

# **Back When We Were Grownups Study Guide**

**Back When We Were Grownups by Anne Tyler**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Back When We Were Grownups Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">part 1, Chapters 1 and 2.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, Chapters 3 and 4.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Part 3, Chapter 5.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Part 4, Chapters 6 and 7.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Part 5, Chapters 8 and 9.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Part 6, Chapters 10 and 11.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>



## Plot Summary

This novel tells the story of middle-aged Rebecca, suddenly discontented with her life after several years of managing a large, dysfunctional family and its business operations. As she attempts to build a new present on the foundations of an abandoned past, Rebecca discovers the value of the present moment and begins to enjoy and celebrate it.

The narrative begins with a description of a family picnic, organized by Rebecca (despite the resentment of her quirky, troubled family) to mark the engagement of her stepdaughter NoNo to a businessman named Barry. Barry's sullen teenage son Peter tries to escape, but Rebecca's attempts to bring him back into the fold end with Peter falling into a nearby river. As the members of the family (some irritated, some genuinely concerned) join forces to bring her and Peter back to the party, Rebecca realizes that her life has become something she never planned and has come to resent it instead.

Soon after, Rebecca takes a brief trip to her hometown to visit her mother and aunt. While there, she is reminded of her past relationship with, and near-engagement to, a man named Will Allenby. Idealized memories of Will entwine with Rebecca's discontent with her present situation, motivating her to search out, and get in touch, with the man whom she had once loved. At the same time, Rebecca becomes increasingly involved in the life of Peter, happily (and with grateful surprise) enjoying the friendship that's slowly growing between them. Meanwhile, she becomes increasingly resentful of the demands placed on her by her three step-daughters, an elderly relative, the Davitch family business, and her biological daughter.

After a couple of false starts, Rebecca's relationship with Will eventually progresses to the point where he invites her to his home for dinner with his volatile daughter. However, this meeting does not go well. Beatrice, the daughter, is extremely angry about how Will treated her mother (his ex-wife), and leaves after a short, bitter, and accusatory visit. Rebecca begins to sense that her ideas about Will and the possible joy he could bring into her life are somewhat illusory, but nevertheless persists, spending more time with him and eventually inviting him to meet the Davitches. The gathering to which he is invited is relatively successful, in that Will seems to get along with just about everyone, but Rebecca feels increased dissatisfaction with who he is and how their relationship has progressed. Eventually, she tells him she doesn't want to see him any more, and at yet another Davitch family gathering (this one celebrating the one hundredth birthday of an elderly relative), Rebecca realizes the value of celebrating the life she has that now includes an even closer relationship with Peter as opposed to longing for a life that she believed she wanted.



# part 1, Chapters 1 and 2

## part 1, Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

This novel tells the story of middle-aged Rebecca, suddenly discontented with her life after several years of managing a large, dysfunctional family and its business operations. As she attempts to build a new present on the foundations of an abandoned past, Rebecca discovers the value of her existing present, and begins to celebrate it.

Chapter 1 begins with a summary statement of how Davitch family matriarch Rebecca made an important discovery about herself. Rebecca makes her discovery during her struggles to enliven a dull family picnic thrown together to celebrate the sudden engagement of her step-daughter NoNo to a man named Barry, a corporate lawyer who, NoNo's sister Patch suggests, is only marrying to provide a nanny for his son Peter. Later, when Peter storms off angrily in response to a toast welcoming him to the family, Rebecca pursues him, noticing how pretty, serene and timeless the nearby river seems. Her reverie is broken by Peter falling into the river, leading Rebecca to jump in to rescue him. Soon the entire family (including Zeb, the pediatrician younger brother of Rebecca's deceased husband Joe) is in on the rescue, and both Rebecca and Peter emerge from the situation unscathed. Later, after Peter has again disappeared and Barry has gone after him, Rebecca's realization surfaces, the thought "brushing across her mind like the most delicate of moth wings."

In Chapter 2, the day after the party, Rebecca wakes from an unusual dream - of taking a train trip with her son, a son she never actually gave birth to. The dream and its associated feelings of longing and safety linger as Rebecca gets on with her day, recollections of her dream coinciding with recollections of how she came to be part of the Davitch family and of her place in that family. Narration reveals that the family owns a banquet and function hall called "The Open Arms" on the main floor of the large family home, and that the first wife of Rebecca's deceased husband Joe ran off to New York to be a singer (leaving him with three daughters). As all these recollections surface, Rebecca takes care of Poppy or the elderly widowed brother of her deceased mother-in-law and has a visit from her daughter Min Foo, pregnant with her third child with as many husbands. During the visit, Rebecca describes her dream, and accidentally triggers a short, sharp argument with Min Foo, who hurries off to a doctor's appointment and leaves her first two children, Joey and Lateesha, with Rebecca. She and the children decorate the house's banquet room for a graduation party. While they work, Rebecca describes the first party she ever attended in the house, to which she came as Joe's date and at which Joe's flighty mother spilled a glazed ham all over her (at one point in the story, she refers to Joe as the children's grandfather - see "Quotes", p. 30). When Min Foo returns and collects her children, she suggests to Rebecca that the dream might have referred to Rebecca's "dreaming how things would be if [she'd] chosen a different fork in the road." (p. 35). After sorting out an emergency with the booking for that night, Rebecca sits down to some more work, but finds herself unable to concentrate, recollecting more details of her relationship with Joe. Those



recollections lead her to again consider the woman she's unexpectedly become, and to suddenly consider the possibility of going home for a visit.

Later that afternoon, Biddy, the third of Rebecca's step-daughters and a caterer, arrives with food for the graduation party. Soon afterwards, Patch arrives, dropping off her daughter Meredith who, along with Biddy's son Dixon, helps Rebecca prepare for, and then run, the party. Before the party begins, Rebecca takes Poppy for his regular walk and their conversation reminds her of Joe. Following the successful conclusion of the party, Rebecca has her regular late-night telephone conversation with Zeb, during which she decides to go home and visit her mother, narration revealing her intention to do so on a train like the one in her dream.

## part 1, Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

These first two chapters introduce the book's protagonist, Rebecca, her inner conflicts, and her complicated outer circumstances (the unofficial matriarch of a large extended family full of strong, troubled personalities). These chapters also introduce several important (and some not so important) secondary characters, of which Peter is perhaps the most significant. Rebecca's various step-daughters, their husbands, their children, and all the other people in her life play roles of varying influence in her story, but it is her relationship with Peter that has the most impact on her eventual realizations about her life.

Other important elements introduced in this section include a few thematically significant motifs, or repeated images. The first is of the river that metaphorically represents the flow of life, a kind of inevitable movement with an unknown but unavoidable purpose / meaning. There is a strong connection here between this image and the work's central theme of loving your life as it is as mentioned above. A related motif is the imagery of the train and of journeying. Again the sense here is not only of life as a journey, but as a journey forward. As the narrative reveals in the following sections, journeys backward into the past are rarely wise or productive. Rebecca's dream (which disappears from the narrative for long sections, but which comes back with full metaphoric power later in the narrative) is another important motif. Here the author provides some interesting twists, keeping the reader guessing throughout the narrative as to who the son in the dream actually represents.

Finally, there are some important foreshadowings in this section. These include the image of Rebecca rescuing Peter, which she does again, albeit in a less literal way in Part 5. It could also be argued that this also foreshadows how her relationship with Peter metaphorically "rescues" her from the self-doubt and despair she feels about her life. Other significant foreshadowings include the reference to Rebecca's choosing at a "fork in the road," which foreshadows her attempts to go back and choose the path she didn't choose before and the reference to Poppy's one hundredth birthday party. This foreshadows the final chapter in the book, during which the party takes place and during which Rebecca has the encounters with herself and with others that trigger the final steps in her journey of transformation.



## Part 2, Chapters 3 and 4

### Part 2, Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

In Chapter 3, at home in Church Valley, Rebecca visits with her mother (quiet, faded, bad cook) and her Aunt Ida (talkative, overly colorful, a very sweet tooth), reminded the whole while not only of the differences between the two women, but of the differences between them and her. The visit awakens recollections of her sudden wedding to Joe (for which her mother and Ada sewed her dress), her mother and Ada's surprise and resentment at its speed (having known Joe for only a few weeks), and of the man she had been expected to marry, the quiet and studious Will Allenby. Rebecca's recollections of her time with Will are alternated with recollections of her time with Joe. She remembers how he made special trips to Church Valley to be with her, how he invited her into his large, boisterous family (the kind of family she'd always dreamed of being part of), and how she eventually took over the running of the family business (the Open Arms). She recalls being briefly torn between Will and Joe, but eventually realizing that Joe brought more excitement into her life than Will ever would, and that his (Joe's) courting of her was sweet and gentle enough to make her happy in ways she never thought possible. Narration describes how, on an occasion when she was leaving a party thrown by his family at which she was the guest of honor, "he closed the door so gently behind her that she thought at first it wasn't latched. But it was." Meanwhile, present day conversations with her mother and Aunt Ada remind Rebecca of how she was believed to have betrayed them, Will, and the town by doing what she did, but in spite of those recollections, she believes she changed for the better after marrying Joe. As she prepares for bed, she contemplates the overweight woman (with "the ramshackle face") she sees in the mirror. That night, she dreams of Poppy's one hundredth birthday party, at which Will Allenby is a courtly guest. She awakens in the night.

In Chapter 4, Rebecca imagines what her life might have been if she had not met, fallen in love with, and married Joe Davitch, but instead had married Will. Over the course of the chapter, as she and the Davitches prepare for NoNo's wedding to Barry, Rebecca imagines herself and Will continuing, and thriving in, their careers as academics, their quiet but full life, their son Tristram, and even their occasional difficulties. Meanwhile, on the Davitch side of her life, Rebecca navigates the attention-grabbing arrival of Tina, the biological mother of the three oldest Davitch girls. Rebecca watches, with a little jealousy, as the girls laugh and relax with Tina in ways they never did with her, even though Tina's tongue is occasionally sharp and her manner occasionally dismissive. Even so, conversation with Tina sometimes triggers unexpected truths, such as Zeb's comment (when Tina asks why he's not married) that he's waiting for Rebecca, and Rebecca's realization that Tina's right, the Davitch family is a lot to deal with. Meanwhile, Rebecca drifts further into her fantasies about Will. At one point she tracks him down, and is thrilled to discover that he still lives in Macadam, where they went to college together. While she's waiting on the phone for a clerk to find his telephone number, narration comments that "she noticed that her ceiling fan was trailing wisps of



dust as it spun - rags of dust, actual streamers of dust." On the day of NoNo's wedding, the family avoids conflict and argument, the ceremony goes smoothly, the catering (by someone other than Bidy) is well received, and Rebecca is able to relax and have a good time, at one point dancing with Zeb and at another point helping Poppy cover up an embarrassing loss of memory. That night, though, Rebecca gathers enough nerve to call the number for Will that she found, only to discover that he doesn't seem to remember her.

## Part 2, Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

In this chapter, Rebecca has a couple of important encounters with her past, both of which are related to the novel's central thematic consideration of "loving the life that is." The first is her trip home and its subsequent re-triggering of her relationship with Will Allenby, a narrative line that continues throughout the narrative as she becomes more and more enmeshed in a journey into her past that ultimately leads her nowhere - except, ironically enough, into a fuller embracing of the present and the future. The second encounter with her past is somewhat more indirect. This is the encounter she has with Tina, whose departure from the lives of Rebecca's step-daughters not only cleared the way for Rebecca's subsequent relationship with Tina's ex-husband (Joe) but also her relationships with his and Tina's three daughters. The Tina returning sequence makes Rebecca worry that the down-to-earth reality she has struggled to give the girls (Patch, Bidy, and No-No) is not as attractive as the glamorous possibilities represented by their biological mother (is this, perhaps, a common situation faced by any step-parent, or most step-parents?). Eventually, however, Rebecca comes to realize not only that she has given, and wants to continue to give, the kind of security and stability to the girls that they never have, but that both she and they have better lives because of it. In any case, both Rebecca's encounters with her past in this section lead her further on her journey of transformation, the experience that defines the work's central thematic consideration of "loving the life that is."

Meanwhile, at several points in this section (as she does throughout the narrative), the author injects important imagery into the narration that can be seen as reflecting Rebecca's state of mind. These include the comment on how Joe "closed the door so gently," Rebecca's "ramshackle face," her "ache of regret," and her feeling of "something in her chest" bleeding, and the "trailing wisps of dust." There is also the ironic name of the business Rebecca runs for the Davitch family, "The Open Arms."



## Part 3, Chapter 5

### Part 3, Chapter 5 Summary

In Chapter 5, when NoNo and Barry go on their short honeymoon, they leave Peter with Rebecca. Over a game of Scrabble, they begin to enjoy each other's company, but their game is interrupted by a telephone call from Will, who has traced Rebecca's call in order to find out what she wanted. She confesses that she'd been thinking about him a lot and wanted to say hello. They make arrangements to meet for dinner the following Monday, Rebecca immediately trying to figure out how to make herself pretty for him. Over the next couple of days, she supervises another event at The Open Arms, has a bad experience at the hairdresser's, and fusses over what she's going to wear. When Monday finally arrives, Rebecca dresses and does her makeup several hours before she is due to leave for her dinner date, and makes herself wait calmly before eventually leaving. Rather than taking the highway to Macadam, she takes the old back road she used to take, and is shocked and surprised to see how different it is. Eventually she finds the restaurant where she and Will are to meet, and is surprised at how old and frail he looks. Their conversation is awkward and stiff, even when it comes to working out what they're going to order. Will's order is plain and carefully considered while Rebecca's is impulsive and comes with an exotic sauce. Conversation between the two reveals that Joe died in a car accident shortly after Min Foo was born, that his three daughters from his first marriage were only just making friends with Rebecca at the time, and that she slipped easily into the family business. Her chatter about her and Will's past relationship, meanwhile, is cut short by his pointed comment that she broke his heart, ending their relationship so suddenly and without explanation. Her apologies and protestations that she intended to explain to him are also cut short when he accuses her of believing she can come back into his life and pick up where they left off. She protests that that's not the case, even though deep down she knows that's exactly what's happening. Embarrassed, she leaves the restaurant and drives back home, berating herself for what she's done. When she arrives, she eats a great deal.

### Part 3, Chapter 5 Analysis

There are several important points to note about this section, most of which have to do with developments (both positive and negative) in Rebecca's various relationships. First there is the conversation with Peter, during which his initial resentment of her and of her interest in him (portrayed in Chapter 1) begins to thaw and to grow, important steps along their parallel journeys of transformation towards connection and affection (those journeys climax in Part 5, when Rebecca attends Peter's Grandparents' Day at school). Then, and perhaps even more importantly, there is Rebecca's "date" with Will, the outcome of which functions on two levels as a foreshadowing of the eventual unhappy end of their renewed relationship, and as an important component of the narrative's thematic emphasis on loving the life that is.





Meanwhile, narration once again incorporates several descriptive and/or metaphoric elements that reflect and/or manifest Rebecca's internal condition, and the story she's enacting. These include the description of the road to Macadam (which can be seen as representative of her trip down the "road" of her past) and the description of the different meals she and Will order (which can be seen as representative of fundamental differences between their two lives and perspectives, differences which continue to become apparent as the narrative unfolds).

Finally, the narrative also includes important information about Rebecca's past - specifically, the details of Joe's sudden death and the circumstances that Rebecca moved into following his death. While the narrative never states so explicitly, these descriptions imply several things about Rebecca's character - principally, a powerful and defining sense of strength and compassion. These, in turn, can also be seen as anchoring her relationship with Peter but, on the other hand, as being overwhelmed by her desire to escape from the responsibilities that her compassion and strength have brought into her life. Here again, the narrative can be seen as portraying Rebecca as lacking in recognition and/or valuing of what is in the face of being drawn to what might have been, or might still be. It's important to note, meanwhile, that the narrative continues to portray Rebecca as a complex, multi-faceted character with a variety of often contradictory elements of her life to explore.



## Part 4, Chapters 6 and 7

### Part 4, Chapters 6 and 7 Summary

In Chapter 6, Min Foo's husband Hakim leaves Joey and Lateesha with Rebecca while he takes Min Foo into the hospital to have her baby. During her day with the children, Rebecca has an opportunity to reflect on how small and uninformed she thinks her life has become since her days of involvement with student activism and with academic research. Meanwhile, and after a short labor, Min Foo has a baby boy. Following a visit to the hospital to see her new grandchild, Rebecca returns home and finds a message on her answering machine from Will, which she deletes. In the few days following the birth, Rebecca deals with NoNo (fussing about how she's going to be a good mother to Peter) and LaVon (Lateesha's jazz-musician father), and goes to the library to pick up some research/reading material related to history, her major in university. She also fields several phone calls, including one from Will, in which his comments about how confusing and troubling he found his divorce lead him and Rebecca to encounter a misunderstanding that makes Rebecca hang up on him. Immediately afterwards she calls Zeb, but after their conversation ends, she realizes she feels pretty lonely. A few days later, Rebecca hosts the Davitch family official "baby welcoming party" for Abdul, Min Foo and Hakim's baby. During the party, Poppy suffers what seems to him and to Rebecca like a heart attack, and Rebecca accompanies him on the ambulance ride to the hospital. While waiting for news, she reflects on how odd it is that she, someone not even a relation, will be the person holding Poppy's hand when he dies. She learns, however, that the heart attack was just indigestion, and she and a cranky Poppy return home. There, she learns that Will has again called. Making unexpectedly curt excuses to her family, Rebecca goes to her room and calls him back, making arrangements to have him over for dinner in a couple of days.

In Chapter 7, when Rebecca tells her mother over the phone that she's going to be having dinner with Will, she (her mother) quickly becomes excited, imagining that the two former lovers will be reunited romantically. Rebecca rebuffs her, but then spends a great deal of time fussing over her outfit and making sure Poppy is out of the way (she sends him out to dinner and a movie with Zeb). On the night of the dinner, Will arrives with a large, strange looking plant. Their initial small talk is interrupted by first the arrival of a pair of landscapers, whose frank and somewhat crude conversation about women is overheard through an open window by Will and Rebecca (that is, until Rebecca closes the window). Meanwhile, the phone rings several times (but Rebecca ignores it), and shy little intimacies appear between Will and Rebecca, intimacies including Will's comment that when Rebecca first called, he was at the depths of a serious depression.

Conversation becomes even more intimate, until a string of interruptions derails the evening completely. Zeb and Poppy return early, Poppy having become frustrated and cantankerous. Then, NoNo and Peter show up, NoNo saying that it was she who had been on the phone because Peter has a question. Will Rebecca accompany him to grandparents's day at school, even though she isn't really a grandparent? She happily



says yes, while still resenting her family's interruptions. Later, as everyone is leaving, Will comments quietly to Rebecca that he remembers her wearing a long, cream-colored cloak during their time at school, and for a moment, Rebecca feels almost like "her girlhood self again."

## Part 4, Chapters 6 and 7 Analysis

Rebecca's frustrated and dissatisfied contemplations of her past go in another direction in this section, as she recalls both her student activism and her intellectual pursuits. Both sorts of contemplations, and the action she takes to revisit the latter, can be seen as paralleling and/or echoing her experience with Will. This is true not only of the dissatisfaction driving all three of these pursuits, but also of the way they eventually (in future chapters) lead to dead ends and, subsequently, to Rebecca's thematically central realization that the life that is, is the life to be celebrated.

Other important elements include developments in Rebecca's relationships with Peter and with Poppy, both of which are important steps along her journey of transformation towards acceptance and/or celebration of the life she has. In other words, both developments are foreshadowings of further developments - specifically, of Rebecca's participation in Peter's grandparents' day (Part 5) and her participation of / rejoicing in Poppy's one hundredth birthday celebration (Part 6). Meanwhile, it's interesting to note how discussions of a celebration of an elderly man nearing the end of his life (Poppy's birthday) are juxtaposed with celebrations of a new life entering the world (Min Foo's baby). The motif of celebrations appears several times throughout the narrative, not only in terms of the business of the Davitch family (hosting celebrations of all sorts in The Open Arms) but also in terms of Rebecca's determination to find as many opportunities as possible to celebrate. The irony, of course, is that while Rebecca puts so much time and energy into convincing others to celebrate, she herself feels those celebrations are empty - until, that is, her journey of transformation over the course of the narrative makes her realize how important, and ultimately honest, such celebrations are. This, in turn, is an important component of the novel's central thematic consideration, celebrating the life that is.

Meanwhile, an important image is introduced in this section that of the plant Will brings as a gift to dinner. The author introduces an image that metaphorically represents Rebecca's inner life and situation over the course of the narrative, the plant moves further and further out of the house and into the back yard, where it eventually dies. The parallel here is to Rebecca's feelings for, and beliefs about Will - as the narrative progresses, they too move further and further from the centre of her consciousness and/or intentions and eventually die.



## Part 5, Chapters 8 and 9

### Part 5, Chapters 8 and 9 Summary

In Chapter 8, Rebecca and Will spend more and more time together, remembering who they were when they were younger (as individuals and as a couple) and getting to know each other as the people they are now. They tentatively begin some slight physical intimacy, and Rebecca endures the occasional resentment of the Davitch family, who are to varying degrees bothered by her not being around as much. She also continues her research into Robert E. Lee, fends off her mother's gossipy stories about Will's wedding (to a much younger former student), and responds uncomfortably to Zeb's teasing comments (while Will is over for dinner) about how indispensable she is to the family. Meanwhile, she also attends Peter's Grandparents' Day, is genuinely excited by his complicated, musical science project, and is just as genuinely upset by NoNo's self-centered attitude towards him. A short time afterwards, Will invites her to his house for dinner and to meet his daughter Beatrice. After fussing, as usual, over what to wear, Rebecca decides on a fairly plain outfit and makes the trip to Macadam. There she is welcomed by Will into his messy, smelly apartment, has a very uncomfortable, very short dinner with him and Beatrice (in which Beatrice pointedly discusses how badly Will had behaved during his divorce from her mother), and leaves after an equally uncomfortable, suddenly romantic kiss. When she gets home, she feels heavy and "burdensome."

In Chapter 9, Will suggests that now that Rebecca has met his family, it's time for him to meet hers. Rebecca reluctantly agrees, in spite of her strong feeling that Will is only doing what he thinks he's expected to do. She invites everyone to dinner that upcoming Saturday, and in spite of some initial resistance from the girls, everyone shows up. The party turns out to be a great success, and Will is a hit with everyone, particularly. After everyone has left, Poppy insists upon bringing out a family photo album to show Will, and after going through stacks of pictures of the girls, he (Poppy) arrives at the photo he was looking for - a picture of his long dead wife Joyce. Meanwhile, Will makes pointed comments about an acquaintance of Rebecca's, discussed at dinner, whom Will doesn't evidently think much of. As Poppy goes off to bed, Rebecca realizes that the uneasy resentment she's feeling is very familiar, and tells Will she doesn't want to see him anymore. He quietly leaves, but not before commenting that Zeb is his "competition". After he's gone, Rebecca realizes how empty and used the house suddenly feels.

### Part 5, Chapters 8 and 9 Analysis

The key element of this section is the way in which Rebecca and Will simultaneously relive their past lives (as friends, as students, and as a couple) and interact with each other's present ones. There are several interesting points to note here. The first is the vivid contrast between their respective relationships with the young people in their lives - specifically, Will's frustrated relationship with the resentful Beatrice contrasted with



Rebecca's increasingly fond relationship with the increasingly vulnerable Peter. The second important point about the various interactions between past and present is how Rebecca continues to ignore the many signs that her and Will's pasts are not a strong foundation upon which to build a positive, healthy present. These signs include not only her discomfort with stories of Will's first marriage, but also her discomfort with Poppy's intense focus on his own past as represented by his attention to, and comments about, the photo album. There is the sense here that Rebecca intuitively understands the parallels between Poppy's devotion to his past and Will's relationship with his, refuses to act on that understanding (i.e. continuing to pursue the relationship), but eventually comes to a conscious realization of what that understanding suggests (i.e. that it's time to move on). This, combined with her deepening awareness of the value of her relationship with Peter, propels her further along the journey of transformation that climaxes in the following section.

At this point, it might be valuable to comment on the Rebecca/Zeb relationship, which plays an important secondary role in the narrative. There is the clear sense throughout the story that the comment Will makes here is true - specifically, that the Rebecca and Zeb relationship is a romance waiting to happen or rather that Zeb is waiting to happen. The writing around and about this relationship is subtle, but nevertheless quite clear - there is an intimacy, an openness, and a respect in the relationship between the two that seems missing from the Will/Rebecca relationship, and that she, for some reason, is unaware of. It's interesting to note that after Will's comment, Rebecca doesn't seem to have much reaction - she doesn't awaken to the possibilities of her relationship with Zeb in the same way as she's awakening to the possibilities and implications of her relationship with Peter. It's very possible that in her future, she might, but for now, it's a question that's barely posed, let alone answered.



## Part 6, Chapters 10 and 11

### Part 6, Chapters 10 and 11 Summary

In Chapter 10, in the aftermath of her breakup with Will, Rebecca becomes listless and distracted, short with potential customers, careless in the kitchen, and testy with Zeb. At the same time, she tries to continue with her studies of Robert E. Lee, claiming an old book on Lee she had ordered from the library but reading it only passingly when she discovers the cover falling apart in her hands. She also finds herself remembering her time with Joe, regretting all the things he never got to experience and reflecting how he would have been "a fine old man." Shortly before Thanksgiving, NoNo reminds her that she (Rebecca) usually hosts a Thanksgiving dinner, and Rebecca goes through the motions of inviting everyone and doing all the cooking. Before the dinner actually starts, and as the family is arriving, Rebecca deals with the complaints of two of her stepdaughters, succeeding only in angering them further. At the dinner table, Barry suggests that everyone say what they're thankful for. The family is reluctant, but Barry starts (talking about his gratitude for NoNo) and is followed by Hakim (who talks about his gratitude for Min Foo and her whole family). While he's talking, his and Min Foo's baby son begins to fuss. Rebecca takes him out into the foggy street and walks with him a while, realizing how much of an important contribution to the Davitch family she has made. She goes back to The Open Arms, her walk jaunty.

In Chapter 11, a few months later, in December, the family prepares to celebrate Poppy's one hundredth birthday. Rebecca does all the organizational work, inviting several guests outside the family (including her mother and Aunt Ida. Poppy's special day begins with his favorite breakfast (waffles and cocoa) and reminiscences about his long dead twin brother, reminiscences that make Poppy wonder whether he's lived all the years his brother never did, and to comment on how one's life is what it is. Soon the guests start arriving, but the Davitches, as usual, are all late and, also as usual, quarrelsome. Poppy opens his presents as they arrive, and is happy with all of them - except, at first, for a video tape put together by Hakim, onto which he's dubbed all the family home movies. The family gathers to watch the tape, looking at a much younger Poppy, his wife Joyce, all the girls as they grow up...and then, close to the end of the tape, an image of Rebecca. After the tape is finished, a huge birthday cake covered with candles is brought out, and with the help of Peter and another young Davitch, Poppy blows out the candles. Rebecca proposes a toast and in the silence that follows, Patch is heard to complain quite loudly about the fact. As Zeb takes a tearful Rebecca to another room, Poppy starts listing, in minute detail, all the things that have made his day special, everything from a good breakfast and to his cake having his favorite kind of icing. Rebecca, meanwhile, looks around at all the children, all the grandchildren (including Peter, who seems to be coming out of his shell), and her departing mother and aunt, and realizes, as she's looking around her and listening to Poppy, that "there were still so many happenings yet to be hoped for in her life." Meanwhile, the video tape (which has been replayed) comes close to its end, and once again the image of the



happy Rebecca appears, "merry and open and sunlit" and she sees that "she really had been having a wonderful time."

## Part 6, Chapters 10 and 11 Analysis

This section contains the book's climax, or point of highest intensity. In this case, the emotions of the climax are relatively low key, as are the dramatic elements (with the possible exception, on both counts, of Patch's nasty comments about Rebecca's toast). What does highlight and/or emphasize the climax, however, are the confrontations between what Rebecca has believed (about her past) and what she comes to realize (about her present). Specifically, she realizes not only that her past was exactly that, the past, but that what she has idealized about her past was deeply flawed and that for both those reasons she can neither go back nor bring it into the present. At the same time, as the result of her attention to / contemplation of both Peter and Poppy, she realizes there is a great deal to value about both her present and her future, and that that is, in fact, a gift given by her past - the perspective to enjoy and celebrate her present, and to look forward to her future. One other gift given by her past, a gift whose full meaning becomes fully clear in the narrative's final moments, is the gift given by her husband Joe - specifically, his comment, at the party where they first met and recalled in memory several times throughout, that he can see she's having a wonderful time. As Rebecca herself finally comes to see at the end of the work, she actually has ... that she has come to realize and accept the necessity for celebrating life as it is.

Key elements in this delicately shaped and gracefully building climax include Rebecca's walk with the baby and the imagery of the mist, a sequence that metaphorically suggests that Rebecca is, in fact, moving through a past-defined hazy mist of memory into a clearer vision of herself and her future) and the story of Poppy's birthday. Events of that day are perhaps the most important component of both the climax and Rebecca's journey of transformation overall. She comes to realize, listening to Poppy, how important it is to celebrate what one has, rather than what one has not, and also learns to not lose the capacity for celebration in longing or regret. In other words, the book's theme and the journey of its central character entwine more clearly than ever in this climactic section, and there is the sense that as Rebecca's life continues beyond the boundaries of the book's covers, she and her life will both be changed, a sense with which every narrative should leave every reader.

Finally and as often occurs throughout the narrative, the author includes imagery that suggests and illuminates the state of being of the central character. In this case, that imagery includes the tattered cover of the book (suggesting that the past isn't the solid refuge that Rebecca believed it to be, and that Rebecca's beliefs about the past are themselves falling apart) and, perhaps most importantly, the images on the videotape - specifically, the images of the happy Rebecca. Here the suggestion is that in both the past with the Davitches and the present, Rebecca is happy without really knowing or acknowledging it. This is a variation on the oft-explored idea that happiness is not found in what we long for, but in what we have.



# Characters

## Rebecca Davitch

Rebecca is the novel's central character and protagonist, a slightly overweight middle aged woman who has become the de facto matriarch of a large, complicated, extended family. Widowed at a young age with three step-daughters and a biological daughter, as well as a business to run, Rebecca has evidently worked very hard at being what she sees as a success in all her responsibilities. As the novel begins, however, she has started to feel that in spite of her best efforts, her life has become something not her own, that she is living someone else's life. In other words, and in what might be argued is the language of contemporary pop psychology, she is undergoing a mid-life crisis, a point at which adults in so-called "middle age" (the mid-late forties to the mid-fifties) look both back and ahead at their lives and wonder both what the meaning was, and what meaning remains. Her experience, it could also be argued, is if not a universal one, a very common one, with parents and grandparents of a similar age coping with pressures from both sides, pressures often coming from both the next (younger) and previous (older) generations. Here, it's interesting to note that the eventual resolution of Rebecca's crisis comes as the result of her relationships with members of both the younger and the older generations. Her interactions with the younger Peter and the (much) older Poppy help Rebecca come to the thematically central realization and acceptance of the possibility that life, whatever it has become, has elements that can, and should, be celebrated.

## Patch (Jeep), Bidy (Troy), NoNo (Barry)

Patch, Bidy and NoNo are Rebecca's stepdaughters, the children of her husband Joe's first marriage (to Tina - see below). Patch is opinionated and bossy, while Bidy is neurotic and, if the narrative's hints are to be believed, as good as anorexic. NoNo is selfish and manipulative, and all three are quite selfish and insensitive in their relationships with Rebecca. As such, they are prime contributors to Rebecca's experience of discontent in her life. Their husbands (in Troy's case, using the term loosely) are much smaller characters, but are nonetheless vividly portrayed. Jeep is a hulking football player of a decent guy, while Troy is a gay man in a relationship of affectionate, mutual convenience with Bidy. NoNo's new husband Barry is portrayed as well meaning and compassionate towards Rebecca, but perhaps a little selfish towards NoNo. Rebecca strives to maintain supportive, loving relationships with all three, as she does with Min Foo (see below), but becomes increasingly frustrated as her efforts are either manipulated, disrespected, or both.





## Min Foo (Hakim)

Min Foo is Rebecca's biological daughter, given the nickname "Min Foo" because at some point, her father (Joe) thought that she looked Asian. She is flighty, whiny and self-centered, treating her three husbands (including her most recent, Hakim) as something to be thrown away when their attractiveness becomes tarnished by reality. Rebecca has a degree or two more tolerance for Min Foo's failings than she has for her stepdaughters, but occasionally can't help speaking with tart frankness about Min Foo's foibles.

## Poppy (Joyce)

Poppy is the quite elderly uncle of Rebecca's former husband. Nearing a hundred years old (the birthday marking his centenary is the focus of the book's final chapter), his mind occasionally wanders and he is somewhat frail, but at the same time he is determined to enjoy life to its fullest and in its smallest details, even as he has occasional longings for his beloved, and long dead wife (Joyce). It is this determination that ultimately, eventually inspires Rebecca to realize the potential for happiness, and moment my moment celebration of small things, in her own life.

## Zeb

Zeb is Rebecca's brother in law. The narrative hints that he has been attracted to Rebecca ever since she first came into the Davitch family, and that his attraction to her, as well as a long-simmering affection for her, continues into the middle ages of them both. When Will, as he's leaving Rebecca's life for good, comments that Zeb will be waiting for you, the comment has a ring of truth that the reader both gets, and realizes that Rebecca DOESN'T get.

## Peter

Peter is Rebecca's teenaged step-grandson, the son of NoNo's new husband Barry. As the novel begins, Peter seems as discontented with his life and circumstances as Rebecca is with hers, although where Rebecca strives to jolly both herself and her family into loving their lives, Peter is simply unhappy. Over the course of the narrative, however, Rebecca's consistently fond, and occasionally outspoken, attentions thaw Peter's resistance to her, to the point where he even asks her to be a surrogate grandmother on his Grandparents' Day at school. The growth in Rebecca's relationship with Peter that, along with Poppy's determined happiness, helps her to realize there is, after all, much in her life worth celebrating.



## Joe Davitch

Joe was Rebecca's much loved first husband, a friendly charmer who made her feel attractive and desirable, and who made her feel (in her own words) more alive than anyone else ever had. Joe died shortly after Rebecca gave birth to their daughter, but there is the sense that he has never been far from her thoughts or her heart, even at the time of the novel, set decades after his death.

## Rebecca's Mother, Aunt Ida

These two sisters have certain similarities (an attachment to the past in general, and to Rebecca's past in particular) and a lot of differences (the outspoken Ida frequently gets into trouble with Rebecca's more straight-laced mother). They unwittingly reinforce Rebecca's unhappiness with her present by continually reminding her how happy she seemed in her past, with their particular memories of Will Allenby (see below) triggering her search for, and discovery of, him, as well as her re-imagination of their potential future.

## Will Allenby

Will was Rebecca's high school sweetheart, a man with whom she seems to have had an understanding of eventual marriage - that is, until Joe Davitch came into her life and essentially swept her off her feet. Will shared several key characteristics with Rebecca - a strong intellect, dreams of a future in the world of academia, and a desire for a quiet life. Again, all of that became irrelevant to Rebecca once she met Joe, who promised her the fuller, happier life she says she always longed for. When Rebecca goes looking for Will, she finds that she has moved far away from the dreams she once shared with him, while he has, to some degree, lived those dreams (i.e. stayed in academia) and in other ways (i.e. of a quiet domestic life) had those dreams turn sour. This is due in part, he says, to Rebecca's abrupt exit from their relationship. Rebecca's attempts to romanticize who he was, who he is, and who he could be are eventually met with disappointment, and with the end of their renewed relationship.

## Tina

Tina is Joe Davitch's first wife, and the mother of Patch, Bidy and NoNo. Tina disappeared from their lives when they were quite young, leaving for England to pursue a singing career. She returns to America (as she sometimes does) for NoNo's wedding, showering the girls with affection, gifts, and unwanted opinions that eventually turn the initially welcoming girls against her. She disappears as rapidly as she came, having also done her best to belittle Rebecca.



## Beatrice

Beatrice is Will's angry daughter, bitter about how the marriage of her parents ended, and particularly bitter about how her father treated her mother. Her attitude echoes those of Rebecca's four daughters (the three step-daughters and one biological daughter), in that she (Beatrice) is as resentful of the efforts her father has made to do to build a solid relationship as Rebecca's stepdaughters are of hers.

## Robert E. Lee

A leader of the Southern (Confederate) armies in the American Civil War, Lee was the focus of Rebecca's historical research while she was in university. The scope and effects of his military career are beyond the focus of this analysis, and indeed of the book. He is an important character simply because the book quotes one of his more famous statements on the subject of slavery, "emancipation would come about on its own, in the natural course of events". This quote is significant because it can be seen as reflecting an important aspect of the journey of transformation undertaken by the book's central character, Rebecca - see "Topics for Discussion - In what way does the quote from Robert E. Lee ..."



# Objects/Places

## Baltimore

This is the largest city in the American state of Maryland is the setting for much of the novel's action.

## The Davitch House

This is the house in which Rebecca lives, and in which the Davitch family runs its business, is frequently described in the narrative as in a constant state of disrepair. Plaster falls off the walls, curtain rods fall away from the windows they frame, and floors creak and shift.

## Church Valley

This is the small town in rural Maryland is where Rebecca grew up, and to which she returns to visit her mother and aunt. Her trip is both a literal and metaphorical representation of her desire to return to her past in the wake of her discovery that she is unhappy about her present.

## Rivers

Throughout the narrative, the constant motion and relative tranquility of flowing rivers metaphorically suggests to the reader that there is a flow to life, a gentle relentlessness or inevitability, that Rebecca is resisting. By the end of the narrative, however, she has embraced where the particular flow of her experiences has taken her.

## The Telephone

Throughout the narrative, Rebecca is constantly speaking on the telephone, primarily to clients of The Open Arms, but also to her family, and most importantly to Will. In a novel rich with metaphoric representations of aspects of Rebecca's life, her near-constant telephone activity can be seen as representing the constant pull away from herself that she experiences because of the needs of her insecure family and of the business. It's significant to note that at key points in the narrative, when Rebecca is finally focusing on what she wants and by attempting to meet her needs, she consistently ignores the repeated ringing of the telephone.



## Macadam

Macadam is the small university town where Will lives and works, and where he and Rebecca both went to university. Rebecca travels there to visit him on a couple of different occasions, and is surprised on her first trip by how different the road in has become. This aspect of her physical journey can be seen as representing an aspect of her inner journey. It shows her growing awareness of how different her past is from what she remembers it being and what she wants it to be.

## Rebecca's Toasts

Narration describes how, at every possible Davitch family gathering, Rebecca composes a rhyming toast to the occasion and to the family. Narration also describes how the family, particularly her insecure daughters, resent the toasts, but put up with them. There is a significant irony about these toasts, in that they are made in celebration of various events in the Davitch family life, but Rebecca herself has, over the years, felt a lack of desire to celebrate, and as the novel begins, comes to in fact resent the family. By the end of the narrative, however, she comes to realize that there really is something to genuinely celebrate about her life, and resolves to do so.

## Will's Plant

When he arrives to have dinner with Rebecca at the Davitch home, Will brings with him a large, strange-looking, never-identified potted plant. Over the following chapters, and as Rebecca distances herself further and further from Will, the plant is moved further and further from the interior of the home. The final reference to the plant is in Chapter 11, at which point it is referred to almost in passing as being both dead and out on the back porch. This is another of the book's metaphoric representations of an aspect of Rebecca's life. As her interest in Will dies, so does the plant.

## The Home Movies

In celebration of Poppy's one hundredth birthday, Rebecca's son-in-law Hakim puts together a videotape of old family home movies highlighting Poppy and his life with his deceased wife Joyce. At one point, the video contains a shot of a happy, relaxed Rebecca. Seeing this image, while being made aware of other aspects of her life that either make her happy or have the potential to make her happy, reminds Rebecca that it's possible to find joy in her life, and that there's a lot to be joyful about. In other words, the images on the home movies are the final step along her journey of transformation, and the novel's thematic consideration of the value of "loving the life that is."

## Rebecca's Dream

Early in the narrative, shortly after she has come to the troubling belief that she is living a life not her own, Rebecca has a dream in which she envisions herself on a train journey in the company of a son she never really had. Throughout the narrative, she relates aspects of her various experiences to aspects of the dream, realizing that she is taking herself on a real-world journey that in some ways reflects some of the aspects of her dream.



# Themes

## Loving the Life that Is

This is the narrative's central theme, as developed and manifest in the story of its central character and protagonist, Rebecca Davitch. At the beginning of the book, she realizes she is discontented with what her life has become (see "Quotes", p. 1). As the story unfolds, Rebecca struggles to turn her life into what she believes it could and/or should be, putting particular effort into reconnecting with a person and a past that she recalls as being rich with dreams and potential for fulfillment. In other words, she strives to recapture, and reconnect with, the life that was, as opposed to exploring and / or celebrating the value of the life that is. As she pursues reconnection with her past, she encounters a series of increasingly troubling disappointments, but continues her efforts in spite of mounting evidence that they are proving fruitless while, at the same time, downplaying, rejecting or resisting positive developments in her present life. Again, she blinds herself to what is while idealizing and pursuing what was. At the novel's conclusion, however, and as the result of a conjunction of varied circumstances (including encounters with people who happily celebrate the small joys and successes of life), she comes to realize that there is a great deal to be happy about in the life that is, and a great deal to celebrate (see "Quotes", p. 230). This story, and therefore this theme, is echoed in the journeys and experiences of other characters (in particular, the much younger Peter and the much older Poppy). It is simultaneously contrasted (and therefore heightened in intensity and clarity) in the lives and experiences of other characters (in particular, Rebecca's daughter and step-daughters) who seem determined to remain stuck in lives of unhappiness, resentment, and bitterness.

## Parents and Children

There is a large number of parent/child relationships in the novel, both biological and step. Protagonist Rebecca has three step-daughters, one biological daughter, several step grandchildren, and three biological grandchildren. For the most part, relationships between all three generations (parent, child, grandchild) are portrayed as being both troubled and difficult. This is true of the biological parent / child relationships (such as those between Rebecca and Min Foo, between Will and Beatrice, and between Tina and her three daughters), and also of stepparent/child relationships (such as those between Rebecca and her step-daughters, and between NoNo and her stepson Peter).

In terms of the various step-relationships, the narrative never goes into detailed explanations of how those relationships evolved over time. Nevertheless, there are indications that Rebecca's relations with her stepdaughters started with a lot of tension, and developed more tension following the death of their biological father. There is the further sense that eventually, and as the result of necessity on both sides, the relationships became relatively peaceful without becoming particularly loving or intimate - the girls needed a mother figure, and Rebecca felt it necessary to fulfill their needs.



Ultimately, though, the tensions that developed at the beginning of these relationships (and which are paralleled in several other parent/child relationships) seem to have continued into the various adulthoods of the various daughters, and into Rebecca's unhappy middle age. There is the further sense that the various parallels in unhappiness between the biological and non-biological parent/child relationships are ultimately grounded in shared issues related to the narrative's third thematic consideration, related to the dangers of expectation.

## The Dangers of Expectation

Throughout the narrative, there is the sense that both parents and children (step or otherwise) have expectations about how the other will and/or should behave - expectations that, in many cases, actually deteriorate into preconceptions that, in turn, often trigger the characters to react with impatience and disrespect. For protagonist Rebecca, these sorts of preconceptions, on BOTH sides of her relationships with all her children, are a fundamental component of the discontent with which she views her life. It's only when preconceptions break down, or are changed (such as, for example, Peter's unexpectedly affectionate connection to Rebecca, or Poppy's clear-eyed awareness of the gifts in his life) that Rebecca, and therefore the reader, comes to see and appreciate the positive values in their various parent / child relationships, and indeed in ALL their relationships.

Perhaps more importantly, however, questions of expectation fuel and define the central struggle and/or the central thematic consideration of the narrative. In many ways, the story of Rebecca and Will, in both the past and the present, is one of expectations both disappointed and realized. Rebecca clearly pursues a relationship with Will in the present because she has a certain set of expectations, while the reactions of Will and other characters (particularly Rebecca's mother) to both the history and the present of the relationship are ALSO defined by expectations - in that case, expectations being essentially destroyed. It could be argued, in fact, that the book's central thematic consideration relating to the value of celebrating what is can be seen as a comment on the value of living life WITHOUT expectations. For further consideration of this aspect of the book, see "Topics for Discussion - In what ways do you see issues of expectation ...





# Style

## Point of View

The story is recounted from the third-person and subjective point of view from the perspective of central character and protagonist, Rebecca Davitch. It is her experiences, her perceptions of and reactions to those experiences, and her transformation as a result of those experiences, that define the story and manifest the work's central theme. The reader is drawn into the story by the detailed, specific, and at times evocatively poetic ways in which the author explores Rebecca's circumstances and choices, hearing her internal questions as she asks them and becoming connected to her insights as she comes to them herself.

In terms of the work's thematic point of view, there is the very strong sense that as a whole, the work's point of view is quite clear that life is to be lived and celebrated in the present, and for what it is in the present, as opposed to defined by dreams of, and reactions to the past. The narrative dramatizes this perspective from several angles, suggesting that dwelling on a happy past, a longed-for past, or an unhappy past that ultimately leads to a troubled, discontented present. The novel takes the thematic point of view that a living actively, fully, and realistically in the present is the best way to live if not happily, at least with a degree of peace.

## Setting

In general terms, the novel is set in the present day, in a large urban American city (Baltimore, Maryland). Within those broad strokes of setting, there are several smaller components of setting that play significant roles in the narrative. These include the house in which Rebecca lives and works and the neighborhood in which the house is placed, which is portrayed as being, in many ways, as rundown as the house itself, and on the verge of becoming a really bad neighborhood.

There are also several occasions throughout the story when Rebecca leaves her home environment and travels to other, smaller communities - specifically, the community where she grew up and the community where she went to university. In this context, it's clear to see that these two elements of setting are connected to the novel's core thematic and narrative elements - specifically, the work's exploration of how searching through the past can lead to even deeper discontentment than that which lead to the search in the first place. In general, the settings through which Rebecca moves (i.e. the physical, external world) are reflective, to one degree or another, of her inner, emotional, mental, and spiritual states. In other words, setting functions on the same level as many of the other images in the work as a metaphoric reflection of what the central character is experiencing.



## Language and Meaning

As has been discussed several times throughout this analysis, the author frequently uses language and imagery to reflect and illuminate elements of the story - specifically, elements of Rebecca's journey of transformation. Language used in these circumstances and with these intentions tends towards the poetic, portraying Rebecca and her experiences in ways that suggest or imply what she's thinking, feeling or becoming, rather than stating those things outright. For the most part, though, language used throughout the narrative is relatively straightforward and direct, creating clear vivid pictures of character, place, situation and relationship. Differences between characters are developed with particular effectiveness - the contrast between Tina and Rebecca, the biological and non-biological mothers of Patch, Bidy and NoNo (who are themselves vividly contrasted) is especially effective. There is also very effective use of language in the various descriptions of setting and place. The word pictures of the decrepit Davitch house and of Will's cluttered, neglected home in Macadam are strong and clear. While the story flow is slow with less action, the events that do occur are given weight and richness through the author's portrayal.

## Structure

On one level, the novel's structure can be perceived as being essentially straightforward. In traditional storytelling fashion, the events of the story move from cause to effect, from action to reaction, through tactic against obstacle with increasing stakes, to a point of climax. There are occasional diversions into Rebecca's memory, but for the most part the story moves in a straightforward, linear fashion.

On another level, however, the question of structure can be considered from a different perspective specifically, that of the narrative's opening line. The phrase "once upon a time" clearly evokes traditional fairy tales, those magical narratives in which a central character (so often a young woman) in a particularly difficult circumstance struggles to find true happiness. It could be argued, in fact, that many of the events and circumstances encountered and/or experienced by Rebecca echo those of a variety of fairy tales. She goes on physical and inner journeys, as do the central characters in many such stories where she awakens from a metaphorical sleep in the same way as a few fairy tale princesses awaken from literal sleep, and she has an encounter with a so-called Prince Charming or a man she believes to be Prince Charming. The encounter does not have a so-called fairy tale ending, which is one of the intriguing ways in which the narrative puts a twist on traditional fairy tale structure, but then the narrative returns to that structure, giving the central character the long desired happy ending.



## Quotes

"Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person" (Chapter 1, p. 1).

"It could have been a hundred years ago. The line of dark trees on the opposite shore would have looked the same; she'd have heard the same soft, curly lapping close by, the same rushing sound farther off" (Chapter 1, p. 8).

"It felt peculiar to refer to Joe as a grandpa. He had died before he turned forty. In Rebecca's mind he was forever young and handsome, and when she tried to imagine how he would have aged she had to guess from how Zeb had aged ... although Zeb lacked Joe's expansive manner and his grace" (Chapter 2, p. 30).

"This struck Rebecca as so apt, and so immediately obvious where it hadn't been before, that she stopped short" (Chapter 2, p. 35).

"Wasn't it strange how certain moments, now and then - certain turning points in a life - contained the curled and waiting seeds of everything that would follow" (Chapter 2, p. 38).

"She loved these children, every last one of them. They had added more to her life than she could have imagined. But sometimes it was very tiring to have to speak in her grandma voice" (Chapter 2, p. 47).

"Rebecca had laughed, and Joe had sat back and watched her with a fond, considering smile that made her wonder, suddenly, whether they already knew each other from some earlier time in her life that she had simply forgotten" (Chapter 3, p. 65).

"It had occurred to [Rebecca], often, that the way to win your family's worshipful devotion was to abandon them. Look at how Tina's daughters clustered around her! The men acted bashful and smitten...distance was the key, here: the distant, alluring mystery woman whose edges had not been worn dully by the constant minor abrasions of daily contact" (Chapter 4, p. 85).

"... she thought what a clean, simple life she would have led if it weren't for love" (Chapter 4, p. 91).

"...nothing in this family ever flowed from start to finish without interruption. Their lives were a kind of crazy quilt of unrelated incidents - always some other family to consider, some strangers getting married or retired or promote. (Even her own wedding had taken place at an earlier hour than she'd wanted because of an anniversary party scheduled for that night)" (Chapter 4, p. 105).

"She had never aimed for the emaciated look; it wasn't that. In fact, some part of her had always wanted softness and abundance - the Aunt Ida look. (Which may have been why she had slipped off every diet she'd ever attempted: the first pounds she lost



invariably seemed to come from her cheeks, and her face would turn prim and prunish like her mother's" (Chapter 5, p. 121).

"When she hung the blue dress in its place, a wistful, sweet, lilac cent drifted from its folds. But she supposed it was just the smell of aged fabric. It couldn't be Amy's engagement party, after all these years" (Chapter 5, p. 122).

"I've never understood this country's phobia about boredom. Why should we be constantly diverted and entertained? I prefer to sink into my life, even into the tedious parts. Sometimes I like to sit and just stare into space. I don't require newness just for newness' sake" (Chapter 5, p. 130).

"It made Rebecca see, at long last, that this really was Will Allenby - a lanky, big-eared giraffe of a boy who never had quite learned how to manage his own limbs. Those were his startling blue eyes ... and his wide, sharp shoulders, and his boxy Adam's apple bobbing in his neck. Looking at him was like looking at changeable taffeta - back and forth between the generic old man and the specific young Will. Which made it all the worse that he sounded so bitter" (Chapter 5, p. 133).

"Look,' she told the children. 'He's saying "Who are you? What kind of people have I ended up with, here? How am I going to like living on this planet"' She hoped they didn't notice the ridiculous break in her voice" (Chapter 6, p. 140).

"The torn feeling seemed to have grown more pronounced, spreading its ragged edges deep inside her" (Chapter 6, p. 152).

"I can't help feeling that that woman in the cloak is who you really are, and I'm the only person who knows it. I feel that I can SEE you, in a way other people can't...he stepped forward to hug her. They clung together for maybe a minute, like people consoling each other for some loss" (Chapter 7, p. 182).

"Rebecca let herself think sometimes: might it be possible, after all, to return to that place where her life had forked and choose the other branch now? Even this late in the journey? Even after she had used up the branch she had first chosen" (Chapter 8, p. 183).

"Sometimes I hear you talk about the old days, about the way we lived our lives then and the subjects that used to interest us, and I think, Oh, yes, that was back when we were grownups" (Chapter 8, p. 186).

"Hello, Rebecca,' he would say, and back came his lopsided boyhood smile, a cloud-gray sweater he had worn in junior high, and his springy corkscrew curls the color of wild honey" (Chapter 8, p. 186).

"Sometimes Rebecca thought that the whole point of having lots of daughters was, the law of averages said at least one of them might behave right at any given time" (Chapter 9, p. 210).



"It was more than she had even thought to fantasize: her entire family, gathered in one room, hearing for the first time that somebody thought she was lovely" (Chapter 9, p. 216).

" 'Everywhere I look ... the refrigerator, the album - everybody's celebrating. We just get through drinking a toast and then you sit me down and show me pictures of other toasts, years of toasts. Even the children are drinking toasts'" (Chapter 9, p. 223).

"She felt she had been through all this before; she KNEW she had been through it: that dampening of her spirit; that tamped-down, boxed-in feeling; that sense she had in Will's presence that she was a little too loud and too brightly colored. And now she recollected that he was the one who had brought things to a halt that long ago night on the sofa" (Chapter 9, p. 225).

"She used to assume that the bereaved were actually mourning for themselves, and of course that was partly true. But what she hadn't expected was the sorrow she felt on behalf of Joe. She ached to think of all that he was missing - the various landmarks in the girls' lives and the daily pleasures and the minor family triumphs" (Chapter 10, p. 233).

"...she saw that her most valuable contribution had been her joyousness - a quality the Davitches sorely lacked. Not that she herself was joyous to begin with. NO, she had had to labor at it. She had struggled to acquire it. Timidly, she experimented with a sneaking sense of achievement. Pride, even. Why not? It didn't seem all that misplaced" (Chapter 10, p. 245).

"I see you've been having a wonderful time"

"Face it," I said. 'There is no true life. Your true life is the one you end up with, whatever it may be. You just do the best you can with what you've got,' I said" (Chapter 11, p. 250).

"Then September 1966, and who was this? A heavysset young woman standing in front of a picnic table, wearing a silly miniskirt that exposed her broad thighs. Her face was large and shiny. Rebecca felt embarrassed for her; she seemed like such an interloper, so presumptuous, beaming straight at the camera while other, more entitled people...wrapped leftovers in waxed paper" (Chapter 11, p. 263).

"On the screen, Rebecca's face appeared, merry and open and sunlit, and she saw that she really had been having a wonderful time" (Chapter 11, p. 272).



## Topics for Discussion

What role do family celebrations play in your life? What events does your family celebrate? How do you react to those celebrations? What do those celebrations mean to you?

In Chapters 3 and 4, the author includes several images and phrases that metaphorically evoke Rebecca's state of mind. Discuss how each of these quotes reflects Rebecca's experience and/or situation.

How does your past affect your present? How do your memories and past dreams affect your reactions to, and the intentions for, your present and future?

Who in Rebecca's life do you think the boy in the dream represents? What aspect of her life does her joy in him represent?

In what way does the quote from Robert E. Lee reflect and/or illuminate both the work's thematic considerations and the journey of transformation undergone by Rebecca?

What do you think the decrepit state of the Davitch house represents and/or evokes about Rebecca's state of mind, her perspective on her situation?

In what ways do you see issues of expectation, either disappointed or realized, or both, affecting and/or manifesting in the narrative?

Do you agree or disagree with the idea that celebrating the life that is is, in some way, connected to the idea and practice of living a life without expectations? Explain your answer.