

Bettyville Study Guide

Bettyville by George Hodgman

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Plot Summary

George Hodgman details a living memoir of his life with his failing 90-something mother, Betty. George had left his hometown of Paris, Missouri, for New York City where he becomes notable in the world of publishing and editing. However, when George's mother can no longer care for herself, George returns to his hometown to care for her. During their time together, they share memories, talk about what the future holds and avoid the painful subject of George's parents' avoidance of his homosexuality. George settles into Paris, Missouri, again and endearingly calls his new location Bettyville, due to his mother's all-consuming impact on his life.

George's mother, Elizabeth Baker Hodgman, had been a lovely, vital woman in her youth and she and George come to terms with her decline every day. Betty's irascible behavior grates on George but he understands where so much of her discontent comes from; only occasionally does he give in to his frustrations and reply to her ill-tempered retorts. George understands Betty's fears and he attempts every day to make the time she has left more pleasant.

George does consider placing Betty in an assisted living facility but she adamantly opposes this life change. Betty does agree to a visit to a local facility but opposes every amenity shown. Ultimately, it is determined that Betty's needs demand more care than the facility can provide so any discussions about her leaving her own home are dropped.

Being in his childhood home reminds George of growing up and how incredibly difficult it was to be a gay boy in his hometown. The memories of bullies and not ever fitting in, especially in sports, still haunt George. He still finds it hard to believe that his parents never outwardly acknowledged his homosexuality and he is not sure if this is good or bad. By not validating him in his homosexuality, George feels that his parents never really validated him.

During the memoir, George recalls good times he had with his parents and also with his favorite relative, Mammy, his grandmother. The family owned a lumber yard and George helped out during the summers when it became evident that he would not be participating in athletics.

During his return to Paris, George encounters people from his youth and they all want to know when he is going back to his glamorous life in New York. George and his New York friends wonder the same thing, but George has recently lost his job in New York and he is editing on a freelance basis to keep some money coming in while at Betty's house.

The memoir is filled with episodes of George taking Betty to various appointments to try to maintain a sense of normalcy. They go to dinner, eat ice cream and he takes her to the beauty salon where she is always disappointed in the style results.



George makes note of some of Betty's idiosyncrasies such as mumbling when she is afraid, repeating words and phrases, and repeatedly asking him the same questions over the course of days. George notes that he has written the book while seated at a card table in Betty's house so she can see where he is all the time.

While George immerses himself in Betty's life, he speculates that she could never understand the life he has led in New York. Betty has never come to terms with the fact that George has never married, has no children, and seemingly no other security in his life.

George also writes about the love he had for his father who died several years ago. They tried to share but were never close, mostly because of the unspoken cloud of George's homosexuality which hung over their relationship. George recalls this his father had a more rebellious nature than his mother and that he loved to entertain, often breaking out into song at inopportune moments at social events.

The longer George remains with his mother, the closer they become and he is heartbroken to learn that she now has cancer in addition to the dementia. George faithfully drives the one hour each way to the hospital to visit her for days until she is able to return home.

At the close of the book, Betty is 91 years old, George remains in Paris to care for her and is unsure if he'll ever return to the life he used to know since he has spent this dedicated time in Bettyville.



Chapter 1

Summary

George Hodgman awakens in the middle of the night and realizes that he is not in his New York City apartment, but in his mother's home in Paris, Missouri. George believes that he is there for a short time only to care for his 90-year-old mother, Betty, and get her admitted to an assisted living facility. Betty's sometimes caretaker, Carol, is recovering from surgery and George has volunteered to watch over his mother. George has been sleeping in the guest room of the house which is very cluttered with old pictures, Christmas wrapping and other household items. He feels ill at ease but knows that his will be a short stay. George has been awakened by the sound of his mother moving about in the kitchen which is what she does when she can't sleep. Betty is suspicious of everything George does. She listens to his phone calls and follows him around because she does not want to leave her home and she thinks George is conspiring to make that happen.

George recalls Betty telling him about taking the street car when she worked as a young woman at an electric company in St. Louis. Betty had been attractive and vibrant and George can't help but wonder if she would have been happier if her life had turned out differently. Betty has always contended, though, that all she ever wanted was a house with a few nice things.

Betty's health has declined as she can't hear or see well and she has dementia. She has times of being very alert and able to go to her bridge club but some days is befuddled and confused and can't find her shoes. Earleen cleans Betty's house and sometimes Betty can be sharp with her but Earleen understands. The nights are the worst times for Betty, just before bed, because she knows something is happening to her mind and she can't understand it. Neither Betty nor George discuss Betty's decline because that would make it all too real.

George recalls that when he was in kindergarten, Betty would drive him to school in her convertible with the radio blasting, much to her husband's chagrin. Now, Betty has lost her driver's license because she backed the car into a ditch and she has to wait for people to take her places.

Betty always said that she was not a perfect parent but George thought she was. Although Betty could not cook and was always having accidents in the kitchen, she did try to make popcorn balls for George's school treats and they, true to Betty form, were irregular in size and shape. The effort pleased George and he told her so.

George had come to visit Betty for her birthday on what was supposed to be a two-week stay, but it has turned into two months. George had lost his job in New York and has the time to stay but he misses his friends and the life he had in the city. Betty is terrified that George will leave her and she demands that he do his freelance editing work at a card



table near her so she can feel secure in his presence. George does everything he can to make her happy like bringing her fresh fruit and taking her to the beauty salon.

George knows that Betty's days in the home she loves are coming to an end and he tries to imagine how awful it must feel to know that you are losing everything, including yourself.

Analysis

George sets up the situation for his memoir about his mother, Betty, in the first chapter. The reader understands what is going on with Betty and how George has come to be with her. George also shares thoughts and feelings that he is having about being back in his hometown after living in New York City for so many years. The memories he experiences are shared in little flashbacks so the reader can get an understanding of how Betty used to be when she was younger as opposed to how she is today. The author reverts to these flashbacks to help fill in the profiles of the people involved. This allows the reader to begin to know George and Betty and how they used to interact with each other and what their relationship was like when George was a boy. George also establishes the use of humor in his story about his mother, in part because it is his personality, and also because it helps diffuse the intensity of the situation with his mother.

George and Betty are still trying to get used to each other at this point. Betty suspects that George has come to disrupt her life and that his objective is to send her to an assisted living facility so that he can return to his life in New York. Betty is not quite sure about George's life, actually. She knows that George is a homosexual man but neither of George's parents ever mentioned the fact to him. Avoidance was key in the Hodgman household. Affection was not shared openly even when George was a small boy and as he grew, George's parents felt even more alienated from him because he did not have the same interests as other boys.

This is not to say that the Hodgmans were bad parents though. During the time that George was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, mainstream America was not comfortable talking about homosexuality. Betty and her husband were like most parents who had homosexual children; they thought George would grow out of it. Even though there was no discussion of George's inclinations, his parents tried to sway him toward more traditional male pursuits, but he was not interested. The avoidance of speaking about George's differences eventually made him feel like there was something wrong with him, which is actually not what his parents wanted. They wanted him to feel the love they had for him but they were unable to manage someone they did not understand.

In a way, it's a little heartbreaking that George's parents could not let their guards down and share openly with George. Both of his parents had characteristics that he adored. George loved it when his father would burst into song at public events and that Betty loved fashionable clothes, playing the piano and driving fast. If they could have just



gone one step further, they could have enjoyed each other without reservation. But it was a different time than it is now, 50 years later, and perhaps George's parents were progressive for their time and their geography. They just were not all that George needed to develop as a fully functioning, confident man.

Discussion Question 1

Why does George begin the book by stating the names of different towns in Missouri?

Discussion Question 2

From the tone of George's writing, what do you think George feels about being back in his mother's house in his little hometown after living in New York City for so many years?

Discussion Question 3

George uses humor in the memoir. Do you think that is appropriate for this type of story?

Vocabulary

awakened, pitch, neon, mend, disarray, shag carpet, crescent, startled, fretted, nicking, cadging, veering, schemer, inflictor, soared, jabbed, frail, crankiness, erratically, dementia, whimper, wistful, cache, nostalgic, confections, habitat, strewn, forlorn, snazzy, conventional, alternatives, grimy, martyr, forsaking, despite, battalion



Chapter 2

Summary

George recalls springtime in Missouri and George gives visual descriptions of how lovely the land is during this time of year and how the women pick flowers and hang out laundry at the first breath of fresh air after a long winter. Through the years, many tornadoes also touched down in the area and George notes that Betty never seem fazed by them. People dying and destruction were all a part of life to her.

George recalls the story of his mother's grandmother, Anna Callison, who, at the age of 85, took a train trip from Missouri to Virginia to view the excavated bones of Traveller, General Robert E. Lee's horse during the Civil War. As a girl, Anna, had given a drink of water to Traveller during the war and the trip back to Virginia was so that she could relive the memories she had of those days.

It is now August and the weather is sweltering, with no rain for two months, leaving the area looking like a desert.

George compares his life to his mother's and realizes that they have lived on two different planes. He has a very wry sense of humor and Betty is a no-nonsense type of person. George is a loner while Betty always liked being around people, especially going to parties.

As George drives Betty to her appointments or restaurants, he gives descriptions of the landscape and how it is real rural country, not the country that New Yorkers talk about on their weekend jaunts. They pass one of the lumberyards George's family used to own, now abandoned and where a meth lab was discovered a few years ago.

George and Betty arrive for dinner at the home of Jane Blades, an old friend of George's. Another dinner guest is Evie Cullers, a retired floral designer, and she and Betty bond over their shared vision problems. George declines a glass of wine because he used to be a drug addict and can't risk slipping back into that lifestyle. The dinner guests lament the slow disappearance of the elements that used to make up their town of Paris such as dress shops, florists and barber shops. After dinner, a former classmate of George's, Jamie Callis, arrives and everyone is silently cognizant of Jamie's husband's recent suicide. Betty wants to reach out to her but her reticence to connect emotionally stops her. Betty later tells George that she admires Jamie for carrying on so stoically.

Analysis

George uses beautiful imagery to launch this chapter when describing springtime. The imagery is so vibrant when he writes, "In the mornings, old women wander through wet grass, bending with dirty hands over jonquils or bursts of peonies, rising to inspect



children walking to school or hang summer clothes to air in the breeze." George paints pictures like this throughout the book so that the reader can see Missouri like he has seen it.

By describing how lush springtime can be in Missouri, the description of the current drought conditions stand in stark contrast. The author uses this technique to set up this chapter to show how the lives of everyone have changed so dramatically since they were younger. At the dinner party, the reader learns that Betty is not the only one whose health has declined. Other people have suffered illness and grief and their lives are like the dry land in the hot August sun. The economic climate of the area has also changed. Wal-Mart has replaced the local businesses. Even George's family's lumberyard sits dry and abandoned after all this time.

George continues to provide bits of dialogue between reminiscences in a style that parallels actual thought processes so that the reader feels involved, almost inside George's head. George is also able to project into Betty's head to a degree because he knows her so well. He knows that she feels the pain that the recently widowed Jane must feel. All through his life, George has known his mother to be a caring person who is particularly aware of other people's pain, yet she is not able to reach out to people to comfort them in any direct way. It is almost as if there is an invisible net around Betty. She sees and senses everything, even in her state of decline, yet something restrains her from addressing people directly. In several instances in the book, Betty regrets missed opportunities to talk to people or let them know she is sorry for their negative situations.

Betty's personality is a little hard to pin down though. She always loved to drive fast and enjoyed dressing up and going to parties but it was really painful for her when her husband sang spontaneously in public or called attention to them in any way. Perhaps Betty needed to control her environment and she knew how to manage her driving and social occasions but her husband was unpredictable and therefore a source of discomfort. Betty feels this way about George to a degree too. Betty does not understand George's lifestyle choices and would probably be shocked had she known how he was really living in New York. In a way, George and Betty are like strangers now, close but not really understanding the other as they work through this latest phase of their lives.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of George's memory about his mother's grandmother, Anna Callas, taking a trip back to Virginia to view the excavated bones of Robert E. Lee's horse, Traveller?

Discussion Question 2

Paris, Missouri, is in decline, George believes because of the entrance of Wal-Mart in the community. How does this situation compare to where you live?



Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Betty is so short-tempered with people, especially George, at this time?

Vocabulary

fret, jonquils, torrents, excavated, sharia, ditties, castoff, dubious, beckon, bric-a-brac, dillydally, bemoan, cremation, latticed, relentlessly, miffed, billowing, decanters, rivulets, temperamental, amid,



Chapter 3

Summary

George works as a freelance editor so that he can have some income even though it is not the amount he used to make in his New York job. George's work has often kept him up late at night and he compares his life now to the early mornings in New York and the extreme characters he encountered there. George is good at his job because his mother always made him do perfect work while growing up.

George's childhood had been filled with music as his mother played the piano and his father sang. They often performed together at weddings, funerals and other events.

In spite of being raised to be perfect and having much success, George knows inside that he has missed the mark many times, especially in his personal life. Now George feels as if his old patterns of mood swings and erratic behavior could take over, but, ironically, it is Betty's volatile behavior that keeps him grounded. Little things like making coffee are important to Betty because it's one of the few things she can remember how to do. Betty also enjoys going to the hair salon even though George does not appreciate how the stylist treats Betty disdainfully because of her disheveled appearance.

Betty often stands at the window looking at the beautiful pink rose bushes in the yard. The roses had come from Betty's mother's garden in Madison, Missouri, and have been tended carefully for many years. George often wonders if Betty speculates about what will happen to the roses after she's gone. George admits that he is not good about caring for things or people. His life has been a solitary one and coming home has made him look at his past and wonder why things turned out the way they have.

George recalls that Betty was always a no-nonsense person and how he was so happy at those rare times when she let out the humorous or playful part of herself.

George loses his temper one day when Betty cannot bring herself to get dressed for a beauty salon appointment at the Waikiki Salon in Columbia. He doesn't know if her resistance is planned or unintentional but her behavior is maddening. Betty is confused by his outburst and shrinks back in hurt. While Betty is getting her hair styled, George shops and buys her a University of Missouri jacket and shirt.

George's friends worry that he is not returning to his life in New York and he doesn't quite know who he is anymore. George's life has always centered on his work and now he is struggling with his new identity as Betty's caregiver. George recalls his life in New York as lonely and he always felt out of place. George left Paris as soon as he could to live in the big city and he muses that his mother could never understand the full scope of his life because he has none of the things that she had always prized such as a husband and a house.



Analysis

The author continues his use of figurative language in this chapter. For example, when he is talking about how he never feels that he measured up in New York, he says, "In a city of arrogant wristwatches, I have rarely been able to keep a Timex running right." Clearly, a wristwatch can't be arrogant but the author gives it that human characteristic to show that the watches were more expensive than his and the people who wore them were the ones who were actually arrogant. A Timex is a fine, but basic, watch and George compares himself to this average item. This also alludes to George's discomfort about where he fits in the world and that most people are better than he is. The self deprecating humor and lack of self confidence are always top of mind for him.

The author uses a simile when he talks about seeing his mother looking out the window at her roses. "Her face in the pane is like streaks of a watercolor." This allows the reader to more clearly understand the image of what the author is seeing. Everyone can relate to seeing something reflected in glass and the dreamy qualities it takes on. George wants the reader to have this soft vision of his mother, too, in addition to the irascible ones he also portrays. It also portrays the feelings that George has about his mother's decline. She is living the last part of her life and she is not as clearly formed nor as vibrant as she once was. By giving her image in the glass "streaks of a watercolor," the reader can also understand how she is losing herself just as the colors of a watercolor fade in and out of intensity. Betty is fading and this simile describes her perfectly.

As George drives Betty to the hair salon in Columbia, he remarks on how vast the sky is and how people watch it to gauge upcoming activities. He writes, "The sky is our sea here, our object of contemplation in all its moods and shades." The author creates a metaphor in that he wants the reader to think of the sky as some people think of the sea with its changeability. He also uses personification by giving the sky human characteristics with its "moods" and abilities to affect people's lives.

George also creates a metaphor when he writes about how his father used to watch the sky and leave his car to take pictures of birds flying south. "My father used to watch, in autumn, the long scarves of lonely birds, flying, finally together, toward home." Obviously, there are no scarves made of birds but by phrasing it this way, the author gives a visual image by comparing the sight of flying birds to a scarf flying in the breeze.

Even though Betty can be really irascible and George is the recipient of her outbursts and sullen behavior, he is also fiercely protective of her. George knows perfectly well that Betty can be confused at times and dressing herself can be a challenge. On this particular morning, George has lost his patience with this behavior and he is frustrated that she is no longer the sharp woman she used to be. George feels terrible about his outburst with her and buys her some college shirts as a form of apology. The two of them are finding their way in their new personas and identities as this stage in both of their lives.



Discussion Question 1

Describe how the author uses stream of consciousness technique in his writing.

Discussion Question 2

What do the pink roses in Betty's front yard really symbolize?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the author's use of humor in this chapter and talk about your favorite example.

Vocabulary

anxious, stomping, veering, scrutinizing, lingering, blaring, celebrant, clunker, conscientious, procrastinating, coiffure, tarnished, tempest, conspirator, fitful, askance, avidly, alma mater, juttred, errant, derriere, swoon, penitentiary



Chapter 4

Summary

George returns home one day to find the garage door open and Betty standing inside agitated because he is supposed to take her to a church meeting and she cannot find her shoes. Betty complains about her feet all the time. New shoes apparently cause agony and she refuses to acknowledge that her feet have swollen and she needs a larger size. Despite George's efforts to buy her new shoes at several stores in the area, Betty insists on wearing her rundown sandals even in the winter. George humorously calls this routine the War of Shoes.

George likes to browse the historical items in the city office and he recalls his own maternal grandfather, Joseph William Baker, who opened a lumberyard in Madison, Missouri, at the end of World War I. His bride, Margaret, would eventually become George's beloved Mammy. Betty was born to Joseph and Margaret on August 4, 1922, the only girl in a family of three children also including Harry and Bill. The summer Betty was born was so hot that people slept outside just to be able to catch an occasional cool breeze. George tries to imagine his grandmother trying to keep her family comfortable in such trying conditions. George discovers that several of his mother's classmates died through the early school years from influenza but Betty does not like to talk about it. There are few people left from Betty's life because most have died and she finds it hard to talk to anyone because she doesn't have much in common with them.

The author comes back to the present and Betty is still upset that she is going to miss her church meeting because she cannot find her shoes. Ultimately, the shoes are found but Betty is too distressed and flustered to move from the kitchen table. George can only imagine her fear and anxiety, knowing that age is taking so much away from her. George is finally able to deliver Betty to her church meeting but not without a lot of flurry and anxiety for both of them.

Another fear that Betty has is falling because she remembers that when her own mother fell, it was the beginning of her demise. Betty had recalled feeling bad for both her mother and herself at the time because they were both losing independence and Betty does not want that in her life for herself or for George.

Analysis

The author lets the reader in on more of his personal history in this chapter and it begins to help flesh out the people in the story, especially Betty and her mother, Mammy. It also shows George's appreciation for his family history and that of the town. He seems almost drawn in by the past as he tries to help Betty manage the present. Perhaps he is looking for some answers or some signs that will show him how to behave, how to know what to do for his mother to ease her emotional and physical difficulties. George is



reverting to a very human practice of looking at the past because there are patterns and trends that do repeat and he needs some guideposts at this point in his life.

George has a real feeling and sense of place too. In the descriptions of all the places he has lived, he has very distinct memories and feelings about them. At the beginning of the book, he names some of the towns in Missouri with unusual names, yet the reader can sense a pride that George feels about being a part of this place. George does admit, too, that he is surprisingly happy to be back in Paris once he has settled in a little bit. Perhaps George needs a simpler place both physically and emotionally at this point in his life. Maybe George is also healing during this unexpected respite. As a recovering addict, it is best for George to be away from his life in New York and maybe psychologically he needs to know that his mother would still reprimand him if he started using drugs again. Sometimes a person can get what he or she needs without clearly identifying it. Like the Rolling Stones song says, "You can't always get what you want, but you get what you need."

George describes in detail how some parts of Betty's personality are so unnerving to him now but he, maybe unwittingly, also reveals so many things about himself. What he has shared about himself so far in the book is that he feels inadequate in most situations in his life yet the reader is learning that George is kind, patient, tender, loving, smart, tolerant and very funny. He should give himself more credit for what he is accomplishing on a day-to-day basis. It would be almost unfathomable to leave a sophisticated life in New York in exchange for a rural life in the middle of Missouri. The economic, cultural and social ramifications would be huge. George should be commended for doing the right thing and taking care of his mother in the best way he knows how.

It says so much about George's character that he can sense Betty's pain at the thought of having to leave her home that he cannot bring himself to talk to her about her living in an assisted living facility. George's feelings about the comfort and importance of home come through and he wants his mother to be as comfortable as possible as long as possible. The theme of family and taking care of family members is so critical throughout the book. George does not bemoan his circumstances at all; he is happy that he can help his mother at this time. Not all people are this magnanimous especially when it comes to older people and George should be recognized for caring for his mother out of a sense of love and not just a sense of duty.

Discussion Question 1

Betty gets very upset when she cannot find her old sandals. Why are they so important to her? What do they represent other than protection for her feet?

Discussion Question 2

George attempts to soothe Betty when she is anxious and distressed. Discuss some of the ways that George has of calming his mother.



Discussion Question 3

What is George's purpose of interjecting the scene with the Amish girls?

Vocabulary

dissatisfaction, trembling, desperation, quizzically, tallies, litigious, humanitarian, injunction, ingest, confines, giantess, wistful, arbor, imbecile, parched, languid, contemplate, expenditures, adversaries, tentatively, fray, Amish



Chapter 5

Summary

George recalls childhood visits to the Rexall drug store which was owned by Lennox Bryant and his eccentric wife, Nadine, a registered nurse who served as the town's physician. George's father used to enjoy Nadine's antics and the visits were always fun-filled.

George recalls nights with his father when Betty was away and his father would tell him about his service in the South Pacific during World War II. George and his parents moved to Paris from Madison when George was 13 years old. George's father worked at the family lumberyard but fancied himself to be a bohemian, painting and sketching in his spare time. George recalls that his father had an even temperament which was in contrast to the more highly anxious traits of George and Betty.

George's father was encouraged by Betty to teach George to fish and his father's good-natured ways helped take the edge off an anxious situation. On the fishing excursion, as in every time George and his father traveled in the car together, George's father talked to him about life and his wishes that George have a good childhood. George's father also sang in the car and soon settled George in on the bank of the lake to fish. George was really uncomfortable with such a disgusting event but his father encouraged him, but eventually it was agreed that George was not going to be a sportsman. Instead of fishing, George and his father went to the movies to see Barbra Streisand in *Funny Girl* and George's father enjoyed it but discouraged George from being so taken with the film.

George's father grew up as a privileged child in St. Louis. His father was a successful attorney and his mother loved to entertain. George's paternal grandmother, Granny, loved to sing like George's father did and the family was much more boisterous than his mother's family was. Betty always felt a bit out of place around her husband's family and watched her mother-in-law to pick up social and entertaining skills.

George recalls buying his father a yellow scarf for Christmas one year, thinking that it would remind his father of his time spent flying planes in the war. George's father dismissed the scarf, saying yellow was an effeminate color even though George did not think so.

Analysis

It is interesting to note how George writes his memoir in that he transitions from activity in the present to flashbacks to the past consistently throughout the book. This gives the reader not only facts about George's childhood but also provides some insight into why he thinks and behaves the way he does today. Flashbacks are an effective technique of providing background information in an interesting way as opposed to a linear story



which tells events in progression. Flashbacks provide dimension to the story by filling in the lines of the people's personalities in interesting anecdotes.

In this chapter, George's relationship with his father begins to reveal itself and George's homosexuality begins to emerge. George's parents wanted George to take part in what were usually thought to be masculine activities like fishing and baseball, but George had no interest. George's father was broad-minded enough to go to the Barbra Streisand movie with George but cut George off from talking about the movie because it seemed too effeminate to him. George recalls that his father had always told him that he could talk to him about anything but George never felt like he really could and so he did not.

George and his father seemed to be on parallel lines for all of George's life; they were in the same family and loved each other but their paths never really intersected. It is as if each of them was doing his best to do what he thought was expected for his role but they can only go so far until they would no longer be true to themselves. George's father loved George but he could not fully condone George's love for movie musicals and poetry, while George loved his father but could not like fishing and baseball. It is tragic that their conversations about themselves and how they saw each other were so thwarted. George's father was a product of his environment and the times he lived in when homosexuality was not as public as it is now and it was considered to be a flaw or an embarrassment to have a gay son. Throughout their lives together, George and his father could never fully engage with each other, leading them into lives of secrecy and disappointment which could have been avoided if circumstances and attitudes been altered.

Discussion Question 1

Where are George's parents so intent on George's father taking George fishing? Why is fishing so important at this point in time?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways did George try to be like his father? Is he successful?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think George's father meant when he told George he could always talk to him about anything?

Vocabulary

ascension, eccentricity, pastoral, lewd, rudimentary, swaggered, capricious, tentatively, shrewd, devastating, sparse, armoire, effeminate



Chapter 6

Summary

Betty is inspecting her pieces of valuable glassware displayed in the house and cautions George never to break a set of glass figurines of two Chinese children. Thinking that they are precious, George later learns that his father had bought them for only \$20 on a trip to Chicago once.

One day while Earleen is cleaning Betty's house, she tells George that she thinks the world of Betty and would do anything for her, especially if George decides to leave. George is uncomfortable with the conversation and changes the subject.

George's cousin, Lucinda, invites George and Betty to a benefit dinner for The Missouri Review and Betty embarrasses both George and Lucinda by making loud and inappropriate statements about the speaker's clothing. Despite her irritation at the event, Betty manages to maintain until she and George are in the car on the way home. The hours leading up to bedtime are always difficult for Betty and tonight is no different. She rails about the speaker, the dinner, George's driving and other elements of the evening. This exaggeration of anxiety is called sundowner's syndrome which worsens dementia symptoms in the evening. George finally settles Betty for sleep but in the morning Betty is up early puzzling over stacks of papers and unpaid bills.

George's friends surface and share their opinions about how he should be caring for Betty. They feel he needs to get professional help for her so that he can return to his life in New York. George even imagines that his deceased father and grandmother are joining in the imaginary conversation about what is best for Betty. George questions his friends' pleas that he return to his work in New York but he is having second thoughts about returning to a life where you work all day and all night for a company that can terminate you without hesitation.

When George works late into the night, sometimes he takes a break by driving up to the hill that overlooks Paris and he thinks about all the people living below and their problems and hopes. There is a large incidence of cancer in the area attributed to pesticide use in the 1950s and 1960s. Meth labs have also sprung up in abandoned buildings and in Columbia, there is talk of young women being abducted and forced into white slavery. George notes that the people in Paris are not sophisticated but they are kind and it is this kindness that sustains him.

During one of George's midnight rides, he sees the boy who mows their yard sitting all alone in the dark on the hood of his car. George doesn't even know the boy's name or if he even has a family. George is curious about the boy because it has always been the wanderers of the world who want to tell him their stories. One of these people in George's life was a family friend named Wray Chowning, a single man who apparently appreciated antique furniture too much for the comfort of the community but to whom



George felt a connection. Wray had taken to drinking after the death of his father and the dissolution of the family's dry goods store left him aimless. Wray was invited to parties and family events because he was interesting and a great dinner guest. George was ultra sensitive to the way people treated Wray, especially George's father whose quiet disdain for Wray's lifestyle was alarmingly loud to George.

As a boy, George began to spend lots of time in the library wandering around looking for something but nothing he could put a name to. Eventually George came across the book, *The Gay Mystique*, in which he found information for a gay publication, *The Advocate*. George sent for a subscription and was horrified when Betty found some issues under George's mattress. Betty avoided looking at George the rest of the day and he learned what it meant to feel ashamed.

Analysis

The author interjects little snippets of conversations into the memoir to add some dimension to the writing. In this chapter, he writes, " GEORGE: "That casserole I made Saturday is much better today.' BETTY: "Maybe I'll try some more around Friday." These little glimpses of dialogue help to give dimension to the people by showing how their personalities interact. In this case, George wants the reader to understand that Betty's sense of humor is still intact at times even if she is vulnerable and anxiety-prone at others.

The author is very skilled at showing the reader the state of relationships just by intuiting things that happen. For example, when Betty tells George to be careful with the glass Chinese figurines, George assumes that they must be very valuable. It is only when George learns that George's father had purchased the figurines for Betty in Chicago and paid only \$20 for them that George realizes that the real value of the pieces lies not in their craft but in the fact that George's father had purchased them. The sentimental value reveals the nature of Betty's relationship with her husband. Betty was never very demonstrative so George finds it interesting that she should prize such relatively inexpensive objects.

George made his first physical entry into the world of homosexuality when he ordered the gay magazine. Both thrilled and disgusted, he was learning that there were other people like him in the world and that he might fit in somewhere. This is painfully ironic in that his mother makes him feel ashamed of himself in the place where he should feel most comfortable--his own home. It must have been very lonesome for George at this point in his life because he knew he was not like the other boys, yet there was no one to guide him or help him understand who he was as a person. As a person who appreciated words and writing, George went to the only place he knew--the library--where he could freely explore and try to discover what it was he was feeling and why he was not like everyone else.

It must have been both exhilarating and crushing to begin to understand yourself and then have that identify shamed by your mother, the one person from whom you should



expect unconditional love. George had no way of knowing at the time that Betty felt responsible that something was wrong with George and she was probably not shaming George as much for having the gay magazines as she was ashamed of herself for making him so different. Betty, too, is a product of her environment and the times she lived in. Homosexuality was not openly discussed in the Midwest in the 1960s and 1970s so Betty automatically assumed responsibility for George's differences and internalized her own angst. Unfortunately, George was internalizing his own inadequacies and the two were set on a vicious cycle of avoidance and shame.

George was also very intuitive as a boy and he felt some sort of connection with Wray Chowning, a homosexual man in town. George was drawn to Wray's elegant lifestyle of fine clothes, antiques and a full social calendar. Even though he was young, George intuited that even though Wray was publicly accepted overall, there was an undercurrent of disdain surrounding him. George was especially upset when his own father ridiculed Wray because of his homosexuality because that meant that George's father was also ridiculing him. This was probably George's first example of how a gay man lived his life, but instead of having someone to pattern after, George received messages that Wray was wrong so George was still in the dark about how to live his life.

Discussion Question 1

Why is George so uncomfortable with the conversation with Earleen? Isn't she just trying to be kind to him and Betty?

Discussion Question 2

What part does religion play in the community of Paris? Do you think it's any different than in any other community?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss George's fascination with Wray Chowning. Why was he such an interesting person to George?

Vocabulary

shrewdness, acquisition, coax, diligent, faux, brevity, incredulous, melancholy, engrossed, codger, fret, crazed, articulate, mastectomies, sham, implied, rendition, mulling, oblivious, loathed, ambrosia, off-kilter



Chapter 7

Summary

George does not want to be thought of as a martyr because he is giving up his life to take care of his mother. He thinks that he has had a full life and is not really interested in gay marriage although he has had several loves. George temporarily considers keeping a stray dog that has shown up at the house. The idea of connecting to another living creature is intriguing although George is not sure it is the responsible thing to do since George will not be in Paris very long.

Every day after lunch, George and Betty take a walk in the neighborhood. George is pained to see that a tree that his father had planted in their yard 40 years ago is dying from some disease. George is saddened not just for the loss of the tree, but the loss of his father who nurtured the one-time sapling into existence.

A woman Betty knows named Barbara comes to the house to discuss insurance policies. George does not like these official discussions but is glad that Barbara has a sense of humor and he has someone to talk to for a little while. Barbara reveals to George that her stepson is gay and George appreciates her honesty and her relationship with the young man. George can relate to the young man's discomfort of growing up gay in a little town like Paris.

Analysis

The issue of George's homosexuality is important again in this chapter. George mentions a failed relationship and talks to the insurance agent about her stepson. George has compassion for the woman and the young man but does not want to get too involved. Betty still refuses to address the fact that George is gay.

George is a very lyrical writer and scatters examples throughout the text. For example, he writes about all the items that are on sale at the yard sale and the reader will most surely have seen many of those same items too. This helps give the reader an instant identification with what George is seeing and experiencing. In another example, George talks about how he and Betty are messy eaters and it shows on their clothes. He writes, "During a brief snack time, I can turn a white button-down into a Jackson Pollock." George assumes that the reader will know about Jackson Pollock and his colorful, frenetic art. Obviously, George is not creating a painting when he eats, but he is comparing his messy shirt to one of Jackson Pollock's works. This makes the writing more interesting than just saying he spills a lot of food on his shirt.

It is interesting to note that the tree that George's father had planted in the front yard has started to die, almost mimicking the course that Betty is on. George can remember his father tenderly caring for the tree as a sapling and now it will be leaving just as Betty will soon be doing. The tree could be a metaphor for the life of George's family. It was



planted, nourished, and tended and now it has reached the end of its time. George is the last in the line of the family and there will be nothing new to nurture. It is a testament to George's nature that he can maintain his sense of self and his humor in a time when he is surrounded by loss.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think George was so happy to see the stray dog? What would having a dog mean for George in his life at this point?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Betty's sense of humor. Do you think she was always so wry or is this style new for her now?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think George doesn't want to dig in too deep with Barbara about her gay stepson? Is he afraid? Or maybe just weary?

Vocabulary

bespectacled, festooned, conveyance, entanglement, mischievous, yelp, maniacal, vulnerability, pilgrimage, procrastinate, prematurely, harbingers, grimaces, insignificant, disgruntled,



Chapter 8

Summary

George begins the chapter with a passage from Samuel Clemens who became the author, Mark Twain, who wrote *Tom Sawyer*. Clemens was born in Florida, Missouri, not far from George's boyhood home. George has fond memories of going to Tom Sawyer Days in Hannibal, Missouri, with his aunt and uncle in the summers.

The man who takes care of Betty's yard tells George that the boy who mows the lawn needs help because he is probably on meth. George reaches out to the boy in kindness but does not get much response.

Betty's irascibility is threatening her social life as there has been a fierce argument at her bridge game because she accused the hostess of being stingy with snacks. People do not understand that Betty cannot control her moods and sometimes resulting outbursts. One of Betty's last remaining friends, Mandy, suggests to George that he put Betty into an assisted living facility but George doesn't think he has the heart to do it, although they do have an appointment to visit one called Tiger Place in Columbia just for informational purposes.

George notes that Betty has always been interested in money and lives relatively frugally in order to keep most of what she has. Betty, her mother and brothers inherited the family's four lumberyards. George's father was never included in the business decisions even though he managed one of the lumberyards. When the lumberyard that George's father was in charge of began to lose money, and ultimately, close, the family blamed it on George's father wasting too much time laughing with customers. George's father went to work at the family lumberyard in Madison and George helped out in the summers. George recalls that his father seemed very sad having to make this change.

Analysis

George inserts a quote from Mark Twain's autobiography to break up the regular pattern he has established in this book of flashbacks and stream of consciousness writing. It somehow seems to please George, too, that Mark Twain was born in a small house not too far from his own.

It seems that George may have another stray to take in just like he is conflicted about taking in the stray dog. The boy who mows the grass clearly needs some direction and guidance in his life and it upsets George to see him around town, listlessly wasting his life and spending money on drugs. Perhaps George can recognize himself in this boy and would like to reach out to him to steer him away from the bad things George has also experienced but George is not sure he can do it because he has admitted to himself that he is not a caregiver.



In an odd way, George may be able to relate to his father's being an outcast from Betty's family. George's father was not like the people in Betty's family and they did not know how to relate to him. George's father was blamed for the demise of one of the lumberyards simply for laughing too much with the customers. It is ironic that George's father is cast out for being himself when George experiences the same thing--being ostracized for just being who he is. It is not known whether George's father ever had the insight to explore this, but it might have made a big difference in his relationship with George if he had understood that George felt isolated and tossed aside just as George's father had when he was ousted from the lumberyard.

Discussion Question 1

Compare George's style of writing to Mark Twain's. What things do they have in common? How do they differ?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think that George's father never quite fit in with Betty's family?

Discussion Question 3

Why is George so interested in the young man who mows the lawn? Why has he seemed to have captured George's attention?

Vocabulary

scrutinized, inkling, ardent, exiled, comprehensive, precipitation, preferences, cataclysm, eavesdropping, wobbly, accosting, brazen, bosomy, stricken, exiled, murky, precariously, temperament, succumbed,



Chapter 9

Summary

George relates some of Betty's physical challenges such as her skin being excruciatingly sensitive and her aversion to being touched. Betty also has bad days mentally and emotionally and she must have George in her sight at all times on those days. Sometimes George needs to leave the house and take a walk in order to regain his own sense of balance on particularly bad days.

George recalls his freshman year in high school when his parents made him try out for the football team in spite of the fact that George had no interest in it and did not even know the rules of the game. George failed miserably, even during practice, but the real pain came from the gay slurs hurled at him from a bully on the team. George remembers that it was at this point in his life that he determined that he would not cry in front of the people mocking him and has held in his tears ever since. George has turned his pain outward and relies on humor now to get him by in his interactions with people.

Betty is having a difficult day so George settles her with a stack of postcards she had written several years ago when she and her husband had gone on a trip to Europe. George remembers how Betty had been so excited for the trip and described many places they had seen and things they had done but on this day Betty cannot remember. George's parents came to New York during the holidays to see him and the Rockettes show at Radio City Music Hall. George was conflicted in that he wanted to see them but did not want to spend too much time with them because he knew they would not understand his New York lifestyle. George states that he did not talk to his parents about his homosexuality until he was 40 because he knew it was him that made their family imperfect.

George was never comfortable in school because he was so different from everyone else. Moving from Madison to Paris made him the new kid in school and that was even worse. George would manage through this by escaping into more pleasant scenarios inside his head and he continued to use humor to mask his pain. George did befriend a boy named Freddy who was also a loner and not accepted into the mainstream at school. Freddy spent a lot of time at George's house because his mother was always angry and critical. George felt himself physically attracted to Freddy but sensed that Freddy was uncomfortable with that. The friendship ended when they had to embrace in a school play and it was more real than Freddy was comfortable with.

Analysis

It is ironic that George has so much time to spend with his mother now but she has trouble conversing now or is just too irritable to try sometimes. George wonders why it was that Betty never let herself out to people, why she never was really close to



anyone. George has experienced the pain of shame and rejection in his life and he hopes that his mother never had to go through anything so emotionally trying that made her shut down. George hopes that his mother was always close to herself and that it wasn't a result of pain. Despite all his pain, or maybe because of it, George is able to be sensitive to people like his mother who are no longer the full person they used to be. It matters to George when people make fun of Betty, not only because she is his mother, but also because she is a person who is losing her sense of herself and is trying the best she can to maintain in spite of difficulties. This is especially awful for George because he knows what it is like to be ridiculed just for being yourself.

The topic of bullying comes to the forefront in this chapter too. George suffered both verbal and physical bullying when he tried to join the football team. It was painful to read George's words about how he would try to steel himself against one bully in particular. It must be very difficult to live your life trying to avoid altercations and knowing that your day would be punctuated with abuse. This would make George withdraw even more until he realized that he was funny and people laughed at him for the right reasons.

It is interesting to note that George and Freddy felt an attraction for each other but were unsure how, or if, they should proceed. Freddy's home life was much worse than George's which prompts Freddy to spend so much time at George's house. George understood that even though he was uncomfortable in his own home sometimes, Freddy's life was much worse. George bravely made himself available to Freddy but apparently Freddy was not in a position to reciprocate or simply did not know how to. Again, the cloud of shame and misunderstanding hanging over homosexuality at the time forced George and Freddy to part when theirs could have been a nice relationship.

The thread of avoidance continues in this chapter when George shares that he wanted his parents to visit him in New York but he tried to limit the time he spent with them because he did not want to have to explain his lifestyle. It is especially tragic that George did not talk about his homosexuality until much later in his life because he thought he was the one who made the family flawed. If only George could have seen that he and his parents were just human with flaws and foibles and the family's brokenness was no more his fault than it was his parents' and their resistance to fully seeing their son.

Discussion Question 1

George's parents made him try out for the football team even though he had no interest in it. Have you ever had any experiences when you were forced into doing something that did not interest you? What was the result of the experience?

Discussion Question 2

Have you ever been a victim of bullying or experienced anyone bullying someone at school? What have you done about it? What was the result?



Discussion Question 3

Why does George say that he is the one that made his family imperfect? Can you understand his point of view on that? Do you agree with it?

Vocabulary

disoriented, reluctant, wince, transparent, unsympathetic, skeptical, taunted, dismembering, rupture, transported, distraction, barge, confidante, inventive, encountered, roughhoused,



Chapter 10

Summary

George has taken Betty to visit Tiger Place, a retirement community in Columbia, and Betty is not at all happy. George understands her angst but also knows that her health could turn for the worse and he may not be capable of caring for her properly. The most George hopes to accomplish today is to get Betty added to a waiting list at Tiger Place so that they would at least have the option of taking her there to live at some point. Residents of Tiger Place must be able to care for themselves to a degree and it is possible that Betty would need too much help in order to live here. George knows that living in a home for dementia or Alzheimer's patients would kill his mother emotionally. Betty is stoic and silent during the Tiger Place tour. Betty is adamant that she does not want to live here and George knows that they may have to sell her house in order to pay Tiger Place for her residence there. This is not something Betty has considered. George considers staying in Paris for as long as Betty is still alive but also knows that his mother-the one before dementia-- would have wanted him to return to his life in New York. At the end of the visit, George registers Betty for the waiting list at Tiger Place but he does not think she will ever live there because she is failing too fast.

Analysis

Despite his thinking that he is not a good caregiver, George is exhausting every option to provide for her. His sensitivity regarding the visit to Tiger Place is almost palpable. George's kindness and love for his mother prompt him to tread carefully during the visit to the nursing home because of Betty's sensitivity. However, George must be realistic, as much as he hates formality and rules, because his mother's health is a priority to him and he simply may not be equipped to care for her properly in the near future. He tries to soothe her by promising her fresh peaches and a dinner out. It is almost as if the relationship of mother and child is reversed and George has to placate his mother as if she is a petulant child. If he could, he would stave off Betty's decline, but it is bigger than the both of them and he is trying to minimize it.

George uses humor to try to defuse a difficult situation, at least in his own mind. He states that he sees Betty sitting on the sofa waiting for the tour of Tiger place and "she glares at me as if being sold into white slavery." On the night before the visit, George hears Betty playing "Take My Life and Let It Be" on the piano, evidence of her sense of humor that surfaces. George and Betty are very much alike in that they both experience very strong feelings but they are reserved in letting them out. Their humor is something that binds them and George is pleased to see these humorous glimpses into the mother he used to know.

This chapter is also filled with a sense of melancholy because as George ponders Betty's possible move into Tiger Place, it occurs to him that selling her things and her



home will also make him homeless in a way. He wishes he could keep at least some of her things but his life has not been set up for sentimental attachments. Caring for an aging parent puts George in the place of having to live in the present to tend to her immediate needs, projecting into the future and plan as best he can, while also taking sentimental trips to the past in his mind where he visits his mother in her prime.

Discussion Question 1

How do you think Betty feels when forced to go on the tour of Tiger Place? What can you compare that to in your own life?

Discussion Question 2

List some examples of Gerorge's sensitivity to his mother related to the visit to Tiger Place.

Discussion Question 3

How does Betty's sense of humor exhibit in this chapter even though the visit to Tiger Place is a negative experience for her?

Vocabulary

sentimental, glare, assess, upswing, fascinating, contemporary, dementia, grimace, eccentricities, cloisonne, concession, endearment, interject, woebegone, segregation, glinting,



Chapter 11

Summary

George keeps a photograph of his grandmother, Mammy, by his bedside and he wishes he knew more about the young woman standing at a train station with a suitcase beside her. George never knew Mammy's husband because he died of a heart attack long before George was born. George muses that Mammy must have been an exceptional woman to have left home when she did because that was something that girls in those days--nearly a hundred years ago--just did not do.

When it came time for George to leave home to attend college in 1977, his parents drove him to Columbia. He ducked out of a fraternity rush party to go see a Barbra Streisand movie, much to Betty's horror because the son of one of her friends had extended the invitation to George. Betty did not like social embarrassments, especially this close to home. Once more, George found it difficult to fit in with the other boys because of the differences in their interests.

George attended a meeting at the Gay People's Alliance on campus hoping to meet some interesting men, but he nearly had a panic attack because he was so uncomfortable being there. A few months later, George returned for another meeting and met a man named Michael who asked George out on his first date a few months after that. They engaged in sex but George was so humiliated by Michael's callous behavior that he never saw him again.

Analysis

George continues to use literary devices in his writing. For example, when he sees Betty napping on the couch and writes, "glimpses of other women, her grandmother Anna, whose face I have seen in old photos; Bess; Nona; and perhaps others I never knew, drift across her face. The women she is from are there in her chin, cheekbones, and slender nose." Obviously these women are not moving across Betty's face as she sleeps. George uses the technique of personification which gives the glimpses human characteristics. It is touching too that George observes and really sees his mother. Many people do not like being around elderly people, even their own parents, but George is truly devoted to his mother and he is trying to capture every moment in his mind so he can remember when Betty is gone.

George continues to reveal more of his internal anguish as he attempts to live an openly gay life in a world where he does not feel accepted. It is bad enough when his own family does not validate him, but it is particularly painful for George to be treated so callously by another gay man who should be more sensitive to George's situation.

The importance of proper social interactions to Betty is especially evident in the situation where George rejects a fraternity house party invitation in favor of attending a



Barbra Streisand movie. In Betty's world, social propriety had a huge influence on a person's life and could make or break personal and business connections. It is especially horrifying to Betty that George blew off the frat party because the invitation came from the son of a friend of hers. Betty would have to address the issue of George with her friend and Betty was not in the habit of discussing George's foibles with her own husband, let alone anyone outside the family. George continued to embarrass Betty, first by his homosexuality and now by his social clumsiness.

Discussion Question 1

George seems especially drawn to Mammy and her story. Why is family history important to George? Why does he keep talking about it?

Discussion Question 2

Why did George refuse to pledge the fraternity in college? Why did Betty want him to do it so badly?

Discussion Question 3

Do you notice less humor in this chapter than in some of the other chapters? Do you think there is a reason for that?

Vocabulary

expanse, reasonable, dwarfed, potential, seizure, proprieties, anticipate, slathering, full-fledged, jaunty, contemplate, pelt, glimpsed, chinos, vulnerable, glimpse, phlegm, coerced, stoic,



Chapter 12

Summary

George learns that a young man had been killed at his house by some homeless people staying with him. George is startled to learn that the house used to be Mammy's. He also learns that someone had been operating a meth lab in the house at one time and blew a hole through the roof of the kitchen where Mammy used to bake bread.

It is early Sunday morning and George awakens to Betty practicing on the piano in the living room. She has to play at church later this morning and she audibly scolds herself for every wrong note. George notes though that when Betty is playing well, she is soft and tender and he sometimes wishes he were that piano.

After his father died, George would come back to Paris every August to visit Betty. On one visit about ten years ago, he learned from someone else that Betty had a new boyfriend, a recent widower named John Hickey. John's wife had also been a strong woman who played the piano at church so his transition to a relationship with Betty seemed completely natural. Betty felt comfortable taking charge of John, much like she had controlled George's father. Betty had taken to being a girlfriend again with splashes of perfume on her wrists and pink polish on her nails. George joined Betty and John on some of their outings and they really enjoyed being with each other.

Betty is nervous that she will make mistakes at the piano at church and George tries to calm her down, even applying some makeup on her worried face.

Analysis

This is a short, bittersweet chapter about life in Bettyville. George shows that not too long ago Betty was more spry, had a boyfriend and even considered re-marrying. Now, 10 years later, Betty struggles to remember some of the notes for hymns she plays on the piano at church. George seems to be constantly torn between memories of his mother when she was fully functioning and her condition today. It is especially poignant when he realizes how quickly her decline has occurred. What seems to remain intact for Betty though is her demand for perfection, both from herself and from others. She occasionally scolds George for gaining weight and is impatient with herself when she hits the wrong notes on the piano. George senses her impatience with her lack of perfection but all he can see is that she tries so hard. It would be nice if George felt free enough to talk to his mother in this vein but theirs is not a relationship that will allow for that.

Betty is still Betty at many times, stubborn, willful and determined but George wishes that in all the changes that are occurring in Betty that she could develop some tenderness, especially toward him. What George may not be aware of is that Betty must maintain what she knows and she must do it willfully so that it does not slip away too



soon. Betty's life is hard now and it shows in her obvious determination. Betty had always wanted what was best for George but now she has to do what is best for herself. This is essentially the circle of life when the mother must shift her focus from her child to her own needs so that she can stay who she is for as long as possible. The child is grown and vital and her work in that area is complete.

It is also interesting to note that George never resented Betty's getting a boyfriend after his father died. Many adult children don't like their deceased parent being replaced by someone else but maybe George knows that Betty needed to be reflected in the eyes of a man, even if the man in her life now is her son.

Discussion Question 1

What does playing the piano represent for Betty? Why does she get so mad at herself when she hits a wrong note?

Discussion Question 2

Are you surprised by George's reaction to the fact that Betty had a boyfriend? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Betty sometimes uses anger to disguise her fear. Have you ever found yourself behaving like that? How did things work out?

Vocabulary

wane, equilibrium, mourning, accompany, fragile, midst, formidable, contradict, assess



Chapter 13

Summary

George recalls a summer internship in Washington D.C. during college when he met a man named Eric whom he would have liked to have considered his boyfriend. Eric was gay but pretended to be straight and had a girlfriend named Binky. George and Eric had one physical encounter and then Eric retreated back into the world where he was considered straight. When George returned home after his internship, his father questioned him about his time in Washington and assured George that he would find a girlfriend soon. George did not have the heart to tell his father that he would never get married and have children.

George worked with his father at the lumberyard for the rest of the summer and his father tried to get closer to George but did not seem to know how to reach out to him.

George recalls attending the wedding of the daughter of one of Betty's friends a few years ago. George was never comfortable at weddings but he flew home from New York to accompany his mother. George remembers that Betty seemed to want to have a good time that night and that she was beautiful. George admits that he misses his Aunt June who also attended that wedding and she was one of his favorite people while she was still alive. June did make George uncomfortable, though, especially at weddings, because she always wanted to know when George was going to get married.

George talks about his Uncle Bill and how the two were almost estranged and when Bill died in a house fire, George went to the funeral only for the sake of his aunt. Betty's boyfriend, John, had been living in a nursing home and died from complications with diabetes. Betty and George were both saddened when John's dog, Bob, died not long after. George recalls that Betty seemed to have lost energy and joy after John died and thinks that maybe John meant more to Betty than George ever imagined.

Analysis

George continues to get doses of reality about what it means to be a gay man in the world. He was attracted to Eric, feelings that were mutual, but Eric could not afford to live a gay lifestyle because his parents would have never understood. This reinforces George's emotional pattern of longing and rejection, one that will continue for quite awhile. The theme of an alternate lifestyle continues to run through the book. George thought that he might have found someone with whom he could have had a meaningful relationship but Eric was living a false life, living in denial about his sexuality. Eric came from a wealthy East Coast family and appearances meant everything; having a gay son was simply not allowed. Creating the proper appearances was important to Eric who even went so far as to have a girlfriend, probably approved by his family. George runs into Eric later in the story and Eric has adopted the gay lifestyle and is also dying from



AIDS. It is especially tragic that Eric could not live the life he really wanted to for so many years but unfortunately he lived in a time and in a family environment when homosexuality was not discussed, let alone condoned. The theme of the search for love is important in this chapter because George had never really connected with another man like he did with Eric so Eric's refusal to take the relationship any further dashed George's hope for anything meaningful yet again.

In that same vein, George's father continued to talk to George about getting married and having children. It is almost as if George's father thought that if he just talked enough and presented a good argument, George would see the error of his ways and drop the whole homosexuality thing. It must have been so difficult for George to not only have to deflect these conversations with his father but also feel unworthy and unvalidated every time they came up. And it wasn't only George's father who tried to talk to George about achieving a "normal" lifestyle. Even George's favorite aunt, June, would question him about his life plans for marriage and children. By ignoring who George really was was painful and a much more receptive relationship could have developed between George and his relatives if they had only seen the true George.

The theme of aging runs through the book with Betty's decline, but George cannot help thinking about the others around him or in his family who are no longer a part of his life. Aging is a natural part of life but somehow George never connected it to his own family and it seems as if he is almost a little surprised to realize that so many people who were an important part of his childhood are no longer there. George is feeling sentimental about his aunts and uncles because they are now dead or very old and he has difficulty imagining them as young people whose lives have run out. George even mentions the deaths of John and his dog, Bob, as very sad events. Everything around George now seems to revolve around loss and he struggles to maintain balance. One loss that is not so publicly validated as a funeral is the lack of a relationship with his father yet George still mourns that.

Discussion Question 1

Why was George so uncomfortable at the wedding of Betty's friend's daughter?

Discussion Question 2

What did George's brief relationship with Eric signify in George's life? Do you think George ever got over the loss of that?

Discussion Question 3

Was George surprised at Betty's reaction to John's death? According to George, what did Betty's reaction to John's death signify?

Vocabulary

intern, craving, intellectual, grieving, SWAT, haste, elusive, aligned, commission, cues, bountiful, discharged, flammable, sanctuary, diabetic



Chapter 14

Summary

George has stocked his car with dog food and treats and heads to the dog pound to feed the stray dog who had been taken away from his house a week ago. George is trying to find an owner for the dog but the authorities need to make sure that his rightful owner will not show up and claim him. George loves the dog and would like to keep him but his future is uncertain and he doesn't feel like he can make that commitment. A friend of George's always says that people who withhold their emotions often lavish their feelings on their dogs.

When George was a senior in college, he moved into an apartment with his first real boyfriend, Steven. Steven loved to bake sourdough bread and gave loaves of it to everyone he knew. George was uncomfortable with how open Steven was with their relationship because George still felt guilty about it and thought people watched everything they did. Steven was also emotionally needy which was not at all attractive to George who had become masterful at keeping his emotions at bay. George took Steven home to meet his parents one weekend and Betty was borderline rude, probably having already determined the real nature of their relationship. George's father, however, was congenial until he came upon George and Steven in amorous activities on the couch in the family room. The next day George's father was not outgoing or angry, just kind of blank.

Analysis

George is really feeling the lack of having anything in his life and he desperately wants to claim the stray dog. All the food and toys he wants to lavish on the dog belie his underlying feelings of wanting to be wanted himself. George is trying to do the responsible thing and get the dog adopted but he can't help but want him for himself. The theme of the search for love continues and George shows that even having a dog would mean so much to him when his own personal life has been pretty lackluster for awhile. People have an innate need to love and be loved and the need must be met. Sometimes people make the wrong choices for themselves and George had done so several times in his life. But George is a very loving person and he has a right and a need to share that with another living being. Perhaps the dog would fill that need without the typical messy relationship issues.

George's relationship with Steven seemed to be one of love and hate. He loved that someone wanted him but he could not stand some of Steven's personal habits and how needy Steven was. In this chapter the reader also sees how Betty and her husband truly felt about George's being gay. Betty did not want to admit it and lashed out verbally at Steven. George's father said nothing but it was evident that something in him had changed after seeing George and Steven being intimate together. Perhaps George got



his kindness from his father who would not allow himself to hurt George or Steven. People always say that George is Betty's son but maybe he has a lot of his father in him as well.

The theme of an alternate lifestyle runs stronger now that George is older and able to make choices independent of his parents. George had made the choice to be with Steven but he did not like how Steven had some outwardly gay and showy behaviors. George did not want their relationship discussed with the postman as Steven was likely to do and George wished that Steven would dial down the homosexuality a bit while visiting George's parents. It was during a visit to his parents' home that George's father first saw George physically engaged with another man and it was probably at this moment that he knew for sure that there was no going back on their relationship; George was a homosexual and no amount of talking from his parents could change his interests and inclinations. Perhaps even bigger for George's parents was the knowledge that there would be no marriage and no children and the lives they had hoped for as grandparents were officially dead.

Discussion Question 1

Why was Betty so rude to Steven about the sourdough bread? What did the bread really represent in Betty's eyes?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Steven was emotionally needy? Or was George just too emotionally thwarted?

Discussion Question 3

What does the stray dog represent to George? Why would he buy so much food and so many toys for a dog that does not belong to him?

Vocabulary

impediment, battered, resentful, illuminating, instigating, girth, suppress, stance, tentatively, prominence



Chapter 15

Summary

George remembers being tucked into bed at night by his mother when he was young and they always prayed for people who needed help. George admired his mother's tenderness in this way and how she hated it that some people were sick or alone. George treasured these times with his mother but they stopped abruptly one night when George wanted to pray for his mother who had had eye surgery and he did not want her to hear him. Betty was hurt, left George's bedroom and the bedtime ritual never happened again.

After George finished graduate school in Boston, he moved to Brooklyn and tried to find a job to no avail. George's father wanted George to return home, but Betty wanted George to stick it out in New York because she knew how badly George wanted to work there. George went to sessions with a therapist because of his inability to get a job or a date. George speculated that he was not able to be present in the moment and it was hurting his job interviews and social interactions. Finally George landed a job at a small publishing company called Yourdon Press where they published books about system analysis. Eventually George got a better job writing pamphlets for a Wall Street firm.

George began going to a gay bar called Charlie's but soon the AIDS virus became a crisis and he did not go anymore. The disease started hitting close to home and men he knew were getting sick and dying. George started to avoid gay men altogether. George was terrified of getting sick and having his parents find out that not only was he gay but he was also dying. The disgrace would be too much for them to bear. George wrote a letter to his parents to find if he should get sick and die, telling them that he never meant to hurt them.

George visited a man named Kevin who was dying from AIDS in the hospital. Kevin was a friend of George's friend, Ned, and George got almost physically sick from the emotional and physical anguish Kevin was suffering. George's supervisor at work let his attendance slip and looked the other way when George fell asleep because he knew George was gay and the terror that haunted gay men at the time must have been overwhelming. Before long, George found out that his old lover, Steven, had the AIDS virus and George went numb thinking that it was very possible that he was sick as well. All around him, men that George knew were dying. Occasionally, George would go to Saint Patrick's cathedral to light candles for those who died and were in the process.

When the AIDS test came out, George tested negative. George also took the bus trip to Washington D.C. for the AIDS march. George contacted his former lover, Eric, who lived in Washington and the two went to view the AIDS quilt on the Mall. Eric was now living as a gay man and he and George commiserated about all the losses from the AIDS virus.



Analysis

The theme of prayer was an important factor in George's early life as he and Betty said nightly prayers when he was a boy. George was always amazed at Betty's sensitivities to other people during these prayers because she was never outgoing and seldom reached out to the people in need. Clearly prayer was important to George as a boy, maybe not so much for being heavenly missives but as a way to get closer to his mother. Betty always seemed kinder and more tender during nightly prayers and George so wanted that part of her and wished she could be more like that more often. One night after Betty had had eye surgery, George wanted to pray for her but did not want her to feel awkward about it. George's request to pray by himself that night hurt Betty's feelings and the two never prayed together again at night. Because Betty never knew how to manage emotions, she probably overreacted to the event, leaving George feeling awkward and abandoned by his mother emotionally. How different it might have been for Betty and George if Betty had not taken this perceived slight so seriously and talked to her son about his needs. As it was, both mother and son felt alienated from each other from a misunderstanding, furthering the divide between the two.

Prayer continued to be a major element in George's life when he and his friends became vulnerable to the AIDS virus in the 1980s. This is an intense chapter about the initial awareness of the AIDS virus and the impact it was having on the gay community. So many of George's friends and past lovers were succumbing to the disease that he went almost numb from terror. When George found out that his former lover, Steven, had contracted AIDS, George was terrified that he would be next. His primary fear, though, was for his parents who would have never recovered from having a gay son die in such an undistinguished manner. Again, the theme of an alternate lifestyle is prevalent as George went nearly paralyzed from fear that his parents would find out he was gay if he died from AIDS. George's parents also lived in secret terror during these times from the thought that George could get AIDS and die. The family relied on prayer but how different it would have been if there had been an open channel of communication between George and his parents. They could have comforted each other and managed through the crisis rationally instead of going silent and hoping no one found out.

When the AIDS virus first became prominent in the 1980s, little was known about how it was contracted or the course the disease would take. When the gay community started to see overwhelming cases of the disease, it brought notoriety not only to the disease but also to homosexuality in general. Everyone in the gay community was extremely vulnerable and the gay lifestyle was suddenly thrust under a microscope for the whole world to analyze. The AIDS virus struck terror not only in the physical sense but also the emotional toll it took on people and their families. It is interesting to note how George chose to view the statement at the time that Silence Kills. It was supposed to mean that not talking about AIDS led to ignorance and death, however all George recalls is the silence left in the wake of all the deaths from the virus.



It is interesting to note that even though George had conflicting feelings about his relationships with former lovers such as Eric and Steven, he still maintained contact with them. Steven even wanted to see George's parents when they came to town to show off his new doctor boyfriend. George has a hard time letting go of people, even if they have hurt him, and it is this kindness that is helping him to get through the last days with Betty.

Discussion Question 1

What do you know about the initial time of awareness of the AIDS virus? How is AIDS viewed in society today? Can you compare and contrast the times?

Discussion Question 2

Can you imagine the fear that George lived with during the early days of the AIDS epidemic? Has anything happened in your life that you could compare to such personal anguish?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Betty behave so irascibly with George's friends? Did she dislike all of them or was there some other underlying reason?

Vocabulary

therapist, embarrassing, crestfallen, abandoned, therapeutic, vices, neurosis, desperate, petition, hasty, inevitable, eccentric, jubilation, festive, extraordinary, exquisite, swindle, undulated, repression



Chapter 16

Summary

George has a Sunday off and plans to go to Columbia for coffee, read the New York Times and then later to the theater to see the movie, *The Master*. Unbeknownst to George, Betty has plans to accompany him. George does not have a good history of going to the movies with his parents after their disastrous review of *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* which they saw one Easter Sunday years ago. George knows that *The Master* is not Betty's type of film and that she really does not want to see it, she just wants to go to Columbia so she can get a Blizzard at the Dairy Queen. Just as he expected, Betty hates the movie, talking and squirming in her seat the whole time.

On the way back to Paris that night, George hits a deer on the highway. The next day, George calls the insurance agent and is proud of himself for managing through the deer crisis.

Analysis

This is a short, funny chapter about George and Betty in current day. The author needed to introduce some levity into the book after the intense former chapter filled with sadness and angst related to sickness and death from AIDS. Understandably, George could use a little time to himself and engage in some things that remind him of his own life such as getting coffee and reading the New York Times. When Betty insists on going, George is kind to her even though he probably really needed a few hours without his mother. Family is important to George and family members who really care for each other, look past their own wishes sometimes and include others. This is who George is. This is not to say that George will allow Betty to ruin his day out with her irascible behavior. George threatens Betty with not getting her Blizzard if she doesn't behave in the movie theater and the writing is so vivid that the reader can imagine being in the seat behind this mother and son. It's fun to imagine Betty still figuring out how to get her ice cream treat even though she suffers from dementia.

George admittedly is not a caregiver but he is trying so hard to be what his mother needs. When George manages through the deer strike situation, he is secretly proud of himself for taking care of something. Perhaps George is growing in maturity during this experience with his mother and that will make him feel better about himself as a person and as a son.

Discussion Question 1

Why is George so upset after hitting the deer on the highway? In what way does George relate to the deer?



Discussion Question 2

Why did George's parents not like the movie, *They Shoot Horses Don't They?* Why did they keep bringing it up for years afterward?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways does Betty show her dissatisfaction with the whole movie experience?

Vocabulary

buxom, flaunt, significant, reluctant, postponed, placated, rummage, petrified, animated, vengeful,



Chapter 17

Summary

Betty tells George that the father of the governor has written a book which states that Betty was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Betty had dated the governor's father before she knew George's father. George first learned of this when Betty received an invitation to the governor's inauguration several years ago. Betty never went to the inauguration but one time when she and George were in St. Louis, she made George take her to see the apartment building where the governor's father now lived. George tells Betty that he wishes she would have let him take her to the inauguration, that perhaps including the mention about Betty in his book was a message that the governor's father wanted to see her again. Betty said that she made a contribution to the governor's campaign and that was the end of it.

George's friend, Marci has agreed to adopt the stray dog even though George still wishes he could take it. George would name the dog Nicky if he were his. George and Marci show up at the dog pound to retrieve the dog and George is pleased when the dog runs to him. Marci lets the dog ride with George to her house so they can transfer all the dog's items in George's car.

George recalls working at Simon and Schuster, starting out as a copywriter and advancing to senior editor. A friend at work invited George to weekends at Fire Island and that began a tradition of summer escapes for several years. Parties were everywhere as were drugs and alcohol and George remembers a variety of gay men and he felt like he was in heaven. One year when George was on Fire Island, Mummy died of a stroke. She was 96.

Analysis

It seems as if in her more lucid moments, Betty is reviewing and examining her life. The story about the governor's father is probably Betty's way of wondering what her life would have been if she had married him instead of George's father. It also validates that Betty had been a beautiful woman and she likes to remember that part of her life. It is probably natural to want to return to the days when you were in your prime both physically and mentally when your own body and mind are now betraying you in their decline. In typical Betty fashion, though, she will not allow George to dwell on the ideas of what might have been when it is reality that must be managed. George is his typical kind self by indulging his mother and driving her past the apartment building where the governor's father lives so that Betty can have just a few moments of dreaming.

George's search for love continues with the stray dog. Even though George has made arrangements for a friend to adopt the dog, George still wishes he could take the dog and has even chosen a name for the dog should it ever become his. George's love for



this dog is almost palpable. Perhaps George sees that the dog has lived on the outside the circle of normal society and George can relate to being a stray with no real direction to his life either.

The author inserts a section in this chapter that is written in the second person point of view. He is giving a description of how he packed and traveled to Fire Island. As it is written, it is almost like a travel brochure advising tourists on how to make the journey to the island. This is a diversion from his first person point of view throughout the book and makes the reader wonder if he is trying to distance himself from his behavior during those times and this is how he chose to share it.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Betty did not attend the governor's inauguration? She said she was afraid of being cold, but was there a deeper reason for her not going?

Discussion Question 2

Describe George's relationship with Mammy. Why was she his favorite person in the world?

Discussion Question 3

Why does it seem that a possible relationship with the stray dog would be the most satisfying relationship George has ever had?

Vocabulary

culminating, tatters, lugubrious, radical, concede, conglomeration, scrawled, repress, indiscriminately, distinguish, aback, acquaintance, enhanced, comrades, massive



Chapter 18

Summary

George worked at Vanity Fair magazine in the 1990s. One year George was on vacation with his parents on a beach in South Carolina when he was called back to New York for an emergency at the magazine. Graydon Carter was George's boss at the time and George soaked in the attention he got from Graydon. But when something was wrong, George, like the others who worked for Graydon, were consumed with agony and the fear of complete rejection. George loved being in Graydon's good graces and reveled in the privileges associated with working on a high profile magazine. George was in constant pursuit of Graydon's approval.

When George would call home from New York, Betty would tell George that he did not sound good and George would ask about his father and Betty would say he was fine even though he was not. Both of them had a habit of not wanting to share bad news.

George recalls the camaraderie of the men on Fire Island during those summers. But drug use and HIV positive diagnoses ended the carefree times there. Now that those days are gone, George misses the freedom to be close like the relationships in those days. By the time the gatherings at Fire Island ended, George was a full blown drug addict.

George's father had collapsed from a coronary and learned that he had had two other heart attacks. The diagnosis was congestive heart failure. Betty went into denial about the state of her husband's illness and refused to consider that he was dying. George tried to reach out to his father with some important conversations but did not know what to say. George had also hoped that his father would reach out to him to tell George that he was OK but those conversations never came either.

At the same time, George's relationship with Graydon Carter had taken a turn for the worse and George did not know what he had done. Graydon was hyper critical of everything George did. George began to go out clubbing again and doing drugs to the point where he knew something would have to change. One Saturday afternoon when George was sleeping his aunt called to tell George that his father had died.

Analysis

George suffers a double emotional loss in this chapter. George had always looked up to Graydon Carter at Vanity Fair and had projected a father and son perspective to their work relationship. Graydon appreciated George's talent and George basked in being in Graydon's inner circle for awhile. Graydon seemed to validate George in ways that he never received recognition before. This type of praise coming from a male mentor figure was rare for George and no doubt he felt very special. However, the world of publishing is mercurial and relationships change quickly. When George fell out of favor with



Graydon, it was devastating to George. He had looked up to Graydon as a mentor and seemed to glow in the praise sent his way. Now that George was no longer a part of Graydon's immediate universe, George felt lost and increased his own destructive behavior. Following on the heels of this emotional loss, George's father died of congestive heart failure. George never received the words of validation he had always craved from his father and now there was no longer even the hope for it. Perhaps George hoped he could have received from Graydon the positive reinforcement he never got from his father and now the opportunities for validation from either of them were gone.

George's search for love took an almost hedonistic turn during his summers at Fire Island. Sexual relationships ruled the day and the men acted with abandon until the negative effects of drug use and AIDS ended the good times there. It was almost like Fire Island was a private sanctuary where these homosexual men could be who they really were without fear of negative views from the outside world. George instinctively knew that the Fire Island experiences, while pleasurable, were not good for him because he made a point of hiding the information from his parents. George misses the freedom of those Fire Island summers as well as the relationships he had there. Unfortunately, the drug use got out of control and the fear of AIDS became too real for the behavior to continue. George emerged from those days without having contracted the AIDS virus but he did come away addicted to drugs for which he would need treatment.

As typical for their family, George and Betty went into denial about the health of George and his father at this time. George was living a dangerous lifestyle for his health and George's father was diagnosed with congestive heart failure. George told Betty that he was fine and Betty told George that George's father was fine. None of this was true but this family has spent so many years avoiding the truth and hiding feelings that they did not know how else to behave. Perhaps this avoidance was merely a way of sheltering the other family members from hurt and bad news but they would have been much closer and been able to support each other had they told the truth about their state of their health. George had also hoped that his father would have reached out to him after his heart disease diagnosis knowing that he did not have long to live but that never came. Even nearing death, George's father could not extend to George and engage in some meaningful connections which saddened George.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Graydon Carter's opinion of George matter to much to George? Did George view Graydon as more than just a boss?

Discussion Question 2

Why did Betty go into denial about the severity of her husband's medical condition?



Discussion Question 3

Why did George tell Betty that he is fine when she called? And why did Betty say that George's father was fine when George called? Why did they not tell the truth to each other?

Vocabulary

murky, acquisitions, conchs, flattering, plummet, hermetically, subtle, treacheries, attentive, pursuits, reassuring, monogrammed, indisputably, peeved, cajoled



Chapters 19, 20 and 21

Summary

George recalls the last time he saw his father; it was at Christmas a few months before his father died. George's father had pulled his sciatic nerve while rearranging a mattress and was in considerable pain. George took him to the emergency room and sensed that his father did not want to be alone, even as long as it took to have his father's pain prescription filled. On the way home, George's father stated that it was getting to be time to die. George's father died on a Saturday afternoon in February on the work bench in his basement workshop. When George's Aunt Alice called to tell George about his father, George's first instinct was to call his drug dealer to block the pain but that somehow seemed disrespectful.

Early the next morning, George flew home to Missouri and George could feel his father's presence in their home. George's father had left two handmade gifts for George at his workbench. The first gift was a wooden cube with photographs of their home in all seasons glued on every side. The other gift was a wooden hand George's father had made by tracing his own hand and cutting out the shape with a saw. The hand was highly polished and the initials GAH carved at the bottom. The initials belonged to both George and his father. George was grateful for these silent goodbyes from his father.

George begins Chapter 21 with a list of things his mother will no longer do, among them are complain, ignore a coupon, or dispose of almost anything, including years-old margarine tubs possibly hoarded for the dispersal of emergency rations.

Back in present time, George wonders what it must be like for Betty to not have anyone from her generation around her anymore. Betty tries to keep up but times are changing so fast now and her age makes it difficult. George also learns more about dementia. While driving in the car one night, Betty asks about one of George's friends and if he ever married. When George tells Betty that the friend never married because he is a homosexual, George tells Betty that she must know that George is homosexual too. Betty states that she always thought it would pass and that George's father could never bring himself to speak of it. Betty reveals that she and George's father never spoke about George's homosexual lifestyle and George is incredulous that they never even bothered to discuss him. Betty said that George's father loved George in spite of what he turned out to be but George did not want to hear 'in spite of.' George is saddened by this separation from his parents and the fact that there was a part of him that they could never approve of, that the world and religion taught them that there was something wrong with people like George.



Analysis

George suffers the loss of his father and the loss offers George the opportunity to speak to his mother about how his parents felt about having George for a son. George is incredulous to learn that his parents never really discussed George's lifestyle. George, who has always felt invisible, now feels even more at odds with the world because his parents did not even take time to discuss him. All the years George made decisions so that his parents would not be hurt or embarrassed now seem futile to him. George is less than invisible now. It is ironic that George's father could never reach out to his son while he lived but was able to give a wooden hand to George after his death. Even though the wooden hand is less than what George wanted from his father for so many years, George will take it because it is the only gesture he has from his father and so much can be read into the gift.

At the moment that George learned of his father's death, he wanted to obliterate his feelings by doing drugs but he resisted the impulse. In some odd way, George must have felt like he should improve his life after his father died and began that very moment. This plays into the family's pattern of not dealing with their issues and going into avoidance mode but perhaps George will be the one to break the cycle of not into denial and be brave enough to confront issues head on.

George reveals deeply moving aspects of his life in this section and how he does not blame his parents for his psychological problems; they were all just a product of their times. When Betty and her husband were raising George, it was a time when homosexuality was not discussed as openly as it is today. George's parents probably thought they had done something wrong in raising him for George to be gay. The underlying current of non-communication is almost palpable in the story; George not talking about what he needed as a gay man and Betty and her husband not talking about the impact George's lifestyle had on their lives.

The theme of aging is very evident in this section. Betty's condition continues to decline and her efforts to maintain are heartbreaking. George tries to project into some of Betty's personal struggles and wonders what it must be like to not have anyone else like you around anymore. All the people from Betty's generation in the family have died and there is no one who has had the same experiences that Betty has had. This must be very frightening when the rest of the world does not know about the things that were important in your life. Betty not only feels alienated by having no one to really talk to but also by her physical and mental decline. It must be very unnerving to not be able to get a grasp on your world every day. George struggles to be the good son and not give in to his usual methods of drugs and food for comfort while tending to his his mother. This section is a great study on the human condition, the frailties and vulnerabilities everyone experiences and the overwhelming need to be loved.



Discussion Question 1

Discuss the list of things Betty will not do anymore. Why did George feel it was important to include the list?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism of the wooden hand that George's father leaves for George. Why did he make a hand and not something else?

Discussion Question 3

What are some of the signs of dementia that Betty exhibits now? Does Betty know she is losing herself? How can you tell?

Vocabulary

dire, revival, nostalgia, pallor, spry, vulnerable, instinct, reticence, sprawling, plague, legacy, diminishing, truce, circumstances, legislator, crises, dislodge, mutter, severance, retaliation, renunciation, drenched, complicated, pilgrimage, humiliating, confiscated, mediate, haltingly, reverberate, futility



Chapter 22 and Epilogue

Summary

It is Labor Day weekend and the neighbors have gone away for a family holiday but Betty and George have nowhere to go. The summer drought has finally broken and Betty stands at her window watching the rainfall. The day before, George had gone to the church and sat on the steps and prayed for peace for Betty. George recalls that all Betty has ever really said of George as an infant is that he cried and cried and she was never able to console him. George suspects that it was Betty's insecurity about being a mother and not being able to care for her child properly that made things turn out all wrong. George also believes that he was able to intuit Betty's insecurities which just perpetuated his angst.

Betty thinks she is the one to blame for who George turned out to be. George's father never did anything to assuage Betty's fears and for years she tried to make everything perfect in an attempt to over correct the situation. Betty did everything she thought she was supposed to do and now that she can't do any of it anymore, she is deeply distressed. Repeatedly George has tried to reassure Betty that he is fine but she feels her job is not complete and she does not want to leave George behind.

Betty feels as if she has spent all the time she should have been allotted to live, that she is taking up someone's else's time by continuing to live. George learns that Betty is not eligible to live at Tiger Place because she needs too much special care.

In March, Betty complained of pain in her side and George took her to the emergency room. Betty was admitted to the hospital with a blockage, probably a tumor, in the tube leading to her kidney. George drives to the hospital early each morning to be there when the doctor makes rounds. After rounds of tests, it is confirmed that Betty has lymphoma. Betty agrees to treatment and George is pleased that at the age of 91 she still chooses to fight to live.

Analysis

Betty feels that her job of raising George has not yet been completed but she also knows that she does not have much time left to help him. George learns that he was inconsolable as an infant and that ultimately Betty felt it was her fault that something was wrong with George. This way of thinking is unfortunate on two levels: George's being homosexual is not something she created and it is not wrong, it just is. How unfortunate that Betty has lived her life thinking that her child was flawed and that she created it. It did not help that George's father never countered that way of thinking. In the days when George was growing up, homosexuality was not discussed and people felt that it had to be blamed on something or someone. This has proved to be tragic for the entire family.



Prayer continues to be an important motif in the story as George goes to church to pray for his mother. George senses Betty's inner turmoil and he would like for her to know some peace in her life. Again, George's selflessness shows as he does not pray for himself and his life but for his mother who is suffering mentally and physically. George wants to lessen his mother's burden in some way and the only other route he now has is prayer.

The effects of aging continue to be revealed in this section. Betty feels as if she has lived long enough and that she is just taking up space that could be better used by a younger person. Alternately, though, Betty agrees to treating the lymphoma instead of giving in to it which shows she really is not ready to give up on her life. Betty's resilience and persistence still continue to exhibit in her life and George is pleased because he knows that this is truly his mother as he has known her.

Betty and George's story is not yet over as Betty has been diagnosed with lymphoma. George may be a little surprised but really pleased that Betty has chosen to have the treatment for the disease because it means she still wants to fight to live. In spite of all their shortcomings as a family and how they were never sure how to be with each other, George acknowledges that in the end they are just human beings doing the best they can. Everyone comes with physical DNA as well as environmental effects which factor in to who we will be as people moving through the world. In the end, George chooses to remember the kindnesses and hopes that he shows that characteristic above all others as he lives his life.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think George will do with his life after Betty dies? Where will he go? Will he stay in Paris?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think George admires most about his mother? What does Betty admire most about George?

Discussion Question 3

Does George come to terms with who he has become as a man? Why did it take coming back home again to help George on his journey back to himself?

Vocabulary

drought, wary, commentary, ignorant, dermatologist, grieve, poring, comprehending, fragments, procured, cascades, lymphoma, premonition, consciousness, submissive,



Characters

Betty

Betty is the main character of the book and the chief resident of Bettyville. Betty was born Betty Baker in Madison, Missouri. Betty was a beautiful girl but grew up relatively poor and was always concerned with money after that. Betty's family owned several lumberyards and she became one of the principals along with her mother and two brothers. Betty used to love to go to St. Louis and buy pretty clothes but her mother made her feel guilty for spending money so she always took them back, a habit that remains.

Before Betty married George's father, she had briefly dated the man who would become the father of the governor of Missouri. Betty was a beautiful young woman but a bit insecure about her looks. Betty married George's father and they moved to Springfield, Illinois, but eventually returned to Madison to be near her family. Betty felt that she was not a good mother to George because she could not calm him. Betty always wanted what was best for George and pushed him to be perfect. Betty suspects that something is wrong with George and blames herself for his imperfections.

Betty is a kind person but she does not let her feelings out, especially with George. Betty lives in denial a lot regarding George and, eventually, her husband's illness, because she would prefer not to face reality. As age and dementia take over, Betty can be caustic, sullen and downright mean but it all stems from her fear of aging and losing herself a little bit every day.

George

George Hodgman is the author of the book and Betty's son. People always called George "Betty's son" because they were alike in their mild neuroses. George and Betty could be prone to melancholy and brooding in contrast to George's father who was always bright and optimistic. George never found a place to fit in as a boy because he was different. He suffered bullying at school and the constant angst of trying to please his parents, even though he knew he could never be what they wanted him to be. George spends his life trying to gain his parents' validation of him but it never fully blossoms because they do not understand the homosexual lifestyle.

George escaped as soon as possible to a big city where he had a better chance of finding a life. George worked in publishing and excelled because of his love for words. George was always faithful to his parents, though, and invited them for visits to New York and returned to Paris to visit them regularly. When the AIDS crisis struck, George withheld talking to his parents as much because he did not want them to worry. He would rather save them the pain and humiliation of having a son die from AIDS than suffer the illness himself.



George craved his father's full love, but his father could not completely embrace who George had become. George is very good to his mother after his father dies and then again when dementia sets in for her and he returns to Paris to care for her. George is kind, tolerant, patient and loving toward his mother during times when it would be so easy not to be.

George's father

George's father was a gregarious man who made friends easily and loved to entertain, often bursting into song in public places. This behavior often embarrassed Betty who kept a lower public profile. George's father sensed early on that George was not like the other boys but encouraged him to do things boys typically did such as play football and go fishing. George had no interest in anything athletic and eventually George's father had to accept his homosexuality although he never became comfortable with it. George's father never really related to George; he loved his son but did not care for what he had become. As a long overdue gesture of reaching out, George's father left a handcrafted photo cube and a wooden hand for George prior to his death.

Mammy

Mammy was Betty's mother and George's favorite grandparent. Mammy sensed that George was different from the other boys and loved him in ways that his parents could not. Mammy's love was unconditional and he spent many joyful times with her and recalled her with much love.

Lucinda

Lucinda is George's cousin who helps George with Betty's care in Paris. Lucinda is kind and very understanding of Betty's health and accompanies George and Betty to social events and takes the emotional strain of such outings off George.

Eric

Eric was the young man with whom George had his first satisfying intimate encounter. George felt like he could love Eric and have a long term relationship but Eric lived as a straight man because his parents would never understand his homosexuality. George met Eric many years later and Eric was dying from AIDS.

Steven

Steven was George's first boyfriend and they lived together in small apartment. Steven was much more gregarious and outgoing than George and this could sometimes be



unsettling for George. Betty came to understand George's real relationship with Steven and she was rude to Steven as a result.

Earleen

Earleen is the woman who cleans Betty's house. Earleen is good hearted but can be a bit over zealous in her attempts to make life easier for Betty. Earleen is often on the receiving end of Betty's irascibility but she understands the source and lets it go.

Graydon Carter

Graydon Carter was the editor of Vanity Fair magazine. George looked up to Graydon as a mentor because he was sophisticated, well traveled and powerful. When George fell out of favor with Graydon, George felt as if he was losing the nurturing of a father.

Jane

Jane Blades is an old friend of George's and she understands George's stresses while taking care of Betty. Jane includes George and Betty in her dinner parties so they have at least a little social activity.



Symbols and Symbolism

Pink Roses

The pink roses are in Betty's yard and she stands at the window to look at them all the time. The roses came from her mother's house and they have been diligently tended so they do not perish. Even during this summer's drought, the roses are watered because of their importance in keeping the heritage of Betty's family alive. In the Epilogue of the book, George calls the roses beauty, faith, sharing, work, perseverance, memory, consolation and care.

Gin & Tonic

Betty's favorite drink is a gin and tonic and she prefers that to any other alcoholic beverage. Betty likes to calm down with a gin and tonic because it is refreshing. A gin and tonic is a classic mixed drink which may be one of the things Betty likes about it. Having a gin and tonic is Betty's daily 5 o'clock ritual.

Betty's old sandals

The bane of George's existence, Betty's old sandals are worn out and not fit for use any longer. Betty prefers to wear the old sandals because they are broken in and very comfortable, which is very welcome now because Betty's skin is very tender and easily hurt. People out in public such as Betty's hair stylist think that George is neglecting his mother by making her wear the old sandals but they don't realize that she is the one who is adamant about keeping them around. George knows that after Betty dies, the sight of those old sandals will be the saddest thing he will ever have seen.

Lisbon. Portugal. Scottsdale.

In Betty's attempts to retain her mental balance, she repeatedly asks George certain questions, the answers to which she cannot remember. The answers to the questions are Lisbon, Portugal and Scottsdale based on places that have had some significance or interest to Betty.

Wooden hand

George's father left George a wooden hand in the shape of his own hand. George's father had traced his hand and cut it out with a saw, sanded it and applied varnish to it. George found the wooden hand at his father's work bench after he died. George's father had never been able to reach out to George while he was alive and George is happy to have this memento which means that his father had been thinking about him.



Dairy Queen Blizzard

Betty loves a Dairy Queen Blizzard almost more than anything in the world. When George goes to Columbia to see a movie, she wants to come along just so she can stop at the Dairy Queen. When Betty is restless and too loud in the theater, George threatens her with not getting a Blizzard unless she calms down.

Drugs

George began to use drugs in an attempt to escape the pain in his life and eventually became a full blown addict.

Pastries

George and Betty really enjoy eating pies, doughnuts, ice cream and other sweet treats. Betty had always watched her sweets intake but now eats them with abandon. George eats now out of stress and as comfort food as a substitute for drugs.

Stray dog

George is immediately smitten with the stray dog that shows up at the house. George would like to keep the dog so he would have someone of his own but his life is unsettled and does not feel he can commit to taking care of the stray properly.

The sky

The sky is to people in Missouri what the sea is to people living by the water. The sky is watched for signs of good weather or impending distress.

Settings

Paris, Missouri

The main setting for the book is Paris, Missouri. It is the location of Betty's house and George's boyhood home.

New York City

George lived in New York City for many years during his professional career in the publishing industry.

Columbia, Missouri

George attended college in Columbia and it was the closest big city Paris where George takes Betty to hair appointments, doctors appointments, restaurants and other sites.

Madison, Missouri

Madison is Betty's hometown and also the town where George was born. When the family moved to Paris, George was bereft at leaving Madison.

Fire Island

Fire Island is located on Long Island Sound and is the place where George spent several indulgent summers with other gay men.



Themes and Motifs

Aging

An important theme in the book is that of aging. Betty's physical and mental decline show the aging process and George captures it in vivid detail. The process of aging takes its toll on Betty's physicality in that she can no longer move around as freely as she used to and she has aches and pains that limit her abilities every day. Betty is frustrated that her body is betraying her more and more each day but she keeps trying and George feels she is remarkable for her determination. George also surprises himself by being able to help take care of many of Betty's physical needs because he admittedly is not a caretaker.

Aging takes its toll on Betty's mental abilities too and she can no longer remember things like she used to. This creates anxiety for Betty and she can swirl down into a panic attack which creates even more anxiety. George is able to anticipate Betty's emotional needs too and finds ways to soothe her such as talking to her about familiar things and promising to buy her peaches or a Dairy Queen blizzard. As Betty ages, George is growing in many ways and the two of them have found their way together.

Aside from the physical and mental aspects of aging comes the emotional impact too. Betty knows that she is losing a little bit of herself every day and that is depressing. She uses humor sometimes to deal with it but sometimes she is caustic and angry which are also natural responses. Some of the sadness comes because most of the people Betty has known in her life are gone. There is really no one around anymore who understands what she is talking about and no one who has experienced some of the same things that she has. This is very alienating and lonely but natural for someone who has lived to be 90 years old.

Watching his mother's demise has made George question his own aging. He wonders what will happen to him when he gets too old to take care of himself properly. George is an only child with no other living family members so George knows he will have a lonely life in his old age. George could become very melancholy about this but right now he chooses to care for his mother the best he can and make life as easy as possible for as long as she has left.

Search for love

Probably the most human of all the things people strive for is love. Every person needs to feel loved, to know that he or she is special to someone else just for being himself or herself. In this story, George is most vocal about his need for affection and knowing that it will be elusive for him because public validation of homosexual love is not common in this country.



George takes the typical route to finding love, especially as a gay man, but he is tentative, always fearful of rejection or just being ashamed of who he is. Society has said that it is not OK for homosexuals to find and express love with the freedom allowed others so it is especially hard for George because of that. The sexual encounters and relationships George has during his life are for the most part empty of any real love and he eventually turns to drugs to numb the longing and angst.

George also struggled to get unconditional love from his parents all his life. George knew that they loved him but there was always a little part that was withheld because they did not understand and could not approve of his lifestyle. George is incredulous to learn from his mother that his parents never really talked about him when all his life he did everything to spare them pain and humiliation. George feels as if he was not even worth talking about and this is very wounding. In their own ways, George and his mother show their love for each other and they learn to accept it with all its imperfections.

George is very loving and kind toward his mother at this time in her life when she is very unlovable because of her irascible behavior. Betty has also been stunted in her search for love because she may have married the wrong man. When Betty told George about the romantic attention from the governor's father, it seems as if she is examining her life and whether she made the best choice in marrying George's father. Perhaps Betty thinks she would have been more gratified in love if she had married the governor's father and had a more glamorous life. Betty quickly brushes away George's questions because that is all in the past now but Betty's musings show that it is never too late to want an authentic love in your life.

Alternate lifestyle

The theme of an alternate lifestyle is very important in this book because it is the complete scope of George's life. George knew from an early age that he was different from everyone else around him. His parents tried to steer him to a more conventional life but it was pointless. When George's homosexuality became evident to his parents, they ignored it, thus ignoring George and the alienation he felt continues. It must be heartbreaking to find alienation in your own family, the place where you should feel the most secure.

George was especially shunned at school and he was bullied by other kids because they knew he different from most of them. For some reason, people feel that they have to destroy things they do not understand and George, as a homosexual, was destroyed time and time again because of the hate directed his way.

Although homosexuality is more open today than it was during the time George was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, he still encounters misunderstanding and confusion even as an adult. George's Aunt June, for example, pestered him every time she saw him about when he was going to get married. Most people would have the sensitivity not to keep asking after George had answered negatively many times. It's as if George's



family members thought he was going to outgrow his being gay. Plus, his family members should have been sensitive to George's discomfort at being questioned and let the matter be finished.

George also resents outsiders who assume that just because George is gay that he is their token gay and they measure everything against him. For example, when the insurance lady tried to talk about her gay stepson, she assumed that George would be eager to discuss the young man's experiences because he was also gay. George resented being the gay sounding board and quickly got rid of the insurance woman and her meddling. George tried to establish a lifestyle that was comfortable, complete with love and purpose but society can still be cruel to those who seek out an alternate path.

Dependence

The theme of dependence exhibits in more than one way in this book. Obviously, at first George was dependent upon his parents when he was a boy. This is natural. But as George grew older, he found the connection between his parents was strained and he sought more independence from them. This was a natural occurrence of growing up but also George needed to put some distance between himself and his parents because he did not want them to find out about his lifestyle in New York.

In later years when George was living an openly gay lifestyle, there were pains associated with hasty rejections, deaths of friends from AIDS, and the rejection of society as a whole. George became dependent on drugs to numb the pain of living. Even after he got clean, the urge to go back to using was strong and the sword of dependence was always hanging over him. Even on the day that George found out that his father died, his first reaction was to get high but then he realized that that would have been disrespectful and he didn't do it. That was a major turning point for George's dependence on drugs.

Dependence is also evident in the relationship between George and Betty. Even though she is losing much of her independence, Betty knows she must rely on George for her care. This is a more palatable alternative than living in a nursing home but still indicates that Betty must depend on someone now. George is good and kind and tries to help his mother know that she can depend on him for as long as she needs to. What is encouraging about the dynamic between Betty and George is how tender he is with his mother in her infirmities. He does everything he can to help her maintain her dignity even when she has little left and he gets visibly angry when people are rude to her. This shows that George does not feel that Betty's dependence on him is a burden, but rather something he is pleased to carry.

In a twist that he did not expect, George has found himself becoming dependent on his hometown of Paris and the people who live there. George is surprised to find that he likes being back in a small town after living in New York. He has come to rely on the familiarity of the scenery, the traditions and the history he explores. He also has come to enjoy and rely on the people he encounters as well as new friends.



Prayer

As a boy, George and his mother would hold hands and pray before he went to sleep at night. They prayed for people they knew who were suffering, were in trouble or needed something in their lives. Betty felt that praying was at least something they could do for those they may not be able to help directly. Betty wanted to impart to George that people are all together on this earth and it was necessary to try to help each other. These were the times that Betty seemed the most tender to George and he always valued the moments they shared in this way.

Prayer continued to play a part in George's life as an adult. When he was living in New York and so many people he knew were ill or dying from AIDS, prayer was the only real tool that George had sometimes to care for them. George also prayed for himself but mostly he prayed that his parents would be spared the pain and humiliation of having a son who died from AIDS. George prayed to spare them more than he needed to be spared himself.

Now as George cares for Betty, he sends up random prayers for her care. George sometimes visits the church and just sits on the steps and offers up prayers to God, his father and his grandparents. George is not really sure what to say but he hopes that Betty will be spared pain and will find peace in the final days of her life.

For most people, prayer is a coping mechanism used in situations when outcomes are uncertain and someone wants the best outcome possible for a person or a situation. It seems natural to offer up prayers to a higher power when one feels powerless too. In George's case, he knows that his mother's time on earth is coming to an end. There is no way to alter what is happening to her and it will happen to everyone who has the good fortune to live as long as Betty has. And while George cannot alter the ultimate outcome for his mother, he can pray for as much joy and freedom from pain as possible. And who knows, maybe George was the answer to one of Betty's prayers. She never said that she wanted or needed him to care for her at this point in her life but for some reason, George was unemployed and needed to be somewhere. It might as well be in Paris, Missouri... or Bettyville. Prayer can work in mysterious ways.

Avoidance of Truth

Avoidance of truth is a major theme in the book because it affects George's whole family. Early in George's life, his parents were in denial about his homosexuality and never discussed it with him. At the time that George was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, homosexuality was not openly discussed. George's parents were probably like most parents who were not happy about having a homosexual child; they just hoped he would grow out of it. So, by going into denial, George's parents, in their minds, were stalling for time so that George would come around and be like most other boys. This was so damaging for George's psyche and self esteem. George was silently crying out for answers to questions about who he was yet his parents continued to avoid the truth and avoided validating George as a person.



During his life in New York in the 1980s when the AIDS crisis hit the homosexual community hard, George avoided telling his parents the truth about his life there. George did not want his parents to worry about him so he wrote them a letter telling them how much he loved them but he did not send the letter. The letter was to be read only in the event that George died from AIDS. George avoided any direct discussion about his homosexuality or the potential for contracting AIDS. George would have preferred to have suffered and died from the disease than to have to tell his parents he had it. George did not want his parents to suffer the pain of having a son who died from AIDS so nothing at all was said. At the same time, George's parents silently worried that George might get AIDS but they, too, refused to bring up the topic. Just as they had hoped his homosexuality was a passing thing, so did they feel about the possibility that George could get sick and die. They simply refused to vocalize their thoughts and fears. It seems that this all-consuming silence prohibited bonding and caring for each other during a time when they all needed comfort and support.

Much later, George is shocked to learn that his parents never discussed George's homosexuality even with each other. So, not only did George worry needlessly, he is still not validated by his parents for being his true self. In a way, George is hurt because it seems as if he has been invisible to his parents his whole life. If his parents did not talk about him even with each other, then who did they really think George was?

Avoiding the truth in the family was not limited to George's homosexuality however. When George's father was diagnosed with congestive heart failure, Betty refused to talk about it when George would call to find out about him. True to her style, Betty did not want to discuss unpleasant things so she simply did not. It was almost as if talking about her husband's disease would make it too real and she could not, and would not deal with it.

Family

The theme of family is a thread that runs throughout the story both in George's current care of Betty as well as his discussion of his other family members. George feels a sense of duty to take care of Betty because he is her only child and the idea of familial duty is important to him. Even though their relationship may be called unusual by other people, George and his mother were always close and people always said that George was definitely Betty's boy. George and Betty have brooding personalities while George's father was more upbeat and outgoing. This dynamic was one they learned to live with

George has a strong affinity for history and heritage, too, and delves into stories about his past which involve other family members such as his grandparents and aunts and uncles. George's favorite family member was Mammy, his maternal grandmother. This was probably because Mammy encouraged George in the pursuits he enjoyed as opposed to others who tried to push George toward more typical activities for boys and young men. Even when he was an adult, George's aunts and uncles still tried to push him toward more acceptable pursuits for his life such as getting married and having



children. George even experienced open hostility from one uncle in particular who did not understand or like George and made no attempt to alter that.

George also explored family from Betty's perspective in that she never quite fit into her husband's family. Betty grew up poor and her husband's family was wealthy so there was an immediate disconnect. Although her husband's family members were not mean to her, Betty always felt at a disadvantage because she not lived with the privileges they had. George recalls that his mother watched her mother-in-law very carefully in order to emulate her and try to elevate herself and be the type of wife who would be acceptable.

During his more promiscuous years spent in New York, George's group of homosexual friends became his family for a time. George, as well as his friends, were being ostracized by society and their own families so they found comfort in their circle of friends and acquaintances and looked to each other for support. These people all played a part in George's life, some good, some not, but they all helped to shape him and who he is today.

Importance of Memories

Since this book is a memoir, memories are obviously very important to the telling of the story. As George writes in the Author's Notes, "Still this is only my Bettyville, created from memories filtered through time, arguable perceptions, and my own consciousness. Other travelers may have their own stories, thoughts, interpretations. My greatest wish is to hurt no one, though I believe we are often the most triumphant when revealed at our most human."

George admits that the story is told from the way he has remembered things but that others may have seen them differently. Memories are entirely personal things because each person has his or her own perspective on events. It was important to George to tell the story but not hurt anyone in the telling. George's fundamental kindness continues to shine through.

Betty's dementia is heartbreaking as she struggles to remember not only scenes from her past but also daily functional issues. George writes that Betty seldom mentions the past but loves to drive past the corner where she used to catch the street car in St. Louis as a young woman when she worked as a secretary at an electric company right after World War II. Betty was a pretty woman. From what little Betty has told George from her memories about that time, George can see her in his mind and he wonders if Betty likes to now drive by that corner and wonder what paths her life might have taken had she made different choices at the time. Memories are like that. There is room for exploration because no one gets hurt and a person always comes back to reality without consequences. In Betty's reality today she has learned how to cope, however, and relies on George to help her remember or resorts to writing down particularly trying things.



Memories are also important to George, especially related to family, and he shares several flashbacks in the story to help flesh out why he is the person he is today. George seems particularly interested in Mammy's story and he writes about a photograph of her as a young girl waiting at a train station with a suitcase nearby. George does not know the story related to the picture but he envisions Mammy venturing out into the world and coming home again filled with memories of a life lived before settling down and raising her family.

Ghosts of the Past

George has some things in his life that continue to haunt him and make him question some of his decisions. The indiscriminate sexual behavior in his younger years, especially the times on Fire Island, still bother George because of their irresponsible and callous nature. Not only did George behave inappropriately but other people hurt George by their lack of authenticity regarding his feelings. It sounds as if this was a hedonistic period in George's life and he is lucky to have escaped without becoming ill from AIDS. And because of the long shadow that AIDS casts, George probably still wonders if he is really healthy or if he might still get ill one day. Most people have periods of exploration during their youth but for George and his friends, the recklessness had deadly implications and the clouds from that will never fully clear.

During the time of Fire Island, George's drug use accelerated and he became a full blown addict. George's work habits became extremely erratic due to his using, but fortunately, George's boss looked the other way because he knew the pressure on gay men during that time. Aside from the recreational aspect of the drugs, George used them to escape the pressures of a life that was misunderstood by society and by his own parents. George and his friends used to escape from the fear that was swallowing the gay community because of the AIDS crisis. George also used to squash his feelings about his relationship with his parents. All of these things come back to haunt George and all the things he tried to avoid have come back to him for resolution.

Even though he had spent time in rehab, George will probably never be free from the ghosts that his usage has created. George is doing a better job of not running from his feelings but he is tempted on a daily basis to relapse just to deal with taking care of Betty. Throughout his story, especially now, George makes half-hearted jokes about wanting to relapse or taking a pill to get through a particularly trying day with Betty.

George is also still haunted by memories of old friends and lovers and the times he spent with them. Thoughts of Eric and Steve appear randomly and bring with them the particular hurts George experienced. That is not to say that all ghosts from the past are negative though, because when enough time has passed, a person has the luxury of hindsight to review and evaluate and learn. George is doing a lot of processing and learning and he is clear-headed now and in a good place emotionally to do that.



Control

The theme of control is clearly evident in Betty's state of dementia and her brave attempts at trying to control her world even though she is declining. Even simple things like taking longer to get dressed or not being able to find her shoes are major events now for Betty. This must be so difficult for a woman who lived her life in control of her household, even if she could not control who her son was. Betty always had a very strong personality and she ran the family the way she wanted people to perceive them. Betty always wanted George to be perfect in everything he did and coached him toward that goal. And although Betty loved her husband, it would infuriate her when he acted out in public and she could not control his behavior.

George writes, "On the way to the washer, Betty pauses at the mirror in the dining room. 'My hair looks awful. How did it ever get to looking like this? That girl who did this ought to be shot.' My mother's hair life has always been complex. It isn't just vanity; that hair is everything she can't quite control." George likens Betty's hair as a metaphor for things that are out of control in her life. Lately Betty has not had too many good hair days so she makes George take her to the hair salon yet she is always disappointed. Perhaps when your faculties and abilities are slipping away, it would be nice for one thing to go right and it should not be so difficult to get a good hair style. But like George said, the hair is not really about the hair, it's about not being able to control much anymore and the hair is just an outward symbol of that.

Betty's mind and body are out of control now, too, and that is especially disconcerting for her. Betty had always been outspoken but now she does not seem to have any filter on what she says and who she says it to. Fortunately, George has developed a thick skin for insults because she cannot, or will not, control herself verbally much of the time. Betty also emits little sounds all day which is unnerving and the nighttime is even worse. These frighten Betty and constantly remind her that she is losing control more every day.

Styles

Point of View

The story is told from the first person narrative point of view. This means that the author tells the story directly in his own words. As the narrator, George uses the pronoun of "I" throughout because the story is being told just as he sees it or experienced it. With the first person narrative point of view, the reader has access to the thoughts and feelings of the narrator only. What is going on in the heads of any other people in the story is only speculative as the reader does not have the privilege of seeing them.

As George goes from present day to flashbacks in the story, he still maintains the first person narrative point of view. The story is his and the reader will learn only what he author wants him or her to learn. The first person narrative point of view is a common perspective in literature and is easily recognizable by its direct statements of "I" or "We."

Language and Meaning

Having worked in the publishing industry, words are very important to George. He uses them carefully and the crafting is rich. Through his writing, George paints vivid pictures of his surroundings as well as the emotions and feelings he has. George likes the sounds of words and even comments about what they remind him of sometimes in the book. It is clear that George is an educated man and some of his references will only be understood by those who are as well.

George uses humor liberally in the book and it is laugh out loud funny at points. The dialogue between George and Betty is sometimes funny and George also shares musings and thoughts about situations that are truly humorous. Humor can defuse tension and it's also George's way of deflecting people when they try to get too close to him.

Structure

George begins the book in the present as he shares that he is caring for his mother at her home in Paris, Missouri. George uses flashbacks liberally throughout the book to share his history and provide the reader with some perspective on why George's life has taken him to where he is today. George always brings the reader back to the present tense though to what is currently going on in his life with Betty.

George's style can almost be called stream of consciousness because it is as if he is talking to the reader about what is going on and then something will prompt him to take side trips in his mind and he will share all of that as it comes. It's very natural and a nice way of sharing a lot of information without making the text too burdened.



Quotes

I just wanted a house with a few nice things," she told me once. "That was my little dream.

-- Betty (Chapter 1 paragraph 17)

Importance: In this quote, Betty states the vision for her life. She came from a relatively poor family and didn't expect to get much from life so to have a little house with a few nice things would have been wonderful for Betty.

Don't bug me, I'd say. Mind your own business." "You are my business.

-- George and Betty (Chapter 1 paragraph 29)

Importance: What started out as George as a child telling his mother to leave him alone and her response that he is her business becomes a running joke for the two of them. George wanted independence as a boy and Betty wanted to keep a close eye on him. The tables are turned when Betty gets ill, wants some independence from George and tells him to mind his own business. George is quick to reply that Betty is his business.

What is the name of that stuff you drink at Christmas? I lay awake half last night trying to remember the name of it.

-- Betty (Chapter 3 paragraph 16)

Importance: Betty's memory is failing and she has a difficult time remembering simple things sometimes. The answer to her question is eggnog and she asks it of George repeatedly throughout the book.

At least I'm out and out with my meanness," she says. "I'm not a sneak. I hate a sneak.

-- Betty (Chapter 3 paragraph 23)

Importance: Betty prides herself on being upfront and honest about who she is. This quote gets to the heart of her character, not only in content but in delivery.

Why did you leave? Where did you go? Why today? Why don't you ever pay attention?

-- Betty (Chapter 4 paragraph 26)

Importance: The significance of this quote is that Betty sometimes gets anxious when she can't find something or if she is worried about going someplace and appearing less than herself. She lashes out at George sometimes too when she gets scared because she thinks he is going to leave her all alone.

Sonuvabitch," my father yelled out as Toto scratched himself lewdly. "We gotta do something about that damn dog." "Sonuvabitch," I screamed in imitation.

-- George and his father (Chapter 5 paragraph 8)

Importance: George wanted to be like his father and he knew he was not. George was



not athletic and did not like activities usually done by boys. By mimicking his father's cursing, George could be manly like his father and feel a bond if only briefly.

That casserole I made Saturday is much better today." "Maybe I'll try some more around Friday.

-- George and Betty (Chapter 6 paragraph 1)

Importance: The significance of this quote is that it shows how Betty is maintaining her sense of humor despite her failing health. When George says he made a casserole on Saturday and it's getting better, Betty replies that she'll try it almost a week past its preparation date. Betty is implying that the casserole might be edible if she waits long enough.

Thank you for taking care of me.

-- Betty (Chapter 7 paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote is important because Betty lets her guard down and reaches out to George in a moment of tenderness. Being cared for has been especially difficult for Betty who has always been independent and much preferred to care for others.

The oven's on. The oven's on.

-- Betty (Chapter 8 paragraph 19)

Importance: When Betty is confused, she looks for things that are normal to help her feel balanced again. When she smells the oven getting hot, it concerns her because she knew she did not turn it on. She pays no attention to the fact that George is preparing to bake and ignores his explanations. She just senses that there is the possibility of danger and it makes her panic.

Look at me, but don't see. Watch, but not too closely.

-- George (Chapter 9 paragraph 39)

Importance: This quote essentially sums up George's youth. He feels completely invisible because he does not know where he belongs in the world so he attempts to use humor as a way to get attention. However, George does not want anyone looking at him too closely because he is afraid of what they will see and he does not want that either.

Tonight, I tell her, we'll buy peaches; we'll go to the Junction for prime rib. We'll do whatever you want.

-- George (Chapter 10 paragraph 31)

Importance: In this instance George tries to appease Betty while they tour the Tiger Place assisted living community. Betty is seriously unhappy about the prospect of having to leave her home to live in a retirement village. This is just one example of how George has to view his mother as a child and coax her into a better mood with the promise of some sort of treat.



Things are different here. Let him go," she said. "Let him go."
-- Betty (Chapter 15 paragraph 57)

Importance: When George's father was in disbelief about the shabby state of George's New York apartment, Betty told him to just let it go. This is important for a couple reasons. Betty knew that her son is gay and that his lifestyle is going to be different from his parents'. She dismissed George's father's concern because she did not want to address the real issue, George's homosexuality, and not necessarily how clean George's apartment was. Betty also wanted George to stick it out in New York because she knew he wanted a job in publishing and he would have very little chance of ever achieving that if he were to return to Paris.