

# At Home in Mitford Study Guide

## At Home in Mitford by Jan Karon

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## Plot Summary

*At Home in Mitford* by Jan Karon, is a delightful novel that details the life of Father Tim, the rector of Lord's Chapel in Mitford, North Carolina. Father Tim questions his calling and his ability to lead the parishioners at Lord's Chapel. The town of Mitford and the characters that live there enhance the priest's life throughout the year, bring him great joy and happiness.

*At Home in Mitford* by Jan Karon is the story of Father Tim and the eclectic group of people that make up the town of Mitford, North Carolina. Tim is at a crossroads in his life, unsure if he is able to continue as rector of Lord's Chapel. His bishop requests that he continue for a time, make some changes in his life, and see if he still feels the same way. Tim agrees, somewhat reluctantly, but does as the bishop requests. Tim lives a busy life in Mitford, and while ministering to his parishioners, Tim sometimes neglects himself. Feeling tired and run down, Tim is badgered by his overbearing secretary to see his doctor and friend, who eventually diagnosis him with diabetes. Though at first Tim follows doctor's orders, he does slack off at times, usually putting others before himself.

Tim winds up the ward for Dooley, his caretaker's grandson, as well as a large dog, Barnabas. The three become a family unit and quickly come to rely on each other. The townspeople of Mitford accept Dooley into the fold happily and Tim's life becomes filled with being Dooley's guardian.

The townspeople fill Tim's life with excitement, joy and sometimes sorrow. Miss Sadie Baxter, the 86-year-old cornerstone of Lord's Chapel donates a painting of questionable origin to the church, and follows that gift with a five million dollar gift to the town. Tim is thrilled to work with Miss Sadie in the planning for the nursing home that she wants built in honor of her family and the love of her life, Willard Porter. Tim meets Olivia Davenport, a new woman in town, who informs him that she is dying, and would like to spend her final days making others happy. The two devise a plan for Olivia to read scripture to the ill at the hospital. Though Olivia is at first resigned to die, she meets Hoppy Harper, the town doctor and as her relationship with him grows, so does her will to fight for life.

Barnabas the scripture loving dog takes up residence with Father Tim as well. Though the dog is sometimes uncontrollable, Tim quickly discovers to his delight that Barnabas will sink to his haunches and listen intently when he hears scripture recited. The dog and the priest seem made to be together. The lovely Cynthia Coopersmith moves into the small house next door, adding another wrinkle to the rector's life. Tim enjoys Cynthia's company very much and is surprised by the feelings of jealousy he experiences when his neighbor spends time with another man. Though Tim is sure he likes Cynthia, for every step he makes forward in the relationship, Tim questions himself and pulls back frequently. Cynthia is patient and tries not to push the rector, but her simple joy in life can sometimes be as overwhelming as it is calming.



A jewel thief startles the townspeople when he descends from the attic of Lord's Chapel, solving the mystery of the missing food at the church. The man's story inspires the parishioners, as well as Tim, making him question his desire to leave his post. The entire town surrounds the man with love, and helps Tim realize that though the people of Mitford can be difficult at times, they are also wonderfully giving.

Events conspire in Tim's life that cause him to pay less attention to his health and well being. Olivia Davenport receives a heart transplant and is recovering out of town with Tim's doctor. Barnabas is dognapped, and though Tim is fond of the dog, he had no idea how much he had become a part of his life. When the dog is discovered with a group of drug dealers in the woods behind Mitford, a deputy is shot while trying to recover Barnabas and arrest the dealers. In the confusion over the following days, Tim becomes more tired and confused, as well as short tempered. The neglect of his health has continued for too long, and after eating cake dropped off by a parishioner, the rector slips into a diabetic coma. Cynthia finds him and Tim recovers; however, he is now insulin dependent.

The bishop, Stuart Cullen, has ordered Tim to take a vacation for two months and Tim realizes that he must do something in order to make the changes required in his life. Absalom Greer, the Baptist preacher, is recruited to take care of Tim's flock at Lord's Chapel. Tim makes arrangements to travel to Ireland with his cousin and speaks with Cynthia. Though he is very fond of her, the priest can not make a deeper commitment to her until he is sure of the commitment he has with God. As Tim's plane lifts off, he looks forward to the trip, putting his life in God's hands, willing to relinquish matters to Him, in order to return to Mitford a better priest and man.



# Chapters 1-4: Barnabas, A Dubious Gift, New Possibilities, Company Stew

## Chapters 1-4: Barnabas, A Dubious Gift, New Possibilities, Company Stew Summary

Father Tim lives in the beautiful small town of Mitford, North Carolina. Pastor to a flock of 200, he seems to be burning out and has written to the bishop to request a leave. The bishop responds, asking Tim to take his time with the decision, trying a bit longer to find what he needs. Father Tim wants nothing more than to be of service, to make a difference, and he does not think that he accomplishes this. Father Tim is also lonely. There are times he imagines a wife by his side, to share company and the small matters of everyday. Emma Garrett, his faithful secretary worries about him and has often suggested he get a dog, a cat, or even a bird. Father Tim never really considered it, until a large black dog the size of a Buick, according to Emma, begins to follow him through town, accosting him randomly. Though Tim is at first put off by the dog, eventually he relents, first allowing the dog to sleep in his garage, and then in his house. Naming the dog Barnabas, after a church warden Tim knew as a young priest, he is astonished to find that though the dog seems to have no training, and likely never will, by reciting scripture aloud, Barnabas immediately lies down and listens with rapt attention. Hal Owens, the town vet and good friend of Tim, says that Barnabas is a puppy, still growing, causing Tim to groan, but Hal relieves some of the pressure, promising to provide food in bulk for the large animal.

A rainy day brings a visit from Miss Sadie, proudly announcing that she weighs her age, 86 pounds for 86 years. Sadie has been searching her attic for random items and found a painting she would like to give to the church. Sadie has never parted with any of the money her father had left her as far as anyone can tell, so a gift of any kind is a surprise.

Harry Nelson, the head of the vestry enters, and declares that the painting might be a Vermeer. Father Tim is not really pleased with the thought, thinking of insurance appraisals and such. Harry states he has a friend who is an appraiser and will have him come down to check the painting. Within a few hours, rumors have spread, each increasing the value of the painting with each whisper.

Father Tim feels poorly and upsets Emma by stating so. Emma immediately takes Tim to the hospital to see Hoppy Harper, the town doctor. Hoppy tells Tim and Emma that the priest has diabetes and gives instructions on his care, including diet and exercise. Father Tim takes up jogging three times a week and does feel better. So much so, that he decides to hold a dinner party. Shopping at The Local, he decides to make Company Stew and plans his guest list. Hal and Marge, Hoppy, Emma, and Miss Sadie will be a great dinner. The evening of the party, Tim is surprised by the arrival of Miss Rose and Uncle Billy. The odd pair are greeted like family by the arriving guests. Miss Sadie



entertains the group with stories of her time in Paris, where her Uncle had encouraged her to study in her youth. The biggest surprise however, is that she had fallen in love those many years ago, with Miss Rose's older brother, Willard Porter.

## **Chapters 1-4: Barnabas, A Dubious Gift, New Possibilities, Company Stew Analysis**

Father Tim lives in the quaint village of Mitford, North Carolina. Tim is happy enough in the town and loves the people that live there but sometimes feels as if something is missing in his life. He has often been encouraged by his secretary and others to find a hobby, get a pet, or find a wife. This is mentioned several times throughout the first chapters, and Barnabas turning up seems to hint that other things will follow for Tim.

At first, Tim avoids the dog, but his loneliness is evident, and the dog's persistence pays off, and Barnabas is rewarded with a home, while Tim welcomes the companionship. The pair is made for each other, as Barnabas seems untrainable, yet when Father Tim recites scripture, the dog listens with rapt attention.

The gift of the picture from Miss Sadie is a surprise, as she has never given much besides apples from her orchard in the past. This, too, leads the reader to believe that things might be changing in this area. The picture was one her father brought home from Europe when Sadie was a child, and Sadie giving it to the church is a big step for her. The fact that the painting might be by a famous artist is met with excitement from the parishioners, but Tim and Sadie both think that the church would be better off with just a simple painting.

The news that Tim has Diabetes is a shock to his system and to Emma. Tim had been feeling off for some time, and Emma had noticed the difference in him. There is some relief in the knowledge that the problem is medical and can be handled without medication. Jogging is daunting, but Tim has promised to do it, and takes to it at once, actually finding it enjoyable. Feeling better, the idea for a dinner party strikes him, and he plans to have five guests with himself making the sixth. Tim would like to have two more guests, but can not think of anyone he would like to invite. The arrival of Miss Rose and Uncle Billy seems fortuitous, and they are welcomed by the invited guests as new members to the parish. Miss Sadie relishes the story of her time in Paris, though she makes it clear to those present that her home was indeed where her heart was. Meeting and falling in love with a man from Mitford all the way in Paris seemed to be a miracle in itself, and Sadie sailed home, grateful to have returned to Fernbank, the family home.

Though Father Tim seems to be lacking some things, he is rich in friendship and loved by the townspeople of Mitford. Father Tim had written a letter to the Bishop, requesting to leave Mitford, but it seems that things are happening which might convince him to stay.



# Chapters 5-8 The Big Six-0, Dooley, The One for the Job, Golden Days

## Chapters 5-8 The Big Six-0, Dooley, The One for the Job, Golden Days Summary

The appraiser arrives to discuss the value of the painting donated by Miss Sadie. After much blathering, Father Tim asks him to get down to business. The painting is not a Vermeer, but if offered properly might sell for seven or eight thousand dollars. Father Tim is relieved. Praising God along the way, Tim walks to the Grill for breakfast the next morning and meets up with Mule Skinner. Mule informs Father Tim that he can expect a new neighbor sometime in the fall. Father Tim had almost forgotten about the small house next door to the rectory. Though Mule informs the priest that the new neighbor is quite good looking, the only thought Tim has is that perhaps whoever moves in will have children. The laughter of children would be nice to hear.

Meeting with Miss Sadie that week, Father Tim is blown away by her announcement and plans an evening of fun where Miss Sadie will announce her plans to the vestry. Serving her favorite food of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, Miss Sadie states simply that she has been hoarding her father's money and is going to stop. She is donating five million dollars, with which a retirement home is to be built. Stunned the vestry is joyous in the news.

Later that week, Father Tim arrives at the office to place the order for church stationary. After deciding on the print and color, Father Tim is stunned to discover that it was all a ruse; Emma and his friends had actually planned a surprise party for his sixtieth birthday. Tim was even more stunned to receive a Vespa scooter as a gift.

Father Tim is pleased with the return of the church sexton, Russell Jacks, who had been recovering from a back problem at his daughter's house. Tim speaks with Jacks about things that have happened in his absence, and is surprised that Russell has returned with his oldest grandson, Dooley. Dooley seems to have no manners, but Tim takes to him at once.

Puny Bradshaw begins working at the rectory, keeping house for Father Tim three days a week. Emma had had enough of the rector not taking care of himself, and had gone behind his back with the vestry to make arrangements to hire someone. Though Tim is not pleased at all when he hears this, he is at once amazed by Puny, and thinks of her as a little Emma. Puny is very bossy and thinks nothing of telling you what she feels or thinks, but means well and does her job proudly.

Father Tim meets with the mayor Esther Cunningham about what to name the town flower. During this discussion he brings up the dilemma faced by Uncle Billy. As Miss Rose's husband, Billy is worried that when his wife dies, he might have no place to live.



The Porter House is to be left to the town upon Rose's death. Without giving names, Tim works with the mayor quietly, extracting the promise that if something was to happen to a member of the town, a dispensation could be made to take care of that person's family. Tim lets Uncle Billy know this quietly and is rewarded with the man's pure happiness. Billy delivers sketches that he had drawn throughout his life, and Tim is stunned by Billy's skill and the beauty of the drawings.

Tim's quiet daily life continues, filled with Puny baking pies and such. Tim takes a Friday off, and Puny meets Dooley, who has come to the house for Tim at the orders of his Grandfather. Dooley becomes angry when talk turns to his mother's illness. Puny is about to set him straight when Tim arrives, halting the argument. Tim and Dooley go the Lord's Chapel, where Russell Jacks waits. Someone had broken into the church, though nothing appears to have been stolen.

Tim helps Russell get Dooley registered for school and also finds Dooley a job helping around the house for Miss Sadie. Dooley is saving to buy himself a bike and Tim is helping. Tim also takes Dooley to spend the night at Hal and Marge's farm. Dooley is thrilled at the idea of riding a horse and Hal helps him, though upon release the horse tosses Dooley into a heap of pig slop. Dooley is determined to ride the horse and speaks of almost nothing else the entire time. Tim is quietly pleased with the boy's determination.

Fall is arriving slowly in the mountains and Tim is busy as a priest might be. In church, he sees a beautiful woman, new to the parish. Many parishioners have requested meetings with Tim, quickly filling his calendar. Dooley starts school, not pleased with the idea and worried the boys will beat him up. Emma has been acting oddly, referring to love and bristling frequently, for no apparent reason. Tim is busy but productive and time is moving quickly in Mitford.

## **Chapters 5-8 The Big Six-0, Dooley, The One for the Job, Golden Days Analysis**

The life of Father Tim becomes rich and full as summer turns to fall. The bishop had told him in his letter that he has known many priests that develop the same type of issues that Father Tim has, but that prayer and working through it always helps. Tim takes the words to heart, and his life does seem to take a better turn.

The appraiser's news that the painting is not a Vermeer is welcome by Father Tim, since he was worried that the money it would bring might cause friction in the church. Miss Sadie is also pleased with the news. To Sadie the painting is simply a gift, and had been her father's. To lose it would be painful. It does seem however that the gift of the painting has started Sadie thinking seriously. Shortly after the appraiser's announcement, Sadie decides that she has been hanging onto her memories, rather than living her life. Giving the five million dollars makes her feel happy and pleases the rest of the town enormously.





Father Tim is pleasantly reminded that he is not just the rector of the Lord's Chapel, but a good friend to many when all his friends turn out for an afternoon surprise party in honor of his sixtieth birthday. The gift of the Vespa scooter is welcome, as Tim had given up driving eight years ago for lent. The townspeople quickly grow used to seeing the priest zipping around town rather than walking as he always did.

Father Tim also continues to welcome new friends into his life. Though angry at Emma for insisting he needs someone to take care of him, Puny Bradshaw proves that being taken care of is not as painful as Tim had thought it might be. The rector quickly grows to appreciate the fact that he had been doing too much and never really getting anything done. Tim also meets Dooley Barlowe, the oldest grandchild of Russell Jacks. Dooley has no manners to speak of and seems to be a bit on the wild side. Tim sees him as a diamond in the rough and takes to him immediately. Puny likes Dooley as well; however, their tempers can clash at times. The two bond over the issue of freckles and ways to be rid of them, but Dooley turns into himself and becomes angry at talk of his mother. Tim thinks perhaps Dooley needs to take his mind off what is troubling him and takes him to visit Hal and Marge on the farm. Dooley is taken with a horse and wants nothing more than to ride it. Even after being thrown in pig slop, Dooley still wants to ride. Tim seems to see determination in the young boy, and is pleased.

Tim ministers to the town's people as he always does, and it seems that each small deed grows into a larger one. Uncle Billy is happy that he no longer needs to worry about what would happen if his wife were to die before him, and shocks Tim with his drawings. Tim happily shows them to Mr. Gregory, the antiques dealer in town, and the two arrange a showing for the drawings. Each time Tim helps someone, he helps more than one person and the happiness they feel, he feels tenfold.



# Chapters 9-12: Neighbors, A Grand Feast, A White Thanksgiving, An Empty Vessel

## Chapters 9-12: Neighbors, A Grand Feast, A White Thanksgiving, An Empty Vessel Summary

A busy day for Father Tim commences. Harold Newland stops in the office to ask for Emma Garrett's hand in marriage. Harold also asks Tim if he would officiate with his pastor at the Baptist church. His next visitor is Olivia Davenport, the beautiful woman he had seen in church. Surprisingly, Olivia tells Tim that she is dying and would like to make her last days filled with meaning. Tim asks Olivia if she would be willing to read the Bible to the ill at Mitford Hospital. Olivia is pleased with the idea, and they make plans to meet at the hospital on Wednesday morning.

That evening, Tim lets Barnabas out the back door and is shocked when the dog takes off through the hedge to the house next door. Shouting scripture in his wake, Tim hurries through the hedge to see Barnabas at the base of a tree, a white cat perched above him. A woman's voice shouts, and Tim explains the situation, sorry to be meeting his new neighbor in such a fashion. Cynthia Coopersmith introduces herself, and the two part laughing.

The following evening, Cynthia reappears to borrow some sugar, and the two share some tea and sherry. Tim realizes that his neighbor is quite attractive and enjoys himself immensely. It is not until after she leaves that Tim finds the barbecue sauce on his chin that had been there the entire time. The days pass. Tim informs Emma that Olivia Davenport is dying and discourages her from matchmaking. Summoned to Mitford School, Tim meets with the principal regarding Dooley getting into a fight. Tim makes a deal with Dooley. Don't get in anymore fights, and the two of them will go to Meadowgate farm once a month, where Dooley can learn to care for Goosedown, the horse. Miss Sadie calls Tim to Fernbank to discuss where Louella will sleep when she visits. Tim sees two pictures, Sadie's mother, who bears a striking resemblance to Olivia Davenport and Willard Porter, the man that Sadie had loved many years ago. Cynthia visits Tim in the evening to return his sugar, and the two discuss poetry and how God fits into both of their lives. At the office, Emma informs Tim that Cynthia is a writer and illustrator of children's books, and that her cat, Violet is the central character. Cynthia had been married before, to a Senator. Tim is perplexed that afternoon to find his chicken sandwich missing from the church kitchen. Confused, Tim thinks that perhaps the Altar Guild had stopped in to clean the refrigerator and decides to eat lunch at The Grill. Before leaving for the evening, Olivia Davenport calls to report that one of Tim's parishioners has died at the hospital, and yet another call announces the birth of Rebecca Jane to Marge Owen. Tim is amazed by the intertwining of life and death.



The art show is held to showcase Uncle Billy's drawings. Tim spends the evening talking to the people in town and meets with Andrew Gregory, who tells him that many of Billy's drawings have been sold. Hoppy is there and asks Tim about Olivia. Cynthia arrives and she and Tim discuss the paintings, as well as her career as a writer. Tim is surprised to feel jealous of Andrew, when he takes Cynthia to see some antique books the shop has acquired.

The day to day business of the rector continues. Tim considers using some of the money left to the church by Pearly McGee to contribute to Dooley's bike fund. Both Puny and Emma aren't sure this would be a good idea. Emma also tells Tim that an orange marmalade cake had been stolen from the church kitchen. Tim is invited to Cynthia's house for dinner and arrives to find Cynthia in tears. She had been drawing and forgot the dinner in the oven. Tim salvages the meal, and the two spend a wonderful evening together.

Thanksgiving arrives with snow, and the town attends the All-Church Feast. Before making his way to the feast, Tim packs some food that Puny had made, and takes it into the woods to the shack of Samuel K Hobbes, known as Homeless Hobbes to all in Mitford. All of the churches in town had sent representatives to see Homeless, each bearing food. Homeless had once lived in New York City and been an advertising executive, but had given it all up, to live what he called, a recession-proof life.

Tim, unhappy that his sermons have seemed bland lately, decides to spend some time thinking about things, while cleaning the urns in the church columbarium. While dusting and polishing, the third urn does not have the same weight or sound as the first two. Tim is shocked to find the urn contains jewels, wrapped in a tea towel. Unsure of what to do, Tim puts the jewels back, unwilling to have the police tearing the church apart before the holidays. Before leaving, Tim comes across a man in the church, who is angry, and questioning whether God exists. Tim tries to comfort him, and says a short prayer with him, before the man leaves.

More days pass, and Tim is kept busy and sleepless, wondering about the jewels, and the missing ashes that had once filled the urn. He also wonders about Cynthia and if she is happy in Mitford, and if she is dating Andrew Gregory. He meets with Olivia, and discusses Hoppy's growing admiration for her, as well as her illness. Olivia tells Tim about her condition, asking him to inform Hoppy, and Tim requests that she avoid Hoppy until the Christmas season is over. Russell Jacks meets with the rector, telling him that Dooley is unhappy and worried about his mother and siblings. Dooley's mother has an alcohol problem, and had given all her children away. As the holidays approach, Dooley worries for his mother and his younger siblings.

That evening, Dooley arrives at the rectory, begging Tim to come. Russell Jacks is sick. Hoppy informs them that Jacks has pneumonia, and must be hospitalized. Tim takes Dooley in; wanting to be sure the boy is cared for. On Christmas Eve, Tim and Dooley visit Jacks in the hospital. Hoppy tells Tim that Russell will recover, but may need months of care, so someone will have to look after the boy.



Christmas morning, Tim wakes Dooley, who is thrilled with his new red bike. Tim sets off to deliver the Christmas Mass, and Dooley, who had not been feeling well, stayed behind. Upon his return, Tim finds Dooley and his bike missing. Fearing that Dooley had left to search for his mother, Tim calls anyone who might be able to look for the boy. Though he had been seen on his bike, his location is unknown, and Tim is left to worry. Three days later, Dooley returns, simply stating that his mother had told him to come back. Tim welcomes him back.

After the ordeal with Dooley, Tim calls the police about the jewels, and is stunned to find the jewels have disappeared again. Hoppy is stunned to learn that Olivia is dying from a heart condition. Distraught, Hoppy works through the logistics of finding a heart donor for Olivia, and Tim can do nothing but comfort his friend.

## **Chapters 9-12: Neighbors, A Grand Feast, A White Thanksgiving, An Empty Vessel Analysis**

Father Tim is busy with the lives of his parishioners and the townspeople. Tim is pleased to be asked for Emma's hand in marriage, and to officiate the wedding with Harold's pastor at the Baptist Church. The news that the lovely Olivia Davenport is dying stuns him, but the fact that Olivia has not resigned herself to live her remaining days in misery uplifts him at the same time. The two devise a plan to have Olivia read to the dying patients in Mitford Hospital. Olivia is happy to have something good to fill her final days, and Tim is happy to help. Emma is distraught to find that Olivia is dying, afraid that she might be too nice to the woman and let on that she is aware of her illness. Emma is shocked that the rector had not asked Olivia what her condition was, though Tim explains that the conversation was more about life than death. Emma is continually frustrated by the pastor for failing to ask details.

Father Tim's first meeting with his neighbor, Cynthia, is dramatic in more ways than one. The dog chasing the cat up a tree is the last thing Tim had expected. Tim also realizes that his new neighbor is attractive, surprising himself. Long ago, Tim had called off an engagement, and had resigned himself to a life lived for God. The laughter shared with Cynthia over their pet's behavior brings Tim surprising happiness.

The troubles with Dooley illustrate the deep feelings that have been growing in Father Tim for the boy. Though unsure of how to deal with the issues that arise, Tim does his best, always concerned for Dooley's happiness and needs. When Dooley runs away, Tim is devastated, questioning his ability to deal with the boy, and wondering if he can trust himself to make the right choices for him.

The lives of the townspeople of Mitford continue to keep Tim busy, filling his days and evenings. The simple joy that Tim gets from spending time with Cynthia surprises him continuously. The most surprising for him is the twinges of jealousy he feels when Cynthia seems to enjoy the company of Andrew Gregory as well.



Tim is also worried for his friend, Hoppy. Devastated by the death of his wife only a short time ago, Tim worries that the news of Olivia's illness will destroy the small steps Hoppy has made since his wife's death.

The mysterious disappearance of Tim's sandwich, and the cake from the Alter Guild, as well as the unexplained jewels, lead the reader to believe that there is more going on in Mitford, and at the Lord's Chapel than meets the eye.



# Chapters 13-16, Issues of the Heart, Absalom, My Son, The Finest Sermon, A Sure Reward

## Chapters 13-16, Issues of the Heart, Absalom, My Son, The Finest Sermon, A Sure Reward Summary

Tim meets with Olivia at The Grill, discussing Hoppy's behavior toward her. Olivia is upset that Hoppy will barely talk to her. Tim explains that Hoppy is processing. Trying to be brave, Hoppy is also afraid to lose the small joy that he is feeling and is also ashamed for feeling such fear. Olivia is stunned to find that Hoppy knows her doctor, Leo, at Mass General Hospital. Tim mentions transplant surgery, but Olivia states her refusal. The odds of a suitable transplant even being found are slim, and she does not think she would be able to handle the operation.

Events in the small village keep Tim as busy as usual. Arrangements are made for him to meet with Harold's preacher, Absalom Greer, regarding the wedding. The weather is getting worse, and Tim finally has his car made road ready, after eight years of not driving. Doing so is really for Dooley's sake, as Tim can think of no other way for the boy to get to school when the weather is bad.

Tim's small Bible is still missing, and that evening, he walks to Lord's Chapel to search the building. The basement is empty, the cupboards bare, which is odd, since Esther Bolick normally kept them very well stocked. While searching, Tim is sure he can smell chicken noodle soup, but no one has been in the church. The stairs to the attic are to the left of the alter. Tim pulls them down, and climbs to the large empty space. Nothing is amiss; the only thing in the attic is an empty wrapper from an Almond Joy. The space seems even emptier when Tim opens the door to the belfry. The three church bells are still in England being repaired. The death bell is the only one that remains.

Hoppy calls one evening, obviously with something on his mind. He has been thinking constantly about Olivia and the possibility that she have a transplant. When his wife Carol had died, there had been nothing he could do but make her comfortable. Now, there is hope with Olivia, there are possibilities. Hoppy is torn. He can not reconcile the fact that he cares so much for a woman that he does not know very well. Tim suggests that they pray about it, and pray that Olivia will change her mind about being put on the transplant list.

Rebecca Jane Owen is baptized and the town is there for it. Louella has returned to live with Miss Sadie in Mitford, and the two women discuss with Tim how they had grown up together at Fernbank. Tim invites Cynthia to attend a Sunday service at Lord's Chapel, apologizing for not asking her sooner. Her simple joy at life amazes him again. Tim is



also relieved that Andrew Gregory had left for England on a buying trip. Andrew's Mercedes will not be parked outside Cynthia's house for a while, at least.

Taking Barnabas for a walk, Tim stops to visit with Homeless Hobbes. Homeless tells Tim how after living a life filled with money and prestige, he had given it all up, to come back to the place he had been happiest. Homeless had given up everything and now lived happily in the little shack outside of Mitford. His easy manner, and obvious happiness, delight Tim. On the walk home, Tim is barely aware of a car traveling slowly down the street, until Barnabas lunges at the car, barking. The car leaves quickly when a deputy drives down the street.

Tim finds his missing Bible on the pulpit. Rodney Underwood calls to check in, telling Tim of a ring of antique dealers that have been arrested for smuggling jewels in antiques. Tim tells Rodney that the jewels had not turned up on a search of the church, that he had only found a candy wrapper. Rodney decides to check the wrapper for prints, and finds only Father Tim's. The two men decided that the church should be searched by the police, who turn up nothing. Rodney is frustrated, but Tim is pleased; perhaps things can settle down at last.

Tim meets with Absalom Greer, who tells him about his calling. Having a vision of angels at the age of fourteen, Absalom amazingly forgets the vision, and spends years avoiding his calling. Traveling to the west coast, he is called by God again while working in a silver mine. Absalom returned home, but once again forgot his calling. Several more times over the years, God calls to him to preach, but Absalom ignored the call until finally he spends two years reading the Bible. The local preacher tells Absalom that God had spoken to the preacher, saying that Absalom should preach the word from the pulpit, and that is what Absalom has been doing ever since, whether from the pulpit or from behind the counter of the general store that had been in his family for years. Living there with his sister Lottie, Absalom is happy to share his story with Tim, and the two men discuss the difficulties of writing a fresh sermon each week, something to inspire their parishioners. Tim is shocked when Absalom asks him if he is too exhausted to run and too scared to rest. This neatly explains the trouble Tim seems to be having of late. Before leaving the little general store, Tim is surprised to find that many years ago, Absalom had courted Miss Sadie.

Cynthia comes over and brings fish stew, and the two of them enjoy an evening at the rectory with Dooley finishing his science project. The quiet evening is very pleasurable, with Tim once again stunned by his neighbor's happy nature.

Life in Mitford runs together day to day, and Tim stays busy, but tired, though he does feel a bit better after resuming his jogging schedule. One Saturday, after Dooley leaves to spend the weekend at Meadowgate, Tim naps on the couch and is shocked when he wakes to full dark, having slept all day. The phone rings at 11, with Hoppy calling. Olivia is in grave trouble. Tim goes to her at once and is stunned by her appearance. Her heart condition has restricted her breathing, and her body is swollen with fluid to the point that she is barely recognizable. Tim prays, and Hoppy takes her to the hospital,



trying to make her comfortable and stable until such time that a donor can be found for her. Olivia is finally willing to try and conquer her fear of the surgery.

Sunday arrives and Tim is on the Alter of Lord's Chapel looking out at his parishioners when suddenly, the attic ladder descends behind him, and a bedraggled man climbs down. Introducing himself as George Gaynor, the man tells the dazed congregation that he has been living behind the death bell in the attic for months. Gaynor explains that he had lived a life of privilege, but that the fortune had been earned dishonestly. Despite this, he had followed in the footsteps of the family deceit. At one time he had been in a plane crash, and had promised God to turn his life around if he were to survive but had forgotten his promise almost immediately. It was Gaynor who had hidden the jewels in the church, having stolen them from an antique dealer with whom he was acquainted. Gaynor draws the parishioners in with his tale and earns their admiration when he tells them that the church has become a home for him. Tim is shocked to learn that the day he spoke to a distraught salesman in the church, Gaynor had been listening upstairs, that the short prayer Tim had prayed with the stranger had moved Gaynor toward God as well. The police arrive to take Gaynor to jail, and he goes happily. On his way out, Ron Malcolm removes his shoes and gives them to the barefoot man. Tim spends time with Gaynor at the jail, learning that the thief had moved the jewels from place to place in the church to keep them safe. The days that follow are busy with newspaper and television reporters that want the story of the man that had lived in the church attic. In the evening, Tim walks with Barnabas, thinking about Olivia, Dooley, Cynthia, and all the others that he cares for, when a car speeds up, and he is shoved to the ground. Barnabas is snatched into the car which takes off with a man yelling about the preacher stealing their dog.

Tim baptizes George Gaynor in the police station, where the popular man has been inundated with gifts by the townspeople of Mitford. Though the occasion is a happy one, Tim is still devastated by the loss of Barnabas. Rodney Underwood promises to do what he can, and JC Hogan offers to run the dog's picture in the newspaper. At the rectory, Tim is stunned when an angry Dooley vents his barely controlled rage toward him. The priest consoles Dooley, who is as devastated as Tim by the loss of the dog.

The townspeople once again rally around one of their own, putting together a reward fund for the return of Barnabas. Tim fills his days as best he can, visiting with Olivia in the hospital and having lunch with Miss Sadie and Louella, though his thoughts are on Barnabas, as well as his neighbor Cynthia. Seeing her cat on the roof he calls her and offers to get the cat down, and Cynthia is thrilled that he will. Arriving at her door, he is a bit disheartened to find that her evening includes dinner at the club with Andrew Gregory.

Easter arrives and George Gaynor is allowed to attend the mass, as the FBI will be picking him up at the Mitford Jail on Wednesday. Tim speaks to the Mayor about having Miss Rose deed her house to the town and the town renovating a small apartment for the old couple. The Mayor agrees to look into it, agreeing that it is a great idea.





Cynthia arrives at the door of the rectory, asking if Tim is angry with her. Flabbergasted, Tim sits with her in the garden discussing not much of anything, but by the time the two part, both feel much better, their strained friendship restored. Tim is even more heartened when he sees Andrew leaving, headed out of town for a few days. Andrew mentions that he had hoped that Cynthia would go with him. The next day Tim stops in Andrew's shop and finds Marcie Guthrie taking care of things for Andrew. Marcie tells the priest that Andrew had left alone for his trip and that his mood was not good. Tim's mood however is much better.

## **Chapters 13-16, Issues of the Heart, Absalom, My Son, The Finest Sermon, A Sure Reward Analysis**

Tim's busy life is filled with the joys and sometimes hardships of the people of Mitford. New friends and old friends keep him occupied to the point that he neglects himself quite often. Tim is tired often, and sleeping for an entire day stuns him. The priest is not taking the care of himself that he should be, and his almost constant fatigue is mentioned often, a precursor of things to come.

Olivia is concerned about the reaction of Hoppy to her illness. Tim assures her that the man is thinking things over. Hoppy had lost his wife to cancer a few years earlier, and her loss was still devastating to the doctor. Tim is somewhat amused. Olivia and Hoppy are acquaintances, yet both seem to think of each other regularly. Though Olivia seems set against the heart transplant that would prolong her life, Tim prays that she will change her mind. A visit from Hoppy a few days later confirms Tim's thoughts. Hoppy wants Olivia to live and will speak to her doctor about what can be done for her. The two men will pray about it, and Hoppy seems to finally be able to move forward with his own life, after living as a shell of himself after the death of Carol. When Hoppy calls in the late hours for Tim to come to Olivia, the devastation of her disease is at last apparent. The woman is barely recognizable, and Tim can do nothing but drop to his knees and pray that Olivia will recover, and open herself up to the idea of a transplant. It is evident to the priest that his two friends care very deeply for each other, and their happiness would be a wonderful thing.

The town of Mitford is stunned by the revelation that a man has been living in the belfry at Lord's Chapel. George Gaynor had been questioning his life for some time and had found his way to the small church. Tim believes that God was working his mysterious ways when Gaynor found his way to the small town, and that he had been listening when the priest had spoken with a traveling salesman who stopped at Lord's Chapel briefly one afternoon. Tim had heard from the salesman, Pete Jamison, and Gaynor said the simple prayer had also turned his heart to God. George Gaynor brought the town together, and they had welcomed him as one of their own. Tim is happily surprised by the love and care that the town shows the former thief. The priest is also relieved that the mystery of the jewels has been solved, and that his questionable thoughts of Andrew Gregory's antique buying trips can be put to rest. The situation between Andrew and Cynthia is another matter. Tim is jealous of what may be a budding relationship between the antique dealer and Cynthia, though he won't admit it to himself. When



Andrew leaves town to golf for a few days, Tim is secretly pleased that Cynthia did not go with him. Tim is confused by his feelings for Cynthia. She brings him happiness and fills his heart with joy, but he has been a single man for so long, committed to God, that he is unsure if being more than friends would be such a good idea.

The theft of Barnabas leaves Tim and Dooley stunned and depressed. The dog had filled an emptiness in the priest's life that he hadn't really known he had. The special bond that he had shared with the animal was something he could not describe. Dooley was also devastated. A boy given up by his mother and separated from his siblings, Dooley was a cautious young man, very rarely giving his heart. He had given his heart to the large dog, and Tim realizes that the theft has reinforced the boy's feelings that nothing lasts, and nothing can be counted on. Though Tim had done his best to make Dooley's life stable, each day brings new challenges, and the priest knows that despite the young man's tendency to be standoffish and surly, the two of them need each other very much.



# Chapters 17-20; A Surprising Question, Something To Talk About, A Love Story, Baxter Park

## Chapters 17-20; A Surprising Question, Something To Talk About, A Love Story, Baxter Park Summary

Father Tim invites Cynthia over for dinner. She happily agrees, and the two share a wonderful meal, both having a splendid time. Cynthia puts Tim on the spot by asking him what he likes about her, and then surprises him by telling him that she thinks he is romantic. Taking a walk after dinner, the couple runs into Uncle Billy and Miss Rose, and is invited into the Porter House for tea. Though Miss Rose is at first surly, she warms up to Cynthia's enthusiasm, inviting them for some pound cake and a tour. At the end of the upstairs hall they find the small door that leads to Miss Rose's childhood playroom. Cynthia agrees happily to enter the room, and Tim is left again to wonder at her almost childlike joy. The room reveals a treasure—Uncle Billy's ink drawings have been hidden away there. Miss Rose had meant to burn them, but had forgotten. Miss Rose entrusts them to Cynthia and Tim carries them back to her house. On her porch, Cynthia thanks Tim for a wonderful evening and astonishes the priest by asking him to go steady. Telling him to think about it, Cynthia goes inside, leaving Tim sitting on her porch steps in a daze.

For the next few days Tim thinks about the perplexing situation with Cynthia, and those around him are constantly commenting on his mood. Tim visits with Russell Jacks at Betty Craig's home to learn that the man has seemingly turned into an older version of Dooley. Tim speaks to him about taking care of himself and treating Betty with more respect. The old man agrees and when Tim leaves, the patient and his nurse appear happier.

Louella calls the priest, concerned that Miss Sadie is not herself, and keeps mentioning that she needs to tell Tim her love story. Olivia calls as well, and lets Tim know she is feeling better, and has finally accepted the idea of a heart transplant. Pleased, Tim tells her that he looks forward to seeing her in church and that she will continue to be in his prayers.

Cynthia arrives at the back door of the rectory with a mole made of gingerbread, causing Dooley to laugh uproariously. Tim had made a mental note to himself to try and make the boy laugh, and is very happy to hear the joyous sound. The joy over Dooley's laughter is followed up the next afternoon by a call from the school principal. Dooley had gotten into another fight at school; this confrontation including a food fight in the cafeteria. Buster Austin had insulted Father Tim, and Dooley had defended him. The frustration that Tim feels about how to handle the situation with Dooley is heavy on his



heart, but when speaking with Dooley, the priest tells the boy that while they have some things that need to be worked out, he is thankful that Dooley stood up for him that day.

Visiting Miss Sadie and Louella, Louella tells Tim that she is worried that Miss Sadie might be giving up on life. Sadie tells Tim not to worry, that she has no intention of dying anytime soon, then tells her priest the story of her life and love. Sadie had grown up in Mitford, though her uncle had convinced her father that the only way for Sadie to marry a good man was to be educated in Europe. Sadie had not wanted to go to Europe, and on the day that she was to leave, her father had come home from the lumber yard angry that a young man had carelessly run him off the road. Of course, the wonderful young man that Sadie meets in Paris turns out to be the very man that ran her father off the road. Returning from Paris, young Sadie and her mother had been stunned by the anger of her father when they tried to tell him about the nice young man from Mitford that they had met overseas. Her father never forgave him for the accident on the road that fateful day, and Sadie was devastated. Willard had made his fortune selling pharmaceuticals and built the Porter house. Once in a while he would send Sadie a secret note, promising that he loved her and wished there was a way to make things right with her father. Willard told her that the name of the house he had built was carved on the highest support in the attic and he hoped she would someday be mistress of the house. Through the years that passed, Sadie was courted by Absalom Greer, who had worked in the lumber yard for her father, but her heart still belonged to Willard and she had turned down Absalom proposal. Sadie's mother finally had enough of the anger that her father held deep inside, and told him that she would like to see him meet with Willard and ask God to forgive her father for the way he had behaved for these many years. Sadie's father agreed in shame and set off to meet Willard. Sadie had a bad feeling and followed her father to the site of the old Episcopal Church. Upon arriving, Sadie's father's anger had apparently returned, and in an argument with Willard, a lamp was overturned, setting the church ablaze. Her father sent Willard away and never told anyone the truth. Arson was suspected, but only Sadie, her father, and Willard knew the truth. Willard never told a soul, and Sadie thought that someday her father might have let her marry her love, but the war came, and Willard was killed in France. Sadie finishes her story and explains that by building the nursing home on the sight of the old Lord's Chapel, the land will become a place of peace and solace, no longer the place where her life had been irrevocably linked to sadness.

Tim is amazed with Sadie's story, and even more so when he is leaving and Louella pulls him aside. The family had another secret, it seems. Sadie's mother had given birth to a daughter before she had married Sadie's father. The poor family that her mother used to visit was actually the woman that had taken in her first daughter. Father Tim realizes that there is a rather simple reason that Olivia Davenport looks so much like Sadie's mother. Olivia must be Sadie's half-sister.

The bells arrive back at Lord's Chapel during the week before Emma's wedding. Tim is pleased that Joe Guthrie seems to have won Puny's heart, though it seems to have pushed her into showing more interest in his relationship with his neighbor. The lives of the people in the town take Tim's time and thoughts and the days rush by. Before he knows it, summer arrives and school is out. The problem of what to do with Dooley



resolves itself without much effort, as the people that care about him have plenty to keep the boy happy and occupied. Tim has a nightmare about Barnabas and Dooley comes to his bed and the two discuss missing the dog. Dooley opens up about the pain he feels over the loss of his siblings, and Tim teaches him how to pray, giving his problems to God and getting himself some peace in the process.

Dooley has plans to go to Meadowgate for an extended visit, and Tim dreads the thought of the boy leaving. Though he had spent his life alone, the thought of the rectory being empty now fills him with sadness. The day Dooley leaves, Tim is not surprised that he is overwhelmed by the quiet. On the spur of the moment, he invites Cynthia on a picnic and the two find a quiet spot in Baxter Park. Tim asks Cynthia what she means by going steady, and why things have to change at all. He is worried that going steady might interfere with his life and work. Cynthia is understanding, but also amazed. She can't understand it when a person always looks at something that might interfere with their life, and never consider that something might actually enhance their life.

Lying in bed that night thinking things over, the thunderous sound of a helicopter startles Tim. Hoppy's car is at Baxter Park. A heart donor has been found for Olivia, and they are rushing her to the location for surgery. Tim prays through the night, and tosses up the next day's fatigue as a remnant of the long night. People around him comment on his sickly look, but Tim avoids any discussion of the matter. At The Grill, Tim and the others are greeted by an excited Homeless Hobbes. Hobbes has spotted Barnabas tied up at a shack in the woods. The police are called and Hobbes leads them to the house, but the dog is gone, with no signs of any people around. Despite that, Tim is extremely happy. Barnabas is somewhere close, and the police in Mitford will do their best to see him home. Hoppy calls that evening, and Tim can hear in his voice that Olivia has made it though the surgery successfully. She will have to remain in the hospital for some time, but Hoppy is confident she will do well.

## **Chapters 17-20; A Surprising Question, Something To Talk About, A Love Story, Baxter Park Analysis**

Tim as always is delighted by his neighbor, but has no idea what to do about her. He has lived his life alone for many years, and though Cynthia has brought something into his life, he is not sure if it is something that would be good for him. Cynthia stuns him continuously with her joy over small things, and her simple way of looking at things. When she proposes that they go steady, the priest can barely contain his shock. Though feelings of jealousy follow him, Tim does not know how to react to the feelings that he has for his neighbor. He is happy when she explains that though Andrew is nice, she does not have anything in common with him, but Tim is also frightened that Cynthia may be expecting too much from him. Each time the couple shares a fun get together, Tim pulls back a bit, but Cynthia seems patient, and encourages Tim in her gentle way.

The story of Sadie's love and life are very moving for Tim. Though Sadie had never been able to marry the love of her life, she had lived her life in happiness for the most part. The two great homes that remain in Mitford were built to symbolize the success



and wealth of the people within, and now both houses are falling down around the families that were left behind, lives destroyed by pride and Sadie's father's unwillingness to forgive a young man. The priest is happy for Sadie, because through her life, she has had her friend Louella, and has been able to move beyond the sadness of her loss of Willard. The truth behind the fire that claimed the first Lord's Chapel is moving and poignant. The site that would bring Miss Sadie sadness, would now bring her joy, and reunite those that she loved, at least in spirit. The home would be dedicated to her parents, and the fountain in front would be dedicated to Willard Porter.

Dooley's absence leaves Tim alone, but not happily. Though he had lived alone for so long, the months with Dooley rambling in the rectory have filled Tim's life with things that he had not known he was missing. A picnic with Cynthia cheers the priest up, and the couple discusses their budding relationship. Tim is a bit ashamed when Cynthia asks why he would look on a partner as a hindrance, rather than an enhancement to life. Though she says that she understands what Tim is working through, there is a bit of sadness when they part. Tim continues to think things through when the helicopter arrives to take Olivia and Hoppy to the donor heart that has been provided. Some prayers have been answered, but more must now be said, for the donor that had provided such a gift for Olivia, and that the surgery will be a success. News from Hoppy the next day seems full of promise. The townspeople are full of the news and most contribute Tim's bad coloring and exhaustion to the late night and the relief of anxiety for Olivia. Tim is as willing as everyone to believe this, though he knows that his diet has slipped and he is not exercising the way he should. It also seems that Tim is always thirsty, a sign of diabetes that he either does not recognize or simply chooses to ignore. Hoppy is away with Olivia, and Tim does not want to worry him, so he does not tell his friend about his symptoms.

The sighting of Barnabas by Homeless Hobbes serves to push all thoughts of himself aside. Thrilled that his dog is near, Tim quickly forgets about anything that might be wrong with his health, focusing on the search of the woods for his beloved friend. Hobbes reports that the dog is much thinner and dirty, but overall he seems well. Though the sheriff and his deputies can not find any sign of the dog or the people that have him, Tim senses that Barnabas will be returned to him. Dooley is also thrilled with the news when Tim calls him at Meadowgate, and the priest promises to keep him posted.

Tim is once again caught up in the things that go on around him, and in the lives of the people in Mitford. The priest does not pay much attention to the signs of his declining health, though the people that care about him do what they can to encourage him to be careful with his health.



# Chapters 21-24: The Bells, A High Command, Homecoming, In New Life

## Chapters 21-24: The Bells, A High Command, Homecoming, In New Life Summary

Tim's spirits are up with the news that Barnabas is near, and he spends the next few days busily following up on duties and chores in the town. Stopping in at the Porter House, Tim views the inscription that Willard had carved there, "Winterpast," and underneath, Song of Solomon. Tim calls on Sadie and lets her know that Willard had always had hope that their love would be realized.

News arrives that Joe Joe had been shot while staking out the house where Barnabas had been seen. The townspeople arrive at the hospital, and Puny and Joe Joe's family meet for the first time since her relationship with him had begun. The mayor and her many children and grandchildren welcome Puny as one of their own, and all are present when the doctor arrives to tell that Joe Joe has had successful surgery and will make a full recovery.

Tim walks with Cynthia in Baxter Park, and invites her to lunch at the Bishop's home. Cynthia would love to go, but asks that Tim pray that she will be able to finish the first draft of her book so she will be able to attend. Tim happily agrees.

At the Bishop's home, Tim speaks with Stuart about his life since writing the previous year about the trouble the priest had been having with his ministry. Stuart is not happy to hear that Tim has been diagnosed with diabetes and has been neglecting his health all the same. The constant exhaustion that Tim has been feeling is a symptom of the disease, and Stuart wonders how someone that is not well can possibly expect to do his job well. Stuart tells Tim he must take a vacation and rest for two months. Tim is surprised by the bishop's orders, but Stuart tells him that though he had requested that Tim change some things in his life, he has failed to change anything. Tim had, in fact, been struggling under even more than usual, between Dooley's arrival, Olivia's heart surgery, and the jewels. After another mostly sleepless night, Tim calls his cousin Walter and makes arrangements to travel with them to Ireland. At mass, Tim is stunned that his parishioners have pooled their frequent flier miles for his trip. Olivia calls from the hospital to thank Tim for his prayers and express her love.

The days continue to be busy in Mitford, and Tim is helping Cynthia in her garden when the familiar sound of Barnabas' bark reaches him. The dog bounds into the garden, happily knocking the priest to the ground. Homeless Hobbes had found the dog on his steps that morning and had brought him into town. Tim thanks Hobbes and informs him that the reward that had been raised will be his. Hobbes decides that the money should be used to help the poor people that live in the woods behind Mitford, and Tim is pleased to agree.



Fatigue follows Tim, and he is often overwhelmed with thirst and lately confusion. Plans have been made with Cynthia to have dinner with her friends, but he can't seem to remember the details. Overwhelming thirst and cravings find Tim in the kitchen, where he eats the orange marmalade cake given to him by a parishioner. The next thing he remembers is waking up in the hospital, with Hoppy standing over him. Tim had not listened to the doctor, nor taken care of himself, and was now insulin dependent. He is still alive however, and that is good news.

Taking Cynthia on a picnic, Tim tells her that he will need to think about going steady for a while longer. Cynthia understands, and the two enjoy a quiet day with each other. Tim knows Cynthia does understand that any worries he has are not because of her, but simply his worries that he might not be able to change his life, thereby making her unhappy in the long run.

Emma drives Tim to the airport, and any fears of the flight that awaits him are overshadowed by the way that Emma drives. Tim boards the plane and reflects on his life in Mitford. Looking out the window and gazing down on the green mountains of North Carolina, Tim feels the weight of the world lifting off his shoulders. He looks forward to the trip ahead, where he will go in a new life with Christ.

## **Chapters 21-24: The Bells, A High Command, Homecoming, In New Life Analysis**

Tim's life in Mitford becomes more busy than usual, with the news that Barnabas has been spotted. The town rallies around the priest, and the police department organizes to catch the drug dealers that have taken the dog. The small cabin is staked out and Tim waits to hear of his dog's return. The news that comes is quite different. Joe Joe Guthrie had been shot. The mayor's grandson is taken to the hospital for surgery and will recover, but the criminals and Barnabas are gone.

Tim stops at the Porter House and gets permission from Miss Rose to look in the attic. Tim finds the inscription that Willard had carved, 'WinterPast', followed by Song of Solomon. Tim visits Miss Sadie, and explains that the passages speak of love being long lasting. Sadie is pleased that Willard had never given up on the love they had shared.

Tim visits Stuart Cullen, and Cynthia joins him. Stuart is not happy with the news that Tim has been diagnosed with diabetes and has not taken care of himself. Stuart understands that diabetes is a very serious illness, and can make a turn for the worse quickly. Stuart reminds Tim that he had asked him to make a change in his life, but rather than do so, Tim had let life change around him. The additional stresses that had cropped up in the past year had allowed the rector to ignore his bishop's orders. Stuart demands that Tim take a two month vacation, and the priest reluctantly agrees, though he is unsure who will take the helm at Lord's Chapel. Stuart is also pleased with the budding relationship between Tim and Cynthia, encouraging Tim to spend more time with her. Stuart had married late in life, and explained to the rector that his life was





better for it. There was no question that his marriage had strengthened his relationship with God.

Tim resigns himself to the loss of his dog, but while digging flower beds in Cynthia's garden is surprised by Barnabas charging through the hedge. Homeless Hobbes had found him at his doorstep. Tim's joy, and Cynthia's happiness for him is overwhelming. Dooley cheers when informed of the dog's return. The boy will be staying with Hal and Marge at Meadowgate farm while Tim is in Ireland. It had been decided that Absalom Greer would take over for Tim while he is away. The rector believes that the change will be good for his parishioners, and might wake up the congregation.

All of the distractions finally catch up to Father Tim. His diabetes had been pushed to the back burner, and returned with a vengeance. Cynthia finds Tim in his bed in a diabetic coma. Though he recovers, the priest is not insulin dependent.

Before his trip, Tim meets with Cynthia. Though he is very fond of her, he can not make a decision about whether they should 'go steady' as she had asked. Tim had devoted his entire life to God, and allowing someone in at this point scares him. Not only is he worried that thing won't work out, he is also afraid of letting Cynthia down. Tim does not understand why she likes him, and worries that she will question herself about the same thing. Cynthia understands, knowing that Tim does care for her, but is afraid to give himself away. She is willing to wait until his return from Ireland.

As Tim's plane takes off, the weight of all his worries seems to lift away, and Tim gives himself to God once again, ready to freely go forward in his new life.



# Characters

## Father Timothy

Father Tim is the rector at Lord's Chapel, the Episcopal Church located in Mitford, North Carolina. *At Home in Mitford* details the life of Father Tim, sixty, the son of a dark and silent Episcopal father, and loving Baptist mother. Tim is feeling tired and burnt out, and the novel tells the story of Tim over the period of about one year.

Tim has written to his bishop about his fear that he no longer has what it takes to be the rector at Lord's Chapel. Tim feels his sermons are tired and lack the spiritual message that his parishioners need. The bishop urges Tim to take some time before giving up, that making changes in his life might be what is needed. Tim takes the time, and changes do come, in the form of a boy that Tim takes in, a large dog, and the woman that moves into the small house next door. The priest does not, however, take the vacation that the bishop has urged, or take care of his health as his doctor has suggested. Tim is diagnosed with diabetes, and though he does take care of himself at the start, he eventually becomes more careless about his diet, until eventually the diabetes becomes much worse, resulting in Tim becoming insulin dependent.

Tim has lived his life alone, having dedicated his life to the service of God. Engaged once, many years ago, Tim had been happy alone, or at least assumed he was happy. The arrival of Cynthia next door awakens something in him, and Tim is confused by his feelings for his neighbor. She brings him almost constant happiness, but Tim is unsure whether there is a place for her in his life. Though Tim does not question his calling, or his commitment to God, commitment to Cynthia is another matter. His neighbor is understanding, and the fact that she does not push him is appreciated. Becoming the caretaker for Dooley is another area of concern for Tim. The priest had no idea how to raise a child and simply puts the matter in the hands of God, trusting that he will simply do what is best for the boy.

Father Tim's life in Mitford is full of life and love, and the people of the town are his family. Though Tim sometimes feels overwhelmed by his duties as their rector, it becomes clear to him by the end of the novel that his life is much richer because of the people surrounding him.

## Dooley Barlowe

Dooley is the grandson of Russell Jacks, the gardener and handyman at Lord's Chapel. Russell had returned from spending time at his daughter's with the boy. Dooley reminds Father Tim of Tom Sawyer with his country behavior and attitude. Rough around the edges and lacking much in the way of manners, Dooley still inspires those around him to care for him.



When Russell becomes ill, Dooley moves into the rectory with Tim and Barnabas. The three of them settle down into a routine of sorts, though there are some rough patches. Dooley sometimes gets into fights at school and remains aloof at times. Upon receiving a bike for Christmas, Dooley runs away from the rectory, but returns when his mother sends him away. Tim finds out that Dooley's mother is an alcoholic and had given away her children, unable to care for them. Dooley had spent his young life caring for his siblings, only to lose them. Tim understands that the boy is very cautious about giving himself to anyone, afraid to be hurt or abandoned again.

Through time and patience, Dooley becomes more comfortable sharing his feelings with others and begins to trust that he will not be left alone in life. By being able to live like a normal boy, he grows more confident in himself, and also develops confidence in others. Throughout the novel, the changes in Dooley are evident, and most of the changes are a direct result of his strong relationship with Father Tim.

## **Cynthia Coopersmith**

Cynthia is Tim's neighbor at the rectory and his love interest in the novel. Having inherited the house from an uncle, Cynthia moves in and Tim's life is changed drastically from their first meeting. An author and illustrator, Cynthia has earned her living writing children's books based on the antics of her cat Violet. Barnabas, Tim's dog, and Violet meet first, resulting in Tim meeting his neighbor for the first time while trying to corral his dog. Cynthia has a joy for life and a simple way of looking at things that amaze Tim, but he is unable to commit to a steady relationship with her. Cynthia is understanding, and does not force the issue.

Cynthia has been married before to a very important senator, and it seems that her old life has released her from the normal worries that most people have. She is committed to simply enjoying her life and her job, and sharing the company of good friends. Though she goes out several times with Andrew Gregory, the antique dealer from town, Cynthia is not impressed with dinners at the club, or the things that Andrew seems to care about. She prefers simple things and longs for nothing more than companionship. Her idea of a perfect relationship is being able to share day to day life with someone, with no worries about trying to impress anyone. She feels that people should compliment each other and be able to make the lives of those they care for easier and happier.

## **Barnabas**

Barnabas is a large black dog, compared at times to the size of a car, or a refrigerator. Barnabas attaches himself to Tim, and though at first the priest is not pleased by the idea of being the dog's focus, he eventually comes to enjoy the dog's company. Barnabas is often uncontrollable, but Tim finds out that amazingly, the dog will lie down on the spot when he hears scripture. A priest and a scripture-loving dog seem to be a match made in heaven.



Barnabas quickly becomes an important part of Tim's life, and Dooley's as well. When the dog is taken from Tim by a group of drug dealers, his absence is felt at once, and Tim and Dooley bond over their sorrow. When Barnabas returns, the two share their joy with Cynthia and the people of Mitford.

## **Emma Garrett**

The bossy, busy body secretary of Lord's Chapel. Emma considers taking care of Father Tim one of her duties, and this alternately pleases and annoys the priest. Emma marries Harold Newland, the mailman in Mitford.

## **Puny Bradshaw**

Hired by the vestry to take care of the rectory and Father Tim, Puny is a "little Emma" bossing Father Tim around, but doing so only because she cares for him. Puny is a hard worker, who took care of her grandfather, a preacher after her mother died. After the jewels were found in the church, Puny meets Joe Joe Guthrie, a police officer, and the two begin dating.

## **Russell Jacks**

The gardener and caretaker at Lord's Chapel, Russell is the grandfather of Dooley. When Russell becomes ill, Tim takes in Dooley.

## **Miss Sadie Baxter**

The mistress of Fernbank, Sadie is an 86-year-old woman and parishioner of Lord's Chapel. Very close to Father Tim, Sadie stuns him not only with her story of her life and loves, but also by donating five million dollars to build a nursing home on the site of the old Lord's Chapel.

## **Louella**

A black woman raised in Sadie's family. Louella's mother China Mae had worked for the family when Sadie was a young girl and when Louella was born, Sadie considered her a sister.

## **Olivia Davenport**

A new member of Lord's Chapel, Olivia is dying, and wants to spend her final days working for God. Meeting Hoppy Harper convinces her that life is worth fighting for, and she decides to have the heart transplant necessary to save her life.



## **Percy Mosely**

The owner of the Main Street Grill, married to Velma. The Grill is the center of gossip in the town.

## **Hal Owen**

The town vet and good friend of Father Tim. Hal takes over as senior warden at Lord's Chapel. Hal is married to Marge.

## **Walter Harper**

Known to the townspeople as Hoppy, Harper is Tim's doctor. Widowed the previous September, Hoppy meets Olivia and begins to fall in love with her.

## **Homeless Hobbes**

A former advertising executive, Hobbes now lives in a shack in the woods of Mitford. Hobbes had given up his wealth and prestige to return to his roots, where he was happiest in life.

## **JC Hogan**

The publisher of the local newspaper, JC often annoys the townspeople while searching for news and amuses them with his inaccurate headlines.

## **Uncle Billy**

Married to Miss Rose, Uncle Billy is loyal to his wife, having vowed to love her in good times and bad. An artist, Billy's drawings are shown and sold at Andrew Gregory's antique shop.

## **Miss Rose**

Miss Rose, married to Uncle Billy, is the town eccentric, having suffered from mental illness all her life. She lives with her husband in the Porter House, built by her brother before he was killed in the war in France.



## **Esther Cunningham**

The mayor of Mitford, Esther is a strong character, that has the best interest of her town at heart.

## **Stuart Cullen**

Father Tim's bishop, Stuart requests that Tim put off any rash decisions about leaving Mitford, and make some changes to his life. Stuart had also been a committed bachelor, but had married later in life, and often encourages Tim to find a wife.

## **George Gaynor**

The jewel thief that takes up residence in the attic of Lord's Chapel. Gaynor reveals himself during mass one Sunday and inspires the parishioners with his story.



## Objects/Places

### Lord's Chapel

The Episcopal Church in Mitford North Carolina where Father Tim is rector.

### Mitford

The small town in North Carolina where the novel takes place.

### The Grill

The small restaurant in Mitford where most of the townspeople gather to share coffee and gossip.

### Fernbank

The large home of Miss Sadie and Louella, Fernbank is a focal point of the town, though it is in need of repair, as Sadie has not spent any money to care for the building.

### Porter House

The home of Uncle Billy and Aunt Rose, Porter House was built by Miss Rose's brother Willard, in the hopes that someday he would marry Miss Sadie and they would live there happily.

### Baxter Park

The park behind the rectory, where Tim takes his exercise and spends some time with Cynthia, walking and picnicking.

### Hope House

The nursing home that Miss Sadie has donated money to build on the site where the old Lord's Chapel had burned years before.

### Oxford Antique Shop

The shop owned by Andrew Gregory, Tim's rival for Cynthia's affections. Andrew also held a showing of Uncle Billy's drawings at his store.



## **Holding**

Town outside of Mitford. Dooley runs away to Holding to see his mother, but she tells him to return to his grandfather and Father Tim.

## **Collar Button**

The men's clothing shop in Mitford, where Tim shops for exercise clothes and to update his wardrobe after meeting Cynthia.

## **Meadowgate Farm**

The home of Hal and Marge Owen. Dooley spends quite a bit of time on the farm with the Owen family.



# Social Sensitivity

Father Timothy Kavanaugh, rector of Our Lord's Chapel Episcopal Church in Mitford, North Carolina, shows his parishioners, by word and example, how to live more abundant lives. According to Philippians 4:13, he prays, "I can do everything God asks me to with the help of Christ who gives me the strength and power." He counsels the elderly and shows compassion for widows, orphans, the mentally handicapped and terminally ill. In giving of himself unselfishly to the point of physical and emotional exhaustion, he merits the love and respect of the citizens of Mitford.

The village of Mitford has its share of elderly citizens with their special problems of loneliness and physical infirmities.

As people grow old, they gradually lose autonomy. Many small towns like Mitford have no nursing homes or retirement centers to care for the aged.

Spinsters like Miss Sadie, widowers like Russell Jacks, and childless couples like Rose and Uncle Billy depend upon the good citizens of Mitford as caregivers.

Father Tim visits wealthy Miss Sadie Baxter, a frail, octogenarian spinster with a secret past. She lives with her childhood friend and servant at Fernbank, a mansion on a hill overlooking Mitford. Miss Sadie donates five million dollars to Lord's Chapel for construction of a retirement and nursing home on the site of the original, burned-out church. Russell Jacks, talented gardener and sexton at Lord's Chapel, has custody of his grandson Dooley. When the old man is hospitalized with pneumonia, Father Tim provides a home for ten-year-old Dooley, an irreverent, stubborn boy. During Jacks's convalescence, Father Tim persuades him to submit to his nurse's care.

Elderly Miss Rose and Uncle Billy live in her ramshackle mansion across from the town square. A schizophrenic, Miss Rose wears bizarre clothing and exhibits strange behavior, but Uncle Billy remains her faithful husband. Because they do not pay their utility bills, they are often without heat and water. They scavenge in garbage cans unless grocer Avis Packard, cafe owner Percy Mosely, and baker Winnie Ivey give them food.

Father Tim sponsors a showing and sale of Uncle Billy's excellent pencil and ink drawings. He urges Mayor Cunningham and the town council to buy and restore Miss Rose's dilapidated Victorian house, built by her deceased brother Willard Porter. Rose agrees to deed the house to the town with the stipulation that Mitford erect a statue to her brother.

Rose and Uncle Billy will live in an apartment in the mansion until they die. The town council's decision is pragmatic as well as altruistic. The dilapidated Porter mansion, located in the heart of Mitford, will become a historical museum, and Rose and Uncle Billy will have a safe, comfortable home in which to live.



Homeless Hobbes, a one-legged man who lives on the outskirts of Mitford, confesses to Father Tim that he once was a wealthy, successful advertising agent until alcoholism ruined his life. Now content to live like a hermit in a shack without modern conveniences, Hobbes reads the Bible and other inspirational books. Non-judgmental about other people's lifestyles, he provides a "soup kitchen" for his impoverished neighbors who live in a rural slum called The Creek.

Father Tim and his parishioners donate food and clothing to Hobbes's project because Creek people have rejected Mitford's previous efforts. By accepting help, they would have to conform to moral and legal restrictions imposed by Mitford society against alcoholism, child abuse, and selling illegal drugs.

Another social concern is dysfunctional families. Father Tim has never forgiven his father for a rigid and cold-hearted attitude toward him and his mother. Miss Sadie's father refused to let her marry the man she loved and consequently condemned her to a lonely life. Puny's mother and father have died, leaving her an orphan. Dooley's father has abandoned his family. His alcoholic mother gives her children away "like candy" to anyone who will take them.

In nearly every case, Karon indicates that the root cause of family dysfunction is an inadequate father whose harshness, pride, neglect, or abuse leaves family members deprived of self-confidence and worthiness.

Many of the characters at the beginning of the book are unmarried or divorced—Father Tim, Cynthia, Andrew.

Karon indicates that family attachments are essential to a person's well-being and that a happy marriage is the best of all adult relationships. In the meantime, people in Mitford act as an extended family to those who are single. Father Tim is a sixty-year-old bachelor who has had only one serious romance in his life.

Consequently, he is confused and awkward in his courtship of Cynthia Coppersmith, a divorcee who moves to Mitford and becomes Father Tim's neighbor. He finds her sense of humor and affectionate nature irresistible. Cynthia is author and illustrator of children's books, similar to Beatrix Potter's. She was formerly married to a politician who abused her and "made babies with other women."

Handsome widower Andrew Gregory, owner of an antique store, also finds Cynthia Coppersmith attractive. Gregory invites her to play bridge and attend parties at the country club, social activities that Cynthia dislikes. Father Tim experiences jealousy over seeing Gregory's Mercedes parked in front of Cynthia's house; when Cynthia declines an invitation to drive to Florida to meet Gregory's adult children, Father Tim is overjoyed. Dr. "Hoppy" Harper, a recent widower, mourns his wife's death until a beautiful and wealthy widow, Olivia Davenport, moves to Mitford. They fall in love but cannot look forward to future happiness because of Olivia's serious heart condition. Emma, another widow and Father Tim's efficient secretary, falls in love with the mailman, who is twelve years younger than she. Too embarrassed to admit her involvement with Harold



Newland and face the disapproval of the community, she keeps it a secret until Father Tim assures her that "God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." Puny, Father Tim's young, energetic and independent housekeeper, also lives a solitary life. Father Tim teases her and asks her why she's never married since she's such an excellent homemaker. She laughs and asks him to pray for the parade of suitors to begin. He does, and eventually, J.J., the mayor's grandson marches in.

Serious illnesses afflict two of the main characters. Father Tim has mild diabetes, which he controls with diet, oral medication, and exercise. Distracted by the needs of his parishioners, he ignores warning symptoms of fatigue, excessive thirst, craving for sweets, and dizziness.

The result is a near-death experience. No longer able to live a carefree life, he must monitor his blood sugar levels and take insulin shots. For years he has depended upon no one but God for spiritual guidance. Now he must allow others into his private life. While he is recovering, parishioners look after his needs and make arrangements for a housekeeper at the rectory.

Olivia Davenport suffers from viral myocarditis, a disease that attacks the heart muscle. The cure is a heart transplant, but because Olivia has an unusual blood type, donors are few. She has resigned herself to an early death. Dr.

"Hoppy" Harper makes her want to live again when they fall in love. Later, he arranges a heart transplant and accompanies her to Boston for successful heart surgery.

Although on the surface, life seems tranquil in Mitford, two crimes occur.

Father Tim suspects something odd is going on when he finds ashes from a funeral urn dumped in his rose bed and valuable gems in the urn. After he reads in the paper that smugglers from England have hidden gems in the legs of antique furniture, he reports his discovery to the sheriff. Unfortunately, the smuggler has removed the gems from the urn, and Father Tim feels responsible, like an accessory to a crime.

Abandoning his getaway car, the gem smuggler lives undetected behind the big death bell in the church tower for many months. Distracted by parish duties, Father Tim overlooks clues. First, an orange marmalade cake vanishes during a women's meeting. Cans of food from the church cabinets disappear, and on a Saturday, Father Tim smells chicken noodle soup. His pulpit Bible is missing. He searches the attic and finds a candy wrapper but does not look behind the big death bell in the tower.

From his hiding place, the jewel thief overhears Father Tim counsel Pete Jamison and lead him to salvation. He listens to Christmas and Easter services and all parish activities and begins to think about his own wasted life. During Sunday service, to the congregation's and Father Tim's amazement, the stairway over the pulpit lowers, and George Gaynor descends. His red hair and beard have grown long, and he is ragged and barefoot because his shoes have fallen off the platform to the floor of the bell tower.



Father Tim's ministry and the faith of the parishioners have inspired the smuggler to give himself up.

Father Timothy baptizes him in jail and serves him the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Later he is tried and convicted of stealing half a million dollars worth of gems, but the Mitford townspeople support his profession of Christian faith with letters and encouragement because they believe his conversion is sincere.

Other criminal activity involves Barnabas, a stray dog that attaches himself to Father Tim. Curiously enough, men in a van "dog-nap" Barnabas. Because Father Tim and Dooley are so fond of the dog, townspeople collect reward money. Later, Homeless Hobbes reports that drug dealers in the hills have tied Barnabas to a tree. He barks if anyone approaches their hideout. The sheriff and his deputy JJ. attempt a capture of the gang, but they get away, and JJ. is wounded. Much later, Barnabas reappears, and the drug dealers are arrested. Karon uses the episodes of the jewel thief and drug dealers to contrast spiritual and emotional conflicts in Mitford with the depravity of the world outside.

A social concern with which church members from small towns can identify is the committee meeting. For some, tradition rules. For others, innovation is important. An aggressive newcomer to Mitford, Harry Nelson, the senior warden of Our Lord's Chapel, wants to have Miss Sadie's painting from Europe appraised.

It looks like a Vermeer, worth as much as \$200,000. Reporters and members of the vestry want to cash in on the rare discovery. The painting's details are interesting to experts, but it is not a Vermeer, and the cost of the appraisal equals the value of the painting. The committee forgets the episode, but Chairman Nelson soon becomes bored with Mitford's lack of excitement and moves away.

In contrast to how little influence a newcomer has with Mitford citizens, Mayor Esther Cunningham, the tall, intimidating matriarch of Mitford, rules town council meetings with an iron hand.

Overruling objections, she supports Father Tim's suggestions to buy Miss Rose's dilapidated house, an eyesore in downtown Mitford. In return, Father Tim reluctantly agrees to serve as chairman of the Rose Festival, an annual event that brings tourists to town and boosts the economy of Mitford.

Mitford is several miles off the interstate highway, so the town council discusses whether to encourage motels and chain stores to buy property in town. The consensus is that Mitford welcomes visitors to share its charm and provincial ways, but visitors can stay in a motel and shop at the discount store in the next town. In this way they sacrifice financial gain to maintain their way of life.

Although Karon focuses on church services and rituals at Our Lord's Chapel Episcopal Church, Mitford has several other Protestant denominations. Christians gather for special all-church functions at Thanksgiving. Staid Episcopal rituals contrast sharply



with the powerful preaching of evangelist Absalom Greer, a Baptist minister, who fills in for Father Tim during his absence in Ireland.

Greer's sermons and prayers express passion and conviction, while Father Tim, guided by a personal, inner faith, leads his congregation by his example of compassion and unselfishness. Greer becomes Father Tim's confessor and mentor. He assures Father Tim that every preacher has dry spells, usually when he is physically tired or sick.



# Techniques

In an easy-to-read style, Karon gently satirizes Father Tim and the citizens of Mitford. Her satire ranges from gentle humor to bitter irony as she portrays the effects parental abandonment can have on a child. This contributes not only to the novel's humor but also to its pathos.

Interests and concerns are typical of small town southern life. At the Main Street Grill, livermush, grits, and gravy are standard fare on the menu. In dialogue, the characters speak with a provincial North Carolina dialect.

Karon writes from a third-person point of view, limited to Father Tim's heart and mind. The effect of having a limited point of view keeps a reader focused on Father Tim, his initial reactions to the behavior of others, and his acceptance of them, just as they are. This point of view also allows insight into his embarrassment and uncertainty over his relationships with Cynthia and Dooley. It also adds a measure of suspense not to know the motives and thoughts of the other characters until they reveal them by word or deed.

Karon splits twenty-four chapters into short episodes as she relates Father Tim's activities. For instance, Chapter 13 has 16 segments, each one separated by a symbol that looks like a heart-shaped dogwood leaf. Several of the segments are no longer than a paragraph. If Father Tim were a first-person narrator, the novel would appear as his journal.

Karon includes many allusions and quotations from the Bible. Because Father Tim feels a nagging sense of inadequacy in dealing with life's crises, he relies on the Bible as his authority for reassurance. He is earnest and devout in his ministry. When he does not know what to do about a problem, he prays. Father Tim is familiar with the Gospels. He has a Bible verse or prayer for every phase of his life, whether it be a hilarious or serious episode. He discovers by accident that his rambunctious dog Barnabas lies down quietly when he hears scriptural commands like "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of thy mouth." As he dresses for dinner with friends, he looks into the mirror at his plain and ordinary image and says, ". . . do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" (Matthew 6:25). In response to Olivia's health crisis, he tells her to repeat the scripture: "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

Before going to sleep, Father Tim reads from the Bible: "By day the Lord commands his steadfast love; and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life." (Psalms 42:8).

In different encounters, Karon allows Father Tim to discuss with Cynthia, Absalom Greer, and Homeless Hobbes the poetry of William Blake and William Wordsworth, the essays of Henry David Thoreau and E.B. White, and the religious writings of C.S. Lewis. Not only do the quotations fit the conversations, they display the characters' intellectual

compatibilities. Karon also includes lines from famous hymns that Mitford Christians sing during the community Thanksgiving feast.



# Themes

## Religion

Father Tim is the rector at the Episcopal Church in Mitford, North Carolina, which makes religion a large focus of the novel. At the outset, Father Tim writes to his bishop, Stuart Cullen, because the priest is questioning whether he wants to lead the people of Mitford any longer. The bishop asks Tim to take some time and change some things in his life before he makes the final decision to leave the parish. Tim spends quite a bit of time worrying over the quality of the sermons that he writes and his ability to help those in the town. Ironically, Tim is sought out daily by parishioners and non-parishioners that need his guidance or advice.

George Gaynor, is a jewel thief on the run, who finds Lord's Chapel while looking for a place to hide. What starts out as a hide out, becomes a sanctuary when Gaynor hears Tim ministering to a traveling salesman who is questioning his faith. By praying the simple prayer with Tim and the salesman, Gaynor realizes that he has turned away from God in his life, and that his life had not been what it could be, that he had not lived up to his potential. George decides to accept God in his life, and by doing so, releases himself from the life of crime that he has lived.

The relationship between Tim and Cynthia also brings religion into the picture. Tim appreciates the simple relationship that Cynthia has with God. Though some people he has dealt with had made religion more difficult than it needed to be, Cynthia looks at God as a friend. Cynthia sees no need to make her love of God, or His love for her into a drama. The simplicity of her religion inspires Tim to appreciate God in a newer, fresher way.

## Friendship

In *At Home in Mitford*, friendship plays a key role. Father Tim is the central character in the novel, and he has strong friendships with many of the townspeople. Tim's closest friends are Hal Owen and Hoppy Harper. The strong friendship that the men share is a type of therapy for Father Tim. As the rector of Lord's Chapel, Tim is on the job 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The two men, while members of the parish, are friends to the priest first, then parishioners. Though they call on him in times of need and for prayer, they enjoy Tim's company as a man, not just as a priest.

The friendship between Father Tim and Dooley develops early in the novel and progresses throughout. Though Dooley has lived a hard life, Father Tim offers him friendship, as well as guidance. Because the hand of friendship was extended to Dooley, rather than Tim acting as just another authority figure, Dooley is able to open up and live the life of a boy. Dooley's friendship is also important to Tim. Having no





experience with raising a child, Tim is swimming upstream quite a bit. Dooley is open and honest from the beginning, leading Tim along the path of friendship and caring.

Tim and Cynthia also have a great friendship. Tim is able to relax and enjoy himself with Cynthia, something he finds difficult to do when acting as the rector of Lord's Chapel. Cynthia has a very simple way of looking at things and does not complicate life with unnecessary things. Tim is amazed by her ability to do so, and because of this, grows to cherish his relationship with Cynthia.

## Love

Love is a key factor for many characters in *At Home in Mitford*. Tim has a deep love for all of his parishioners, though some are closer to his heart than others. Hal and Marge Owen are two of his closest friends, and their love for each other is inspiring to him. Tim is comfortable spending time with the couple and the comfortable love the three share is important. When Dooley enters Tim's life, Tim is happy to allow Dooley time on the farm with Hal and Marge, to share the love of a quiet family, to help Dooley overcome the great losses that he has suffered in his young life.

The love that Miss Sadie experienced in Paris and upon her return to Mitford in her youth is also central to the novel. Her love ties the two prominent families in Mitford together. Sadie had fallen in love with Willard Porter while in Paris. Though her love was never realized, that fateful relationship had changed the town of Mitford forever. Her father's hatred for Willard due to an imagined slight eventually caused the original Lord's Chapel to be destroyed by fire. Sadie's love for Willard is never forgotten, and the inscription on the support beam of the Porter House proves that Willard had never given up hope in his love for Sadie. Though Sadie had every right to become bitter for the losses that she had suffered, her love for her parents and Willard result in a large donation to the town. The nursing home that Sadie wants the town to build will be dedicated to her parents, and to Willard. Though she is 86 years old, her love had carried on, and she had no problem in expressing it. Though the people she loved were no longer living, their spirit would be honored, and her love would be a visible, permanent part of Mitford.

## Significant Topics

Loneliness is a recurring theme in the novel. Many of the characters lead solitary lives and depend upon Father Tim and friends for emotional support. Father Tim is lonely, too. Through prayer, he maintains a close spiritual relationship with God, but at mealtimes and in the evenings, he imagines how much richer life would be if he had a wife. He neglects his house and his health and appearance until Emma and the vestry hire Puny, a housekeeper, to look after him. The big, affectionate dog Barnabas and Dooley Barlowe become Father Tim's surrogate children, and he relies on his cousin Walter, Hal and Marge, and Cynthia for adult companionship.



Miss Sadie is lonely in her Fernbank mansion. She eats Swanson's frozen chicken pies and apples from her orchard. With Father Tim, she reminisces about her happy childhood and youth, when she met Willard Porter in Paris and fell in love. After her father forbade their marriage, she isolated herself from social activities. The arrival of Louella, her childhood playmate and servant, renews her energy and inspires her to contribute money for a retirement home.

Dooley Barlowe has watched his mother sink into alcoholism and neglect his younger brothers and sisters. He kept the family together and looked after the little ones until the day that his mother gave them away "like candy." Dooley lives with Russell Jacks, his maternal grandfather, until the old man is hospitalized. His experiences make him an aggressive, hostile boy who trusts no one. At school, he has fights; he is rude and stubborn.

Father Tim slowly wins his confidence, and Dooley finds security at Meadowgate Farm with Hal and Marge and their new baby.

Uncle Billy is especially lonely, having lived for many years with Rose, a schizophrenic. Her eccentric clothing and behavior isolate them from others in the community. Because Uncle Billy knows that Father Tim will welcome them, they "crash" his dinner party and enjoy the food and conversation. For once, Rose behaves: she does not disparage Uncle Billy or comment unfavorably on the food or guests.

Another recurring theme is the revelation of secret lives. Placid on the surface, Mitford is a setting for hidden conflicts.

For instance, Miss Sadie Baxter notices that Olivia Davenport resembles a photograph of her mother. Later, Louella confides to Father Tim that Sadie Baxter's mother had a child out of wedlock, who later became Olivia's mother. Unaware of their kinship, Miss Sadie is Olivia's great aunt. Although the relationship seems implausible, Karon creates suspense with hints that Miss Sadie's mother had something to hide.

Miss Sadie tells Father Tim why she never married Willard Porter, who was Miss Rose's brother. As a teenager, he angered her father with his reckless driving. Later, as a successful inventor of patent medicines, Porter built the Victorian mansion across from the town square in hopes of marrying Miss Sadie, but she would not defy her father. An argument between Porter and Baxter resulted in the fire that burned the original Lord's Chapel. Preacher Absalom Greer, Baxter's employee, also courted Miss Sadie, but she was in love with Willard Porter and would not marry him.

Consequently, Willard, Sadie, and Greer have lived solitary lives.

Cynthia Coppersmith's Violet, the Cat series for children has won many awards.

She has escaped memories of an unhappy marriage by moving to Mitford. No one knows of her past except Father Tim.



Dooley, Emma, and Puny watch with delight as Father Tim's and Cynthia's "secret" love affair blossoms. Because of past experiences, Cynthia and Father Tim are unable to trust their intuitive attraction for each other.

Olivia Davenport has come to Mitford to die. In confidence, she tells Father Tim of her terminal heart disease and of her resolve to live every moment as fully as possible. She calls on the sick at the hospital and reads to them. There, she meets Dr. "Hoppy" Harper, who falls in love with her. Father Tim knows the anguish his friend has experienced over his first wife's death, so he counsels Olivia not to encourage Harper's courtship. Eventually, her secret is revealed, and Dr. Harper arranges a heart transplant operation in Boston.

Another theme is religious faith. Father Tim relies on prayer and scripture to guide him in every aspect of his life. He prays with the sick, the lonely, and with those who seek direction for their lives.

Most of his prayers are answered.

Father Tim discovers Pete Jamison, a stranger in a business suit, kneeling at the altar of Our Lord's Chapel. The stranger looks up and shouts, "Are you up there?"

Father Tim answers, "The question isn't are you up there, God? It's are you down here?" Jamison confesses that his life is poisoned by hatred so strong that he wants to kill someone. He does not believe God can forgive his sins. Father Tim tells him that old sins will be like dead leaves falling away when he invites Christ into his life. Together they pray, "Thank you, God, for loving me, for sending your Son to die for my sins. I sincerely repent of my sins and receive Christ as my personal savior. Now, as your child, I turn my life over to you. Amen." Feeling spiritually renewed, Pete Jamison promises to keep in touch with Father Tim. In the church attic, the jewel thief overhears Jamison's confession and prayer and is later motivated to do the same.

In spite of such successes, Father Tim doubts his own effectiveness as a priest.

His lack of energy and bland sermons make him seek guidance from Stuart Cullen, his bishop, Preacher Greer, and Dr. Harper. All recommend a vacation, but Father Tim postpones it. For awhile, he diets and exercises faithfully, but a busy schedule interferes. Finally, he discovers how frail his body is when he nearly dies during a diabetic coma. At the end of the book, he takes a vacation to Ireland with his cousin Walter and his wife.

# Style

## Point of View

At Home in Mitford by Jan Karon is written in the third person. This is helpful to the reader, as it gives insight into the thoughts and feelings of the characters in the novel. This is especially important regarding the main character, Father Tim. One of the main focuses of the novel is Father Tim questioning his abilities as the leader of his parish. Throughout the novel, the reader is able to understand the actions of Father Tim, and the reasons behind them. The reader is also privy to the feelings of Father Tim. As the rector struggles through a year in Mitford, the reader is able to understand how Tim is able to grow and overcome the inner battle to better himself.

The novel has quite a bit of dialogue that gives the reader a clearer picture of the people that live in the small town of Mitford. Interspersed fairly equally are many descriptive passages that allow the reader to picture the town that is central to the novel, as well as to further understand the characters that create the rich backdrop to the novel.

## Setting

The novel is set in the town of Mitford, North Carolina. With the exception of a few trips outside the town limits, everything takes place in the town. Father Tim is the rector at Lord's Chapel, the Episcopal Church in Mitford. Quite a bit of the novel takes place in the rectory, where Tim lives with Barnabas and Dooley, as well as the church office.

The Main Street Grill is also a central location to the novel, as most of the townspeople meet at The Grill each morning for coffee and gossip. Most of the town news flows through The Grill, and though JC Hogan runs the small newspaper, most people will find out the news of the town at the Grill long before it is printed.

Fernbank is the family home of Miss Sadie Baxter. Father Tim travels to Fernbank on several occasions, and it is here that the priest learns the history of the small town, as well as the fate of the old Lord's Chapel.

The town of Mitford is small, but the community is strong, and the reader is able to visualize the town and the people that live there through the descriptive passages that the author uses to bring them to life.

## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is easy to read, and moves the book along at a fairly steady pace. The people of Mitford are simple and easy going, and the writing of the novel reflects this. The dialogue reflects the different people in the town culturally. Father Tim



and his friends and colleagues tend to speak more formally, while the local townspeople tend to speak less formally, in a dialect that may reflect their education and status.

The dialogue that is used helps the reader to understand and to differentiate between the many characters of the book, as well as to give the reader a sense of the diversity of the town.

The author uses long descriptive passages that move the novel along as a quick pace. The story takes place over about a year. At some points the time passes slowly, at other times several months can pass in a few pages. The narrative passages serve to guide the reader through the time as it passes, so that one is aware of what has happened at any given time.

## Structure

The novel is broken into twenty-four, titled chapters, that vary in length from anywhere between ten and twenty pages. The titles of the chapters give the reader insight into the focus of that chapter. The chapters tend to have equal portions of dialogue and descriptive passages, which move the novel along at a fairly quick pace.

The main focus of the novel is Father Tim's struggle with his calling as the rector of Lord's Chapel. At the outset of the novel, Tim writes to his bishop, Stuart Cullen requesting either a leave or transfer, unsure if he is capable of ministering to his flock. Stuart requests that Tim stay in Mitford, and change the way he lives and looks at things. Though there are quite a few changes in the rector's life, Tim does not really make an effort to change himself.

There are a few subplots, one of which is the relationship between Cynthia and Father Tim. Tim has been a single man his entire life with the exception of eleven months in his youth. Tim had broken off his relationship at that point in order to devote himself to God. At the age of sixty, Tim is unsure if he can change enough to welcome another person into his life.

Another subplot is the storyline that follows the boy Dooley, that comes to live with Father Tim. The rector has spent much of his time alone, and perhaps lonely. In a relative short period of time, his life becomes full, not only with his ministry, but with Dooley, Barnabas, and Cynthia.



## Quotes

"Emma gave him her handkerchief, which was heavily scented with My Sin. 'That wasn't a dog,' she said with disgust, 'that was a Buick!'" Chapter 1, Barnabas, pg. 2

"This could be perilous. He remembered two or three other gifts to the church that had caused the widest consternation. One was a mounted moose head, said by the donor to be one of God's creatures, after all, and therefore fit for the parish house wall, if not the nave." Chapter 2, A Dubious Gift, pg. 19

"'You need house help,' Emma had told him, again and again. But then he was often told that he needed one thing or another: a cat, a bird, a gazebo, earmuffs, English garden tools, a word processor, a vacation, a bicycle, a wife, and, until Barnabas, a dog. Several people had even made the unwelcome suggestion that he get a microwave."  
Chapter 3, Company Stew, pg. 46

"'Got you a new neighbor comin' in next door,' Mule Skinner said at breakfast. 'Be in there in th' fall sometime.'  
'Terrific.'  
'Pretty nice lookin!.'  
'What does he do?'  
'It's a she.'  
'Aha.'  
'You remember ol' Joe Whattsiname lived there, that was her uncle, the ol' Scrooge.'  
'Percy's outdone himself on these poached eggs.'  
'Blonde, blue eyes,' said Mule, looking at the rector. 'Real nice legs.'  
'Who? Percy?'"  
'Your new neighbor.'  
Chapter 5, The Big Six-O, pg 61

"The boy came and stood on the sidewalk, staring at the rector. Now that he could see him up close, Father Tim was surprised by a certain look in his eyes, a look that make him appear older than his years.  
'Ain't this a church place?' the boy asked skeptically.  
'Why yes, it's a church office.'  
'I cain't come in, then, I ain't washed.'  
'You don't have to wash to come in.'  
'You aint lyin', I reckon, bein' a preacher an' all.'  
'No. No, I'm not lying.'  
The boy bounded up the single step and through the door, searching the room with a quick gaze. 'You got any place in here where I can take a dump?'"  
Chapter 6, Dooley, pg. 81

"On Tuesday, he walked with Dooley up Main Street, crossed over Wisteria Lane, and turned right toward the school.



'I'd rather be dead,' Dooley said grimly.

'Aha.'

'Laid out in a casket.'

'Is that right?'

'With worms crawlin' on me.'

'I don't know why. I always liked school.'

'You was a sissy, is why.'"

Chapter 8, Golden Days, pg. 101

"Suddenly, he knew it just as sure as he was sitting there. He'd buried the remains of the double-dealing Parrish Guthrie in the church rhododendron bed. "

Chapter 11, A White Thanksgiving, pg 171

"The old man was weak and spoke with his eyes closed.

'Dooley, are you behavin' yourself?'

'Nope.'

'Don't shame me, boy. You hear?'

'All right, Granpaw, I won't.'"

Before he left, Dooley took his grandfather's hand. 'Grandpaw,' he said. 'don't die!'

'Russell Jacks opened his eyes and looked at his grandson with a faint smile. 'All right, boy, I won't.'"

Chapter 12, An Empty Vessel, pg 185

"Well, Olivia, all I can say to that is: Philippians four-thirteen.'

She laughed easily. 'I love when you talk like that!'"

Chapter 13, Issues of the Heart, pg 202

"Dooley sat on the side of the bed, sobbing. His whole body seemed given to grief, frustration, and rage.

My heart, thought the rector, feeling it wrench with sorrow. I have never had so many sensations of the heart in one short span of time. He sat down beside Dooley Barlowe and held him. He held him tightly, as if to say, Hang on, hang on. I won't let go. "

Chapter 16, A Sure Reward, pg 258

"As they walked up the broken flagstones in the dar, he took Cynthia's arm and whispered: 'You might be careful of the refreshments.'

She laughed with delight. He knew instinctively that she considered this a grand adventure. How exciting, after all, to go where one must be careful of the refreshments."

Chapter 17, A Surprising Question, pg 284

"At first," she said, quietly, 'I was hurt that you didn't answer right away. But I think I've come to understand you better just recently, and I feel good about what you're saying. Yet, there's something in me that says, you fool, you've been pushy and presumptuous, he doesn't care for you any more than all the other people he's so lovely to, and you'll frighten him off if you don't back away, and then...and then the path through the hedge

will grow over..."  
Chapter 24, In New Life, pg 408



# Adaptations

Karon has stated that film rights to the Mitford series are pending.



## Key Questions

Karon wrote *At Home in Mitford* after she had a vision of Father Timothy and began to follow him in her imagination.

The story is told through the mind and heart of Father Tim, whose placid life is suddenly interrupted by a big dog, a ten-year-old boy, a progressive case of diabetes, and a desirable woman. Putting his own problems aside, he counsels the elderly and handicapped, leads two strangers to Christ, and discovers that even though life in Mitford continues as usual, he has changed. He takes a trip to Ireland to make a decision about his relationship with Cynthia and his future as a vicar.

1. Compare and contrast Father Tim's appearance and personality to pastors at your own church. How realistic is Karon's portrayal of the rector of Our Lord's Chapel?
2. Which segments of Mitford's population does Karon not include in her book? Why would she exclude certain groups?
3. Small towns often have eccentrics like Miss Sadie, Miss Rose, and Homeless Hobbes. Mayor Cunningham's campaign slogan is "Mitford takes care of its own!"

Which institutions in the novel's community take care of the elderly, the mentally ill, the homeless, or children like Dooley?

Are there similar ones in your community?

4. The Owens and Cunninghams are typical, middle-aged married couples.

Most of the other characters are single, divorced, or widowed. How are their lives different?

5. Father Tim's spiritual power is most evident when he counsels salesman Pete Jamison at the altar, and later when he baptizes jewel thief George Gaynor. Are these believable events? How do they display Father Tim's spirituality?
6. Discuss Miss Sadie's 1920s love affair with Willard Porter. For what reasons, other than Porter's reckless driving, could Baxter have had for blocking their marriage?
7. What is funny in the novel? Which are the most effective humorous episodes? How does the humor affect the serious events of the novel such as the baptism of Gaynor?



## Topics for Discussion

Why does Father Tim write to the bishop to ask to leave Mitford?

How does Tim change throughout the novel and why?

Which characters affect Tim the most?

How does Barnabas affect Tim? Why?

Why is Tim cautious about Cynthia?

Tim is diagnosed with Diabetes. Why do the symptoms get worse? Why is Tim ignoring them?

What is the significance of the man living in the church attic? How does the man affect Tim and the people of Mitford?

## Literary Precedents

Although Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding* (1946) does not have a minister as the protagonist, her gentle satire of rural and small town life in Mississippi is similar to Karon's portrayal of Mitford with its shopkeepers, eccentric characters, secrets, and love stories.

Olive Ann Burns's *Cold Sassy Tree* (1984; see separate entry) has similarities to Karon's *At Home in Mitford*. Modern-day Mitford and early 1900s *Cold Sassy* are both small southern towns.

Burns's developing love story of lonely widower Rucker Blakeslee and his youthful, attractive employee Love Simpson is somewhat parallel to Father Tim's and Cynthia's love story. Will Tweedy, Rucker's grandson is much like Dooley.

Several British novels have similarities to Karon's Mitford series. The Church of England is an important institution in these novels, just as the American Episcopal Church is prominent in Karon's books. For example, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872) has a mid-1800s village setting, like modern Mitford, in which the lives of the characters are conflicted by tradition and change. The slow revelation of the secret lives of Bulstrode the banker and Casaubon a biblical scholar maintains suspense. As in Karon's novel, Eliot's characters include beautiful and intelligent women, vicars, doctors, businessmen, farmers, politicians, and journalists.

Dora Saint's series of books about Miss Read, a rural school teacher, and events in the British village of Fairacre are similar in tone and plot to Karon's books.

Miss Read is the first person narrator of twenty-five humorous, heart-warming books. Eccentric characters and gossip abound as Miss Read attempts to teach a roomful of children like Karon's Dooley Barlowe.

Veterinarian Hal Owen, Father Tim's connection to farm life and animals, is much like Dr. James Herriot of Darrowby, England, who relates his stories of people and their animals in *All Creatures Great and Small* (1912; see separate entry) and other books. Dr. Herriot and his wife Helen are like Hal and Marge Owen, a happily married couple who help Father Tim solve Dooley's problems.

Mystery writer Agatha Christie's Miss Marple lives in St. Mary Mead, a British village in which murder occurs with regularity. Many St. Mary Mead traditions and characters parallel those in Karon's books. According to Miss Marple, the village is a microcosm of human vices and virtues. Christie's heroine solves crimes, while Father Timothy of Mitford saves souls.

Readers might contrast Karon's gentle and humorous portrayal of Father Tim and his parishioners to Sinclair Lewis's bitter satire of a preacher and his followers in *Elmer Gantry* (1927). Lewis won fame in the early 1900s for his scathing satires of various



institutions of American life, such as business practices in the novel *Main Street* (1920; see separate entry) and with medicine and experimental research in *Arrowsmith* (1925). Elmer Gantry exposes hypocrisy in religion and ignores the possibility of sincere spiritual leadership.

## Related Titles

The series consists of four novels: *At Home in Mitford* (1994), *A Light in the Window* (1995; see separate entry), *These High Green Hills* (1996; see separate entry), and *Out to Canaan* (1997). A fifth novel is in progress.



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