August feels most dangerously exposed. for August, however, Islam is a religion of men. Her father and brother leave her to pray at home alone when they go to mosque, underlining her need of connection, especially female connection.

In Chapter 9, however, we start to get a stronger sense that becoming women means leaving behind the security of girlhood. "We would be women one day...there wouldn't be the world we were walking through arm in arm" (99). It is not that they would not be in that world, but that the world itself -- the world of girlhood and promise -- would not exist any longer. Without that safe space of girlhood, there is no place for their connections. There is already the sense that when they grow up, August's mother will

be right. The unbroken whole that the four form together will not exist any longer: "When we were women, there would be nothing" (99).

More importantly, perhaps, we get the first sense of what will shatter that whole. From the beginning, August's mother's warning about being friends with women had to do with men. To be a woman is to define yourself against other women as you compete against them for the attention of men. As girls, there is no desire for competition. Again and again, we see the four girls watched with hungry eyes, but there is no sense of the girls wanting that attention. In Chapter 9, however, we get Jerome, August's first boyfriend and first kiss, and with the entrance of another person into their quartet, the balance will have to switch.

August's desire to be Sylvia, and her subsequent decision to tell Sylvia about her relationship with Jerome, comes from a misunderstanding of Sylvia's situation. August sees Sylvia's parents as ideals. When she is questioned by them, she feels so exposed that she wishes she wore the covering she otherwise has rejected. Under the judgement of her parents, Sylvia becomes a small girl again, and August wants that as much as she wants the full refrigerator or neatly arranged shoes in the closets. "I wanted to be Sylvia. And because I wanted it so much, I told her about my secret love" (103). What August fails to understand, about both the situation and her friend, is that Sylvia's parents are stifling and Sylvia wants out. August offers her story about stolen moments in the hallway with Jerome as a trade: "Give this back to me, I wanted to say to her. I want your promised future filling up the empty spaces ahead of me" (106). Ironically enough, her wish comes true. The reader understands that adult August has achieved this future. She is an anthropologist who lives overseas and travels the world as a professional. This scene is even more poignant, however, when we realize that by the end of the novel, Sylvia becomes a pregnant teenager who does not necessarily get the promising future August wants so badly. To underscore just how much August misunderstands Sylvia's life and inner desires, it is Sylvia who will betray August by taking up with the same Jerome who gives August her first kiss.

Discussion Question 1

How does the novel present the ways women can be exposed to the world in Chapter 9?

Discussion Question 2

What is the importance of juxtaposing the Nation of Islam and Sister Loretta's beliefs about how women should be and appear in the world with Sylvia's parents?

Discussion Question 3

Sylvia's parents have the portraits of two revolutionaries on their wall: Toussaint Louverture and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. What might the narrative be

suggesting by giving this very specific detail in a chapter that seems to be about how women are seen by society? How does the idea of revolution and change filter through the novel as a whole?

Vocabulary

vestibule

Chapters 10 and 11

Summary

Chapter 10 is a very short chapter about more changes in the group of girls. Gigi got into an exclusive performing arts high school and she was the first to leave them behind at public school. Then Sylvia's father began believing they were "ghetto girls" and would not allow Sylvia to have them over or go out with them. She left next by going off to a private Catholic school. Angela lost herself in dance, leaving August feeling very alone. August refused to understand or admit that it was her mother's ashes in the urn, even as she spoke to her at night, apologizing for her father's belief that her mother was dead.

Chapter 11 is the beginning of the girls' thirteenth year, one marked by "hands and tongues" (113). The girls began menstruating and had developed more physically into women, but they were still girls who snuck into each others homes and hung out at teenage haunts. Sylvia's father finally relented after she threatened to run away, and the girls were once again allowed into Sylvia's home. The girls began to come into their sexuality, experimenting with French kissing by kissing each other and watching love stories on TV. Angela remained aloof and unwilling to share her whole story with the girls, who only wanted to help her be complete.

Analysis

In Chapters 10 and 11, the stresses of the girls' changing lives become more apparent as the girls, one-by-one, begin to break away from each other.

Gigi gets into a performing arts high school and finally, after so much time, introduces the other girls to her mother, which is another indication of the secrets the girls keep from each other. These secrets, which build throughout the novel, are the weaknesses in their circle that will eventually drive them apart. When Gigi goes for her audition, she tells her friends, "They say I had something. A white lady there said, You could be someone" (108). It is not an accident that it takes a white woman's approval for Gigi to believe this of herself. It is another indication of the larger social structures these girls find themselves caught in.

When Sylvia's father sends her to a new school and sends her friends away without warning, it serves as a reminder of the divisions within the larger community. The girls turn away from Sylvia's house, "ashamed of our skin, our hair, the way we said our own names. We saw what he saw when we looked at each other" (109). It is important to note here that these girls have lived through a sexual assault and constant unwanted attention from men, but the judgement from someone they respect, from Sylvia's father, is enough to injure them in ways that drive their friendship apart.

Meanwhile, August seems to be on the outside of everything. She is alone at school, abandoned by the friends who have moved on, and she is alone at home, apart from her father and brother and the religion they now hold dear.

In Chapter 11, the threat of puberty becomes real as Angela, the last of the four, finally begins to menstruate. Physically, none of the girls are children any longer, and from here on out their interactions with each other and the world around them will lean toward womanhood rather than girlhood. "Men and boys were everywhere," August tells the reader, but this time they do not threaten so much as promise (115). The changing perspective toward the men and boys, who must be the very same men and boys from earlier chapters, is another signal that the girls have crossed a boundary they cannot return from.

Chapter 11 is saturated with images of pop culture, a reminder of the first chapter's lament that all they had was Top 40 music, and its implication that it was not enough. The girls watch the sitcoms and movies of the late seventies and see themselves as Lois Lane or Marlo Thomas, successful and powerful women in busy, male-centered worlds. The narrative makes clear, however, that these dreams are unrealistic with a single conjunction: "But we were young. And we were on earth, heading home to Brooklyn" (119). The word "but" in this final sentence of the chapter reminds the reader that these girls are not characters in some happily-ever-after TV comedy. They are real, flesh and bone, and have the realities of Brooklyn to deal with ahead of them.

Discussion Question 1

How do Chapters 10 and 11 and the book as a whole interrogate the divisions and prejudices within the black community?

Discussion Question 2

Even as the book is about Brooklyn, each of these characters seem to want to leave and dream of being elsewhere. How does the dream of escape correspond with their growth from children to adults?

Discussion Question 3

What does the introduction of Gigi's mother to the rest of the group tell you about how close the girls really are?

Vocabulary

girlish, manicured, imperfection

Chapter 12

Summary

Chapter 12 returns to the more disjointed, episodic structure of Chapter 1. It covers the period of time during the summer of the girls' thirteenth year, when a neighborhood park became the location for a nightly block party and August began to become more sexually adventurous with her boyfriend Jerome, who was four years older than her. Because of the example of Charlesetta, August was aware of the ramifications of having children because of the young, single mothers she saw around her neighborhood, and she refused to have intercourse with Jerome.

By December, her father and brother had grown deeper in their new faith, leaving August to herself, and Angela's mother went missing. Angela's mother was discovered dead on the roof of a nearby building, and August came to the realization that the woman who had stumbled down the street earlier in the book was Angela's mother all along. This tragedy caused August to remember her own mother, both before and after Clyde's death, and we learn that her mother most likely killed herself by walking into the water at SweetGrove.

Analysis

Chapter 12 begins with the dangerous promises of summer and ends with the desolation of winter. The weather in Chapter 12 mirrors the overall mood of the events that are pieced together in these short, impressionistic scenes. The "temperatures broke the hundred-degree mark" during the nights that August dances with her boyfriend in the park and begins to be more sexually adventurous (123). She steps further away from the religion her father and Sister Loretta would have her follow during these nights. "This was the temper I had promised Sister Loretta I'd protect," she claims, but when Jerome takes her pants down in the park she "pushed him down again" to perform oral sex on her (123). Rather than guarding the temple, as Sister Loretta might have preferred, August choses to open and use her body as she sees fit, claiming an independence from the strictures of the religion others have chosen from her and choosing herself. Her decision to push his head down, rather than to meekly accept and go along with it, signifies an agency that has been growing in August throughout the text. Her further decision to not allow him to have intercourse with her further emphasizes her sense of herself and her own agency -- she is not pushed into anything here.

However, juxtaposed with this seeming agency August claims is her helplessness in other situations. For example, when Jennie's children are taken away from her after she leaves them alone in the apartment downstairs, August and her brother can do nothing for them. No amount of pleading will get them to open the door. They remain like the children in the magazine separate: "They were on this side of the Biafran war, filling

their mouths with whatever we offered, their stomachs never seeming full. Same dark skin. Same fearful eyes" (122). This comparison highlights August's distinct lack of agency. She can no more feed and protect those two children than she could protect the starving children of Biafra. She can no more keep protective services from taking them than she could (later in the chapter) stop them from taking Angela after her mother is discovered dead.

Throughout Chapter 12, the girls' sexuality is posed as both a way to gain power and agency, as well as a danger. "We knew the stories" (124) August tells us, before she describes stories of other young, single mothers who ended tragically. When they speak of Charlsetta, the 16-year-old captain of the cheerleading team, it is to laugh at her fall from grace. They see Charlsetta's story as "a warning to all of us that this kind of public humiliation was only one belt-whipping away. There was some Charlsetta buried in each of us" (125). Charlsetta's shame is specifically one of sexual transgression. As the chapter progresses summer into winter, the burgeoning sexuality of the four girls cools in the face of Charlsetta's shame. They both yearn for her knowledge: "How many times had they done it? How did it feel" and they are fearful of ending up like her (126).

In Chapter 12, the narrative also begins interrogating the possibilities of memory. "Was my father as absent as I remember?" August wonders, or is her memory of his absence, of his "living inside his faith" a product of the long view produced by her adult self (128)? This question comes up again later in Chapter 12, as August remembers her mother and their life at SweetGrove. The language she uses here is almost hyperbolic: SweetGrove becomes a fairy tale, a place where "freedom was all we had every known" and the very place they "lived in [their] own happily ever after" (137). These are not realistic memories. Paired with the cold realism of Jennie's children crying from hunger and abandonment, August's recollections of SweetGrove seem like an idyllic dream, and one that could not possibly be true. The narrator seems to recognize this as memories of SweetGrove merge with memories of their life in Brookyln. "SweetGrove becoming memory" (138). In this case, memory saves and preserves in a way that reality cannot, which brings the reader in mind of the narrator's claim earlier in the story -- that memory creates tragedy. The contrast between these different realities in Chapter 12 serves to remind us of this fact. While the memory of SweetGrove seems idyllic and dreamlike, perfect in every way, that in itself becomes a tragedy. Because the young -- and the older -- August cannot accept the realities of SweetGrove, it made it that much more difficult to accept the realities of her life, including her mother's death.

This interrogation of memory intersects with the death of Angela's mother. Throughout the story, Angela is perhaps the most enigmatic of the four girls: she will not speak about her past or her mother. It is clear that she has not told her closest friends the truth of her life. "'This is where I live,' Angela had said one summer...but we had never been inside" (133). When the girls finally do go investigate the building two weeks after Angela's mother is found, the find out that it was a lie, that the friends had known even less about Angela than they suspected. This lack of knowledge should raise questions in the reader about the idyllic perfection of the friendship as August remembers it. How would it be possible for four friends as close and devoted as August tells us these girls are be able to keep something as simple as her address from the others? One possible

answer might be that their friendship was never as close in reality as August remembers in retrospect. It is another, perhaps smaller, tragedy, but a tragedy nonetheless. Her belief in the almost perfect closeness is part of what makes her see Sylvia's eventual betrayal as unforgivable, and it is part of what causes her to turn away from the adult Sylvia on the train earlier in the book.

Discussion Question 1

How does the novel position women's sexuality? What might it be arguing about the dangers -- and rewards -- of female sexuality?

Discussion Question 2

What does Angela's mother's death reveal about the true state of the girls' friendship?

Discussion Question 3

At the end of Chapter 12, August says that maybe her mother had forgotten that the land in SweetGrove ended at the water. What is the novel trying to show by having the adult August continue to propose this possibility?

Vocabulary

hallowed, honeysuckle, hustle

Chapter 13 and 14

Summary

Chapter 13 begins with the historical moment: years after the Son of Sam killed white girls in Brooklyn, brown girls were being killed and dying in New York. The girls were now 15 and beginning to fall apart. In the midst of Angela's disappearance, after protective services placed her in a home on Long Island, August's father began dating and Jerome began pressuring August into having sex. Sylvia urged her to do it, but August "held onto" her body rather than give it up to him, resulting in the couple's breakup. Soon after, she saw Sylvia and Jerome kissing in the park. Around this time, August's father also began taking her to see Sister Sonja.

At the beginning of Chapter 14, we see August with Sister Sonja, who asked when August realized her mother had died. In Chapter 14, Sylvia's betrayal is juxtaposed with images of the urn holding August's mother's ashes, her mother's own apparent suicide, and Gigi's production of Jesus Christ Superstar, which no one went to. That night, Gigi killed herself by leaping from the apartment where the cast party was being held, and it was unclear which of these tragedies drove August to muteness or to seeing Sister Sonja.

Analysis

Chapters 13 and 14 deal with different types of betrayal. In these chapters, Jerome betrays August by breaking up with her when she refuses to have sex with him; Sylvia betrays August by taking up with Jerome not long after; August's mother betrays her by dying (or not coming for her, as she had hoped); Gigi is betrayed by them all, and betrays them in turn by giving up on life at only 15. "We were not afraid of the dark places we went to with our boyfriends," (141) Chapter 13 begins, but it is clear that the darkest places in August -- in all of these girls' lives -- are not in the city but inside themselves. Despite the girls' closeness, it is clear that they keep themselves apart from one another. Once they lose Angela to protective services, they begin to drift apart. No one really understands the pain Gigi seems to be in, Sylvia takes the side of Jerome instead of her friend, and even August is mired in her own needs rather than those of the girls she was once so close to. In some ways, this is symptomatic of growing up, but in other ways, the narrative exposes the cracks that had always been in the friendship.

The narrative tries to make clear, that the pain of 15-year-old August is not the same as the pain of the adult August. She tells the reader, "When you're fifteen, pain skips over reason, aims right for marrow " (149) and "When you're fifteen, the world collapses in a moment, different from when you're eight and you learn that your mother walked into water -- and kept on walking. When you're fifteen, you can't make promises of a return to the place before" (150). When August sees Sylvia kissing Jerome in the park, she processes the betrayal immediately, but she is now seven years older, unable to tell

herself stories to make her happily-ever-after come true. Instead, Sylvia's betrayal acts as swiftly and as devastatingly as the news of her mother's death should have been. However, this is at once the experience of 15-year-old August and adult August. Because this entire narrative is memory, the reader can never forget that it is filtered and changed by the act of remembering. This point is especially relevant when one considers these statements with the adult August's response to Sylvia on the train. When she sees her old friend, she acts very much the same as her 15-year-old self: she freezes, feels the world collapsing, and then flees.

Chapter 14 begins dealing with the aftermath of the betrayals, and with both teenage and adult August's understanding of them. In Sister Sonja's office, she considers the months between seeing Sylvia and Jerome, her mother's death, and Gigi's death. The adult August presents these flashes of memory without much comment. For instance, she says three months passed after she saw Sylvia, but when she did "her belly was pushing against the buttons" of her school uniform" (154). It is possible that the pregnancy is the result of Sylvia's relationship with Jerome, but the text makes it clear that Sylvia is the first of them to lose her virginity. Having her so visibly showing, it is also possible that the pregnancy is not the result of what August sees as a betrayal. The narrative, however does not comment on that. The adult August moves on from it as quickly as the teenage August does, "already halfway gone" (154). Her lack of comment, and the sparseness of this chapter as a whole might indicate that the adult August is no more ready to deal with the realities of these memories than her teenage self was.

Unlike other chapters, which incorporated multiple layers of storytelling and history, Chapter 14 seems almost bare. It gives the reader very much the impression of a reticent teenage girl sitting in the therapists' office she did not ask to visit. It seems to be this inability to deal with these betrayals and to assimilate her own history into something understandable that she can live with that precipitates Gigi's death. She tells the reader that she was ready to go to Gigi's performance, "But that night, as I pulled my coat on, I stopped, remembering Sylvia's belly and the urn filled with ashes and the boy who once winked up at me" and she becomes mired in memory (156). Her decision to miss the play is not portrayed as a conscious decision to hurt her friend or even to avoid the pain of seeing the other friend who had hurt her, but of being overcome with a history and past she has not yet dealt with. "Two steps to the left or right or back or front and you're standing outside your life" (157). That night, she sat outside her own life, unable to incorporate it into the self she had built, and as a result she was not there to "see Gigi lift her heels up and fly" (157). The guilt of this, of all that she has been unable to deal with comes back to her then.

Discussion Question 1

In the novel there are two apparent suicides, August's mother and Gigi, but the narrative itself never quite admits to or describes them as suicides. They are seen as accidents or mistakes. Why does adult August, who has the supposed benefits of memory, continue to describe them in this way?

Discussion Question 2

What does August mean when she claims "it should have been me flying. Or Angela"?

Discussion Question 3

How much has the adult August actually processed the memories of her childhood? Is this narrative evidence of it? Or is this narrative evidence of how much is left for her to do?

Vocabulary

auditorium, enormity

Chapter 15 and 16

Summary

Chapter 15 takes us very briefly into the future of young August as she started college in Rhode Island at Brown University. Her PSAT studies paid off and she escaped Brooklyn to study death and dying in college. She took a white boy as her first love, and began traveling. When she saw the Art Ensemble of Chicago and heard them play jazz, she heard for the first time a music that told the story of her childhood friendships. She spent her twenties "sleeping with white boys" and traveling for her work (161). All the while, she never shared the story of her childhood and her mother with any of the people she took as lovers.

In Chapter 16, the reader is returned to August's sixteenth year, the year after Gigi died and the year August began seeing Sister Sonja. The family returned back to SweetGrove and the now-teenage August is confronted with the place she was born and the place her mother died. The narrative of the visit is interspersed with memories of her sessions with Sister Sonja and flashes from her future: her adult brother asking why she had always told him their mother would return, and the college-aged August seeing Angela on a television show. The novel, however, ends where August's mother's life did, at the water's edge in SweetGrove and the recognition that all she thought she knew, all she remembered had eventually and would eventually only become memory.

Analysis

The final two chapters of Another Brooklyn read like a whisper compared to the turbulent and drama-laden chapters that preseed it. In these final two, short sections, August grows up and moves on from the Brooklyn of her childhood, leaving the reader with a bittersweet understanding of that childhood's effect on her as an adult.

The narrative seemingly divides August's life into a before and after, but it is not the before-and-after of discovering or admitting to her mother's death, as the reader might expect. Instead, the before and after of her life seems to come with Gigi's death and the final breakdown in her friendship with the other girls. This replacement of friendships for the mother she yearned for as a child highlights the importance of those close friendships to the young, and also the adult, August. What comes after Gigi's death remains unimportant to the narrative of her life, and her twenties and thirties count as mere footnotes to the more developed and detailed story of the handful of years she spent with the three other girls in Brooklyn. Even as she has relationships of her own, August is unable to say the very words that begin this narrative: "For a long time, my other wasn't dead yet" (163). Even when she sees Angela on television as a college student, August did not reveal their story to any of the people watching with her. The story of the girls, of Angela and of August herself, remains silent until the narrative the reader holds in their own hands.

The narrative, then, stands in as the very work of recuperation and memory that the young Angela was unable to accomplish, even with Sister Sonja's care. With it's opening line, a line she had wanted to whisper to a lover, she begins the story that has held her back and made her incapable of saying "just three damn words" of love (162). As long as her memories burden her and her past is being dragged behind her, it remains like the dead. The narrative, then, becomes a ritual. Like the people who dress their dead or those who die along with them, August's narrative serves to re-examine, remember, and honor those she has lost and those she has let go of. It is clear from her reaction to Sylvia in the book's opening that the work is not done, but by the end of the narrative, the reader has the sense that the work of acceptance is underway. As the adult August remembers being 16 and watching the water that took her mother lap against the shore of SweetGrove, she thinks of Brooklyn as home. "At some point we are all headed home. At some point, all of this, everything and everyone, became memory" (170) she argues. The past tense of the word became is essential here. In this moment the adult August recognizes that even this moment in her teenage memory has already been re-shaped, re-figured as a memory. It no longer exists as a true thing any more than her mother's ashes can be recovered into a body, but all the same, the act of reviving it, remembering it transforms the entirety of her life. The act of memory may create the tragedy not felt during the living, but it also provides the only possibility of recovering from those tragedies and healing.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think the novel ends with 16-year-old August rather than at the place where it began, adult August after her father's funeral?

Discussion Question 2

What significance does August and her family's return to SweetGrove have for her as a teenager? As an adult?

Discussion Question 3

Did any of the girls surprise you with their eventual lives? How might the book play on our own stereotypical beliefs to surprise us by how the girls end up turning out?

Vocabulary

shuddering, Ibo, briny

Characters

August

August is the narrator and main character of Another Brooklyn. At the beginning of the book, she is a professional anthropologist, who lives overseas and travels around the world studying the rituals of death and funeral rites.

As a child, she moves from her family's land in SweetGrove, Tennessee to her father's hometown of Brooklyn, New York because August's mother becomes mentally disturbed after her brother Clyde's death in Vietnam. After Augusts mother becomes paranoid and threatens to sleep with a knife under her pillow, her father removes the family, leaving her mother behind.

August then spends her childhood and teenage years growing up in Brooklyn, where she is close friends with three neighborhood girls: Angela, Sylvia, and Gigi. Even after her mother's death, August remains unable to accept that the ashes in the urn belong to her mother. She spends her adolescent years trying to convince her younger brother that their mother will return. Her inability or unwillingness to deal with tragedy and trauma continues throughout her childhood and is a predominant factor for her narrating the story of her childhood.

Sylvia

Sylvia is the richest of the four friends. Her family is from Martinique and her father, especially, has plans for his daughter to become a lawyer. Sylvia often says that she does not know herself, because her entire childhood has been spent being groomed to her father's specifications, but she is, perhaps the most rebellious of the girls. She has reddish skin and can speak in French when she needs to. She is also the first of the friends to have sex, and is the character who betrays August by sleeping with her ex-boyfriend, who had broken up with August for her unwillingness to have sex with him.

August sees Sylvia some 20 years later, at the novel's opening, and it is the surprise of seeing her old friend so unexpectedly that precipitates August's narrative of her girlhood.

Ironically, despite her father's attempts to control his daughter, Sylvia ends up pregnant at 15. It is unclear whether she ever becomes a lawyer or succeeds as her father wanted her to.

Gigi

Gigi is perhaps the most beautiful of the four friends. She is originally from South Carolina and has darker skin with long, heavy braids and eyes that tilt up. She is the

daughter of a teenage mother, who teaches her to hate the darkness of her skin and that her eyes and hair came from Chinese and mulatto roots. She is sexually assaulted, possibly raped, by a homeless veteran in the stairwell of her building.

Gigi is the first of the friends to leave the public school, when she transfers to a performing arts high school. She invites her friends and her flighty mother to her production of Jesus Christ Superstar, but when no one comes to the play, she falls (or throws herself) from an eleventh floor window at the cast party.

Angela

Angela is the most enigmatic of the four friends. We know very little about her background at first, in part because she either refuses to tell her friends about her home life or she lies about it. August describes her as "high yellow" or light-skinned, but we do not know much about her except that she always seems angry or her hands are always closing into fists. We also know that she is a dancer, and from her sweat-smelling leotards and gym bag, the reader has some idea of her commitment to that art.

Her background becomes more clear when it is revealed that her mother was most likely a drug addict and had died on the rooftop of a neighborhood building. Angela is taken into protective custody and the other girls do not seem to see her or have contact with her. When August is in her first year at Brown, she sees Angela dancing on television and knows her friend has made it.

August's Father

August's father is never given a name in the novel, but he is a presence throughout it. His death is what brings August back to Brooklyn, just as he brought her to Brooklyn as a child. He is fiercely protective of his children, willing to take them from their home and their mother to keep them safe. When they first arrive in the city, he keeps them indoors as he works long hours to provide for them.

August's father grew up in Brooklyn, joined the military at 18, and was stationed near Clarksville, Tennessee. He is missing a finger on each hand -- the pinky on the left and the thumb of his right hand -- but never tells his children how it happened.

As August's childhood unfolds, her father becomes interested in the Nation of Islam. He converts at one point in her childhood, giving up the ham sandwiches and pickled pigs feet he once shared with his children for prayer rugs and clean eating, but he never forces August to adopt his beliefs. His character is seen not so much in what he says, but in what he does to gently guide his children. He is the one who gets August help from Sister Sonja when she becomes depressed and non-verbal.

August's Brother

August's Brother is never named in the text, but we see him both as the young child who she tries to protect and the grown man who tries to guide her. In the opening chapters of the narrative, he is an adult with a wife and a child on his way, always gently chiding August about her lack of faith and dietary habits. He is an anchor for August during childhood, a playmate at first and then someone to protect, but as she grows closer to the girls and as he accepts their mother's death, his appearance in her life and in the novel diminishes.

August's mother

August's mother is the absent center of the novel. We have memories of her, but only through a very young child's memory, as August was moved away from her at a very young age. She could not handle the news of her brother's death in the Vietnam war, and refused to believe that the government had the right brown-skinned body. Her refusal to acknowledge her brother's death mirror's August's refusal to acknowledge her mother's death. August's mother ends her life by walking into the water that edges the family property. It is implied to be a suicide, but with her mother's state of mind, could also be considered an accident.

Sister Sonja

Sister Sonja is the muslim therapist August's father takes her to after she begins not talking. Sister Sonja is a member of the Nation of Islam, and her presence seems to be a calming and comforting one to August. We do not know much about Sister Sonja, except that she wears a hijab.

Sister Loretta

Sister Loretta comes to help the family after August's father joins the Nation of Islam. She is a motherly presence in the household, who scrubs the apartment, cooks clean foods for the family, and tries to guide August. She disappears from the family's life without ever marrying August's father and without explanation.

Jennie

Jennie is a young woman who lives in the apartment below August and her family when they first move to Brooklyn. Jennie is most likely a prostitute, who is rarely home without a man with her. She has two children, but is too involved in drugs to care for them properly despite the affection she seems to have for them.

Symbols and Symbolism

Urn of ashes

The urn of August's mother symbolizes everything August does not want to face. The urn reappears in the second half of the book. It is literally her mother's body, but it is also symbolic of what August is refusing to acknowledge. August's acknowledgement of that urn and what it contains means the end of her fantasy that her mother will return.

Water at SweetGrove

The water at SweetGrove symbolize loss. Typically, water is seen as cleansing, or is a symbol for rebirth. Another Brooklyn frustrates the typical symbol of water as cleansing or indicating a rebirth by making water the thing that kills August's mother. The water at SweetGrove signals death for August.

Still, the end of the book begins to revise that symbolism, as it is at the water's edge that August begins to heal. It is where she begins to lose the weight of her mother's death.

Death rituals

The description of death rituals in Another Brooklyn symbolize August's own refusal to deal with loss.

The entire text is filled with anthropological descriptions of death rituals from different countries and cultures. Each of these rituals mirror something thematic in the chapter it appears and is symbolic of August's own reaction to the deaths that fill the book.

Biafra

Biafra is symbolic of all the things August's father cannot protect his children from. Historically, Biafra was a country that tried to secede from Nigeria in the late 1960s, but in the novel it stands in for the risks that the children face. August's father tries to protect her from the neighborhood, because he sees the dangers as equal to those of a war-torn country for his own children.

The starving children in Life magazine

The images on Life magazine of the starving children symbolize poverty in general. August sees herself and her brother in those faces, as well as Jennie's children. August sees the pictures as evidence that Biafra is a real place and not somewhere her parents invented to scare them into good behavior.

Music

Music symbolizes a way through hardship in the novel. Different songs are layered throughout Another Brooklyn, and they serve as symbols for a way to convert emotion into memory. The Top 40 songs are too literal, too hollow to encapsulate August's memories, but they are part of them, while blues and jazz serve as inspiration for the structure of the text itself.

Charlsetta

Charlsetta symbolizes the risk of being female in the novel. She is one specific example of teenage pregnancy in a book filled with other examples, but Charlsetta serves a symbol for the dangers of female sexuality that lurk in all of the girls.

The home at SweetGrove

The home at SweetGrove is a symbol of idealized memory in the novel. It demonstrates the way the characters can remember things better than they are. To the children, it seemed like a wonderland, but the older August understands now that it was really a dilapidated structure very much in disrepair.

Jennie's children

Jennie's children are symbolic of what August and her brother might have become in the novel. Jennie's children function as foils--children without a father who are taken up by the system.

Clyde's death

Clyde's death is a trauma and it is also symbolic of a larger trauma -- Vietnam. His death is the specific instance, the personal example, that larger history has had on the very personal story that August attempts to recover in this narrative.

Settings

August's Brooklyn Apartment

August's small apartment is described as a three-floor walk up. At first it is her prison in Brooklyn, but eventually she comes to see it as home. It is clear August lives in a very working-class neighborhood, swiftly becoming poorer with the white flight occurring through her childhood. August does not necessarily feel unsafe in this apartment, but prostitutes live on the floor below, drug addicts litter the sidewalks outside, and her friends all try to leave for better high schools.

SweetGrove

SweetGrove is the land in Tennessee owned by August's mother's family. They are not farmers, however, so they are unable to properly cultivate the land or pay taxes on it, and the government reclaims much of it while August is a child. The land is filled with pecan trees and is edged with water, and in all of August's memory it is an almost-idyllic location. In reality, it is probably simply rural land with a dilapidated house that August spent her very early years in.

Brooklyn

All of Brookyln serves as the main setting for this novel. We see especially Brooklyn of the late 1970s, where heroine addicted veterans slept in doorways, whites began moving out to safer suburban neighborhoods, and children roamed with very little supervision. Most of the story takes place within the few blocks of the Brooklyn neighborhood where August spends her adolescent years.

The 1977 Blackout

In the middle of the book, the characters experience the blackout that affected all of New York City in the summer of 1977. For 25 hours on July 13-14, the entire city went dark. People looted all over the city and crime spiked, including arson.

Post-Vietnam America

In the years this story is set, we are squarely in the years following the aftermath of the Vietnam war. Though we do not explicitly see the war in this story, we see its effects in the homeless soldiers, the gold-star mothers, and even in August's own family. The aftermath of the war triggers August's mother's mental breakdown and parallels the aftermath of that breakdown in August's own family.

Themes and Motifs

Memory

The phrase "this is memory" reoccurs throughout the book to draw the reader's attention to one of the most important themes of the book, the role of memory in recreating the truth of the past. Over and over again, August's narrative reminds us that "this is memory." Rather than being a straightforward story that draws connections between individual moments and scenes, the story presents flashes of insight, small moments selected from August's life, to illustrate the overall trajectory of her life. In doing so, the narrative functions much in the same way memory itself does: episodic, full of missing information, impressionistic rather than realistic, and often jarred loose by other memories. The phrase "this is memory" is simultaneously a declaration of the text's importance, as in "pay attention, because this is a memory and is important to understand, and the text's imperfections. For example, when August's brother cuts his arm on the window, she remembers the flash of the ambulances lights, but not the siren. August remembers her father suddenly appearing to help, but does not recall where he had been or where he came from. "This is memory" in this case serves to remind the reader that each of us remembers imperfectly. We recall those things that made their mark on us, but we cannot necessarily choose what will or will not leave a trace of itself to be remembered later.

In addition to declaring the short vignettes of the book's structure to be memory, the story interrogates what memory is or does. In the very first chapter, August tells us "I know that what is tragic isn't the moment. It is the memory" (1). Over and over, the adult August reminds the reader that the child August did not necessarily understand the events of her life as she lived them. For example, the adult August is careful to give the reader multiple details that paint a picture of their reality in Brooklyn. The family is not well off. The father works long hours to pay the bills, often leaving the children home alone, and they live in a building with drug addicts on the street corners outside. But this is not how August saw her neighborhood or experienced her life as a child. She tells the reader, "we didn't understand the kind of poverty we lived in" (42). It is only in retrospect, as the adult recovers these memories, that she constructs a childhood defined by poverty.

However, even as the adult August claims that the tragedy comes from the reconstruction and remembering of the past through memory, the book itself resists that notion. The story as a whole seems anything but tragic, despite the lost mother, the often lonely childhood, and the friend who kills herself. Even as August argues that her memory is transforming her childhood into tragedy, the narrative as a whole presents a story of resilience and August overcoming the odds stacked against her. The tone of the language, even in the darkest moments, seems to be one of survival and perseverance, using the beauty of its lyricism to transform dark memories into something new, into art and beauty.

Again and again, the text asks us to consider memory: to consider August's memories, to consider the role of memory, and to consider the power of memory to shape an identity. The book as a whole stands as a powerful and beautifully wrought testament to the possibility memory holds of recovering truth and reconfiguring pain into art.

Mothers

Another Brooklyn is a book with motherhood as its absent center. The novel begins with the line, "For a long time, my mother wasn't dead yet," declaring one of the novel's most important central themes (1). August's narrative is a reflection on a childhood without a mother, even as the loss of her mother remains one of the defining features of August's life. August remembering her mother's mental break, her move to Brooklyn, and her resistance to accepting her mother serves as the very cause of her narrative. Everything centers around the effects of her father leaving her mother and taking the children away. August's memories and her subsequent narrative focus on this life without a mother, life in a house filled with men.

August's missing mother is repeated in lives of her friends. None of the three girls really have a mother who is present in any real way, with the exception of Gigi, whose mother seems more like a child herself. Sylvia's father is mentioned, but he is such an imposing and commanding figure that her mother seems like a non-entity in the text. Angela keeps her mother, a drug addict who is eventually found dead on a rooftop in the dead of winter, a secret from the other girls. Whatever Angela is or becomes in this story, it is clear she does it despite her mother's influence. The girls replace these absent mothers with each other. The bond they share as friends takes the place of the nurturing that a mother might be expected to do. They see each other as beautiful and worthwhile. They raise each other up and protect one another from the world outside, at least until they reach adulthood.

The book is filled with mothers. Jennie, the prostitute who lives below them, has two children who are taken by protective services. It is clear she loves the children, but she cannot care for them, and while Jennie is out with men or trying to get more drugs, it is August and her brother who care for the children. There is the old woman who lost her son in Vietnam, and who mothers the homeless veterans because they came back and her boy did not. There is Sister Loretta who is a sort of surrogate mother to August for a time. All of these women provide competing examples of mothers and mothering.

No one searches and yearns for mothering more than August, though. Her denial of her mother's death, even as she mothers her brother, serves as one of the central plot points of this story. As a young child, she believes her mother will come for her and her brother long after her younger brother stops believing. Later, August's inability to reconcile the urn of ashes with her mother's death marks the desperation she feels to believe her mother might still be out there and might still come for her. Though she meets replacement mother-figures, including Sister Loretta, who she imagines coming and being a real part of their family, she does not let go of her desire for her own mother until the very end of the text, when she is 16 and visits SweetGrove once again.

Death

The way different characters accept, reject, or deal with death conveys a sense of who they are as people. As an anthropologist, the adult August studies death and dying, and the rituals that surround it. The book is filled with examples of funeral ceremonies and death rites from many cultures, even as August tries to tell the story that will put her own mother, finally, to rest. The book opens with a death--her fathers--and death is littered within its pages.

The narrative opens with a death--August's father has passed away after a long illness. She has returned home from abroad to be with him and bear witness to his death (something she was not able to do for her mother) as well as to bury him and attend to cleaning out his apartment. This along with the opening line, about her mother's death, should clue readers into the importance of the issue of death and dying in this novel.

In addition to her father's death, the narrative revolves around August's mother's death. The first line, "For a long time, my mother wasn't dead yet" opens the book with a promise: her mother will die. The plot of the novel, to some extent, leads up to this event--her mother's death. The reader knows clearly when August's father takes the children from Tennessee to Brooklyn, but even though the mother's eventual death is a central promise of the novel, the reader never explicitly sees the death. Just as August herself was not present for her mother's death, did not view the body or perform the last funeral rites a family might perform, so too is the reader excluded from these moments. Instead, August's mother's death is an absence in the narrative: one chapter August believes she will still return, and the next there is an urn of ashes in their apartment. Part of August's inability to accept and deal with her mother's death is a lack of witnessing it. For August, her mother is still in SweetGrove, still alive.

August's own refusal to believe or understand the truth of her mother's death mirrors and repeats her mother's refusal to accept her brother's death. Just as August is not present to witness her mother's death, her mother is not present to witness Clyde's death. The novel uses these layering repetitions to show the importance of witnessing death in acceptance. For August, her mother's death comes as an unmarked urn of ashes. For her mother, Clyde's death comes as a government postcard. Neither woman encounters the body, and neither is able to gain closure without doing so. This relates, in part, to the theme of memory. Can we have a memory or understanding of an event we did not witness? the novel seems to ask. If we keep our loved ones alive through memory, can that go too far?

Female Sexuality

Another Brooklyn is a novel in large part about the transformation from girlhood to womanhood, and a key component of that transformation is the development of a sexual self for August and her friends.

In the narrative, the girls start as children, and as children, they are mostly unaware of themselves as sexual beings. The narrative makes it clear, however, that even as children, the world itself is already aware of the girls' sexuality. They are leered at by men on street corners, even before they understand why. Gigi is seen as the beauty of the group with her long, dark hair, but her girlish beauty becomes a danger when she is attacked and molested by a drug-addicted homeless veteran who lives in the stairwell of her building. The girls all know not to wear a skirt to get their shoes shined, because the man will offer them money and beg them to lift their skirt so he can get a glimpse of their underpants. As they grow, they are careful not to be the only female altar server, to stay away from the preacher with roaming hands, and to be careful of men in general, but as children they see themselves as strong because they are together.

As they mature, their female sexuality becomes a way for each of the girls to claim agency -- with each other, in the world, and for themselves. But this sexuality is only safe when they are together. Together, they are able to hide razor blades in their hair to protect one another. Together, they are confusing and dangerous to the boys their age who would bother any one of them individually. Together, they are a powerful force, but as they grow and develop, they begin to grow apart, and the warning that August's mother gave her as a very, very young child -- that women cannot be friends with one another -- begins to come to fruition as the three girls suddenly see each other as competition. As they grow older and transform from girls to women, they begin to see themselves in contrast to one another, which leads to friends turning on one another, to jealousy, and to an irreconcilable break between the four friends.

In addition to the agency the girls claim through their bourgeoning sexuality and the danger a word filled with men pose to them (both as children and teens), sexuality holds risks because of teen pregnancy. Many of the mothers in this story, including Gigi's own mother, are very, very young. Charlsetta, a cheerleader at the girls' school, provides a cautionary tale of teen pregnancy and serves as a warning to the four friends of what they do not want to be. Finally, Sylvia's own pregnancy is seen as the end of her family's dreams for her. While mothers could be seen as a powerful force in the novel, and a major theme, the threat of becoming a mother serves as a reminder of the multiple ways that female sexuality can pose risks to women and their lives.

History

Another Brooklyn is an intensely personal novel; it traces the individual life and childhood of a single character, but even as it is focusing on the internal life of August during her childhood, the novel as a whole sets her personal tragedies against a much larger historical backdrop. In doing so, it both highlights an important moment in American racial consciousness and it makes the argument for seeing a personal history as just as important as the larger history.

Perhaps most starkly, Vietnam's shadow is heavy in this book. August's mother's mental breakdown is a result of Clyde being killed and missing in Vietnam. Everything that happens to her family stems from Clyde's death and, in some respect, to the fact that it

was caused by the war. Vietnam does not only affect August's family, however. Though the book is set in the mid and late seventies, years after the Vietnam war ended, the effects of that war are still present in the drug addiction that rages in the streets and the homeless veterans who are too mentally and physically wounded by the war to keep a job or a roof over their heads. It is one of these veterans that molests Gigi, an intensely personal attack that could be argued is a residual effect of the war.

In addition to the war, the book focuses on the changing demographics of the Brooklyn neighborhood where August and her family lives. When they first arrive, the neighborhood is more integrated, but as the book progresses, the white families move out and poorer families replace them. The once working class neighborhood slowly evolves into a much more dangerous place as August gets older, and part of this change is spurred on by the massive blackout that happens during one summer. This is the same summer when the Son of Sam is killing white girls in the back of cars, and brown-skinned girls are dying in Times Square. The riots and crime that occur during that blackout bring to light the simmering tensions between races and classes in the city, and they spur the last of the white citizens of August's Brooklyn neighborhood to leave. The working-class families who cannot afford to leave, however, are left behind.

Finally, the text makes history global with the mention of Biafra, an often-forgotten moment in African history, when part of Nigeria tried to secede from the rest of the country and a bloody civil war killed millions of citizens. For August's and Sylvia's family, Biafra looms large in their imagination as both possibility and the reminder of what happens when the status quo is disrupted. The starving children of Biafra on the Time Magazine cover are juxtaposed with the poverty and danger that many of the children in August's own neighborhood face. The narrative seems to be suggesting that tragedy does not only strike far-off, forgotten African nations, but often resides closer to home.

In general, one of the projects of this narrative seems to be to remind readers that personal history, the events that live closest to us, are often just as important and monumental as the large moments in history, and to remind us that those large moments have very real impacts on the lived lives of private people.

Styles

Point of View

Another Brooklyn is told in first-person point of view, from the perspective of August as an adult. August shifts between her memories of her childhood, many of which come to the reader only as imagistic impressions, and her present-day reality as a cultural anthropologist who studies the death and funeral rituals of cultures all over the world. As a child, August is in denial about her mother's death, but the adult August, who narrates the novel, is not. The reader can see that the adult August understands her childhood denial through the way she layers hints about the urn of ashes that the child August asks about.

Language and Meaning

The language of Another Brooklyn is lyrical and often verges on the poetic. From the very first sentence, "For a long time my mother wasn't dead yet," (1) the reader is aware that the narrative will be anything but straightforward. Instead, Woodson uses a combination of lush imagery and almost impressionistic vignettes to knit together the larger narrative. There are rarely ever explicit connections drawn between scenes. Instead, the individual moments of August's life are juxtaposed within chapters, forcing readers to draw their own connections between ideas, scenes, and events.

Most often, Woodson's sentences read like poetry, but her poetry is not the dense, difficult to understand verse that many people shy away from. Instead, Another Brooklyn uses clear language and fairly accessible vocabulary in ways that leave startlingly clear and often heart-rending images in the reader's mind. "Cold air like a ghost blowing up from the water" (53) describes both winter and August's mother as she gets news of her brother's death. The air is quite literally cold, but the mention of the ghost foreshadows both the bad news her mother receives and her mother's own eventual mental breakdown and death. Later in the text, August tells the reader the girls "opened our mouths and let the stories that had burned nearly to ash in our bellies finally live outside of us" (56). Something as mundane and historically accurate as the white flight from August's Brooklyn neighborhood is transformed into poetry when August tells the reader, "The last of the white people began fading" (83).

In the same way that the text transforms what might be straightforward memories into poetry, the text transforms what might be clinical, scientific language into literature. Throughout the story, the narrator inserts small paragraphs, interspersed without explicit explanation, about the funeral rituals of other cultures. It is implied that these short descriptions of customs from places like Indonesia and India are written by the adult August, who is a cultural anthropologist that studies these things. These small insertions usually appear at moments of high emotional tenor, or when August is facing a memory she cannot quite examine too closely for the reader. The descriptions of funeral customs

appear almost fantastical in the narrative, Indonesian corpses who are dressed and taken on vacations, Ugandans who prepare graves for children who have not died, and tribes from Fiji who "send their living off with the dead" (158) are all described in ways that sound almost magical, as though the living walk off with the dead, instead of the truth of the matter, which is that widows were killed with their husbands. While the story as a whole is highly realistic, impressionistic moments such as these give the entire text a sense of almost magical possibility, transforming the mundane to something more important than it might be on first consideration.

Structure

The plot of Another Brooklyn is mostly linear, even as the structure of the novel as a whole is fragmented and impressionistic. The plot begins with the adult August, who then tells the story of her childhood in Brooklyn in a prolonged flashback. Once she begins telling the story of her childhood, she does not return to the present moment of the narrative. We see the younger August go from eight years old to beyond graduate school, but the final scene of the novel is her at 16, the moment her family returns to her childhood home in Tennessee. Within each chapter, August might visit other moments in her childhood (usually times from before they lived in Brooklyn), but in general, the overall events of the story move in a fairly chronological order once the flashback begins.

The individual chapters stitch together scenes from moments in August's childhood, but individual scenes are rarely directly connected to one another. Instead, August might describe a short scene with her mother as a child and then another scene with her brother in Brooklyn and then yet another scene with her friends. The reader is left to draw the connections between these scenes and moments in her life as she layers meaning and repeats the various themes that reoccur in her childhood, including moments of friendship, loss, and growth.

Quotes

I know now that what is tragic isn't the moment. It's the memory.
-- August (chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: The entire book is fixated on memory -- the process of memory, the power of memory, the impossibility of memory. This quote introduces that overarching theme of the book.

But Brooklyn felt like a stone in my throat.
-- August (chapter 1 paragraph 2)

Importance: From the title, Another Brooklyn, to the setting in Brooklyn, the whole story revolves around place and especially around the effect that one place has had on who August is and will become.

This is memory.
-- August (chapter 1 paragraph 4)

Importance: This line reoccurs throughout the novel, like a refrain in a song. It calls attention to the different ways memory surfaces and reacts in August's life.

Our words had become a song we wanted to sing over and over.
-- August (chapter 2 paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote refers to the time when August and her brother told each other stories of When they go home...When they go outside -- always about the future that looks back to the past of their childhood.

We didn't understand the kind of poverty we lived in.
-- August (chapter 4 paragraph 2)

Importance: Part of what August recovers in this reminiscence about her childhood is an understanding of their true situation. This recognition shows that their childhood did not feel tragic as it unfolded and reiterates the idea that memory creates tragedy.

We have blades, we said. We can cut somebody.
-- the four girls together (chapter 6 paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote illustrates just how innocent the girls actually are. Even in their fierceness and willingness to fight for one another, the reader is aware that the world around them cannot be dispatched by a razor blade.

Maybe this is how it happened first for everyone -- adults promising us their own failed futures.
-- August (chapter 6 paragraph 4)

Importance: In a book that is so much about mothers -- their effect, their absences -- it is striking for August to realize that adults often foist their own failed dreams onto their children. August's own mother does not do this, because she is not there, and yet August does adopt her inability to cope with tragedy.

Little pieces of Brooklyn began to fall away. Revealing us.
-- August (chapter 7 paragraph 3)

Importance: As the girls get older and begin to come into their own, they are less part of the neighborhood and more a part of themselves. This exposure, while empowering, also puts them at risk.

Everywhere we looked, we saw the people trying to dream themselves out.
-- August (chapter 7 paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote refers to all of the many layered dreams of the characters of this novel -- dreams parents have for children, the dream August has to see her mother return, the dreams that junkies chase when they go after their next hit of heroine. The dreams keep the people of Brooklyn going, even as they blind them.

The last of the white people began fading.
-- August (chapter 8 paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote is about the white flight from their Brooklyn neighborhood. It is a way to draw attention to the larger, historical implications of the story, even as August's narrative focuses on the intensely personal.

When we were women, there would be nothing.
-- August (chapter 9 paragraph 1)

Importance: This is part of the larger trajectory from girlhood to womanhood. As girls, the four could be this one, unified whole, but as they grow, the narrative foreshadows their breaking apart.

There was some Charlsetta buried in each of us.
-- August (chapter 12 paragraph 3)

Importance: The mention of Charlsetta, the teenage cheerleader who gets pregnant, is a reminder that within each of the girls is the danger of female sexuality. As different forces try to curtail it or control it, each girl will have to deal with her own sexuality and the danger it might pose -- even with the freedom it brings -- for herself.

Memory like a bruise. Fading.
-- August (chapter 12 paragraph 6)

Importance: All along, the text has insisted "this is memory," but here we get another

image. Memory is an injury -- a bruise -- but like all injuries can be healed and fade. Unlike a broken bone or a scar, bruises disappear, leaving only clean skin, and there is the implication here that memory can leave no mark, can be healed over, as well.

Two steps to the left or right or back or front and you're standing outside your life.
-- August (chapter 14 paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote serves to remind the reader how fragile lived perception and memory is. One moment, August is in her life and the next, memory removes her from her now and places her outside looking in. In part, the book is an attempt to bring those two halves together.