

Bittersweet (Miranda Beverly-Whittemore) Study Guide

Bittersweet (Miranda Beverly-Whittemore) by Miranda Beverly-Whittemore

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Plot Summary

NOTE: This guide refers to *Bittersweet* by Miranda Beverly-Whittemore, the Penguin Random House LLC edition, Copyright 2014

Mabel Dagmar is a scholarship student who attends a prestigious East coast college where she feels out of place with her wealthy roommate, Geneva "Ev" Winslow. Mabel is surprised when Ev invites her to spend the summer at her family's compound of cottages, Winloch, on Lake Champlain in Vermont. Mabel jumps at the chance to go for two reasons. First, she will experience an amazing summer. Also, she will be able to avoid returning to her dysfunctional family in Oregon.

Each sibling in the Winslow family inherits a cottage at Winloch and Ev's is called Bittersweet. After arriving, Mabel feels as though she has been transported to a place of opulence and ease. She yearns to become one of the Winslows. Winloch was established by Ev's great-great-grandfather. It grew to 30 cottages all inhabited in the summer by Winslow family members. Mabel is in awe of Ev's parents, Birch and Tilde. She soon learns more about Ev's siblings, Athol, Benning, Galway, and Luvinia. Galway is the Winslow family misfit because of his work at an immigration advocacy group in Boston. He and Mabel start a summer fling.

Ev's elderly aunt, Linden "Indo," spurs Mabel to dig into the Winslow family secrets in exchange for inheriting her cottage when she dies. Mabel not only discovers how the Winslow family prospered when others struggled desperately during The Great Depression, she also learns some unsavory facts about Birch.

A history of murder, rape, theft, and more unite the Winslows, and Mabel brings it all to the surface.



Chapters 1 - 3

Summary

In Chapter 1, The Roommate, Mabel Dagmar shares a college dorm room in New York with Geneva "Ev" Winslow but she might as well be invisible for as much attention as Ev pays her. Ev comes from a wealthy family and has experiences that Mabel can only imagine. Mabel is shocked when she receives an invitation to a reception hosted by the college president in honor of Ev's 18th birthday. Ev is donating a Degas painting to the university and it will be a big affair. Ev is shocked that Mabel is considering attending the event. Ev tells her that her mother had sent out the invitations, but Ev did not want to go. Ev says that they will make a blue dress for Mabel to wear and Mabel is thrilled.

In Chapter 2, Mabel and Ev attend the birthday event, and Mabel meets Ev's parents, Birch and Tilde Winslow. They are the most glamorous people she has ever met. Birch is at least twenty years older than Tilde, but they are a sophisticated couple. Tilde has a cool demeanor, but Birch is effusive when he meets Mabel.

In Chapter 3, after an hour at the party, Mabel goes to the restroom and emerges to find that everyone has vanished. Mabel does find Ev and Tilde but they are in an argument and are annoyed that Mabel has interrupted them. Ev was guided into her father's car and Mabel found her own way back to the dorm. Ev didn't return to the dorm until the next day and Mabel finds her crying quietly in her bunk. Ev reveals to Mabel that Ev's cousin, Jackson, shot himself last week. Ev points him out in a photo of the Winslow clan that was taken at Winloch last year. Ev then tells Mabel that she should come to Winloch for the summer.

Analysis

The distance between Mabel's and Ev's lives couldn't be much further apart. Ev comes from a wealthy family and she is accustomed to fine clothes, vacations and a generally privileged lifestyle. Not only does she have wealth at her disposal, she assumes the bearing and demeanor of someone who is wealthy. For example, she is bored with routine things and she acts as if her clothing and possessions are of no importance because if they are lost or ruined, replacing them would be no problem. It is also part of Ev's world to have a large extended family bound by generations of wealth. On the occasion of Ev's birthday, her father is surprised that she has donated a Degas painting to the university. It's common in their world to have treasures such as priceless art and it means nothing really to Ev; her father is surprised only that she has chosen to leave it to a university instead of some other formal institution.

In contrast, Mabel comes from a hard-working family in Oregon. Her parents own a dry cleaning business and Mabel used to work there before she started attending college in New York. Money is tight in Mabel's family and the only way she could possibly pay for



her college education at a prestigious East coast school is by securing an academic scholarship. This leaves Mabel little money for anything other than the bare necessities and she can't help but notice how casually Ev treats her own things. Mabel doesn't buy new clothes or travel or eat out much because she simply can't afford it. Mabel is both drawn to, and repelled by, Ev's wealthy lifestyle and haughty manner. This theme will play out as the book extends and the relationship between the two girls extends.

Discussion Question 1

What does Mabel think is so exceptional about Ev's upcoming birthday celebration?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Mabel feel uncomfortable around the people in Ev's world at the birthday party?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Ev's invitation to Mabel to come to Winloch for the summer so surprising for Mabel?

Vocabulary

loathed, vehement, hunkered, flimsy, galoshes, persevered, willowy, whets, insatiable, boisterous, transgression, deftly, doyenne, fawning, diminutive, pedigreed, foray, demurred, tepid, incongruous, sodden, nonchalant, flaxen



Chapters 4 - 8

Summary

In Chapter 4, Ev and Mabel take a train from New York to Vermont. Mabel has brought a book to read this summer: *Paradise Lost*. Ev tells Mabel that they will have only six days to get Ev's cottage, Bittersweet, cleaned up and ready for inspection by her father. If it does not pass, she will not inherit it. From the time that Ev had invited Mabel to spend the summer back in February, Ev had tried to bring her up to speed on society life. Mabel's mother had also coached her long distance about being wary of life's newfound generosity. On the night before Mabel and Ev had left for Vermont, Mabel's mother called Mabel to remind her to be sweet during her time with the Winslows over the summer. At the train station, a young man named John arrives to take them to Winloch and Mabel assumes he is Ev's brother.

In Chapter 5, John puts the suitcases in his pickup truck along with his dog, Abby. Mabel does not understand Ev's bad mood. They ride in silence for ten miles. When Ev asks John about his mother, Mabel realizes that they are not siblings. It is dark when they arrive at Bittersweet, and Mabel cannot really see much in the wooded area of Winloch. Ev reminds Mabel that if the cottage does not pass inspection, Ev will have to move into her mother's cottage and Mabel will have to return to Oregon for the summer.

In Chapter 6, Mabel awakens on her first morning at Bittersweet and realizes that Ev is not in the room. Mabel feels the desire to masturbate and recoils in horror when she realizes that a strange man has been watching from outside the window. She dives under the quilt and the man is gone when she peeks out. Ev returns a while later and tells Mabel that Galway had told her that he met Mabel earlier that morning. Mabel learns that the man peaking in the bedroom was Ev's older brother, Galway. Mabel is relieved to learn that Galway will only be coming to Winloch on the weekends. Maybe, her embarrassment will have time to die down.

In Chapter 7, Bittersweet had been inhabited by Ev's Aunt Antonia until the woman's death last year. The cottage is filled with stacks of old newspapers, mildew and dust so Mabel and Ev get to work. The next day John brings them some groceries and supplies from town which is how Mabel learns that John is employed by the Winslows. John has also come to affix bolts on the inside of the cottage door, the bedroom door and the bathroom door. Ev explains that her mother is afraid that bears will attack them and Mabel wonders what kind of bears those must be.

In Chapter 8, Ev and Mabel have spent four solid days cleaning the cottage and on the fifth day, Ev tells Mabel that she will be scraping the porch floor on her own today so Mabel can spend the day as she pleases. Mabel decides to take a walk in the woods and thinks about how the land must have looked when Ev's great-great-grandfather, Samson Winslow (1850-1931), had bought the land. Nearby Lake Champlain reminded him of his mother's homeland, Scotland, so he named the property Winsloch. He built a



great hall and many cottages, each with the name of a different plant, sprung up around it. While on her walk, Mabel encounters an old woman who invites her to tea.

In Chapter 9, the old woman in the forest was Ev's Aunt Linden (Indo) whose cottage is painted in vibrant colors and filled with eccentricities. Indo confides in Mabel that she's afraid people will take away her cottage and her things and she tries to enlist Mabel's help in exchange for the cottage. Indo states that she has been looking for someone like Mabel for a long time, someone who likes stories. Indo wants to locate a certain manila folder that must be in the attic of the main building and hopes that Mabel will help her. When Mabel returns to Bittersweet, John is just leaving and the porch has not been scraped.

Analysis

The significance of Mabel's book choice--Paradise Lost--will become important as the story extends. Paradise Lost is an epic poem written in 12 sections and it addresses the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The author uses the book as foreshadowing of what will come for the characters and also as a unifying element that is woven throughout the story.

The author also sets up some questionable events that initiate Mabel into the eccentricities of the Winslow family. Ev enlists Mabel's help to prepare the Bittersweet cottage for inspection by her father. If the cottage is not clean and tidy, Ev will lose it and Mabel will be forced to go home to Oregon for the summer. Mabel finds this a bit odd since the Winslows are wealthy and could pay someone to clean the cottage but she complies with Ev's wishes. As the reader will later discover, Ev manipulates people and it's possible that she has done the same with Mabel, essentially bullying her into helping with the cottage because she knows how much Mabel does not want to go home to Oregon.

Mabel also finds it odd that John has been instructed to install deadbolt locks in Bittersweet cottage--the front door, the bedroom door and the bathroom door. Supposedly Tilde is afraid of bears but Mabel wonders what kind of bears would try to open a bathroom or bedroom door. There is clearly more to this eccentricity and it will be revealed as the story extends.

Discussion Question 1

Why is it important to Ev that Bittersweet pass inspection by her father?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Mabel think it is weird to put bolts on the inside of the doors to protect them from bears?



Discussion Question 3

Why did Samson Winslow name his Vermont property Winloch?

Vocabulary

disdainfully, dulcet, spinster, naive, pastoral, bleating, lunatic, sumptuous, knackered, nuthatch, agape, duvet, sulfuric, musculature, grudgingness, burl, camphor, buffeting, rarefied, limpid, precarious, compatriots, sinewy, drone



Chapters 10 - 15

Summary

In Chapter 10, Birch and Tilde arrive at Bittersweet and Mabel is relieved that Birch greets her warmly, however, Tilde is a bit distant. Ev decides that everyone should call Mabel "May" for the summer because it's much prettier. Tilde makes a list of all the things that need updating at the cottage. Tilde states that their youngest child, Lu, is in Switzerland at tennis camp but will arrive later in the summer. Before the Winslows leave, Mabel asks if they passed inspection and Birch simply pats her on the shoulder.

In Chapter 11, Ev is disturbed by the mere presence of her mother's visit, so she and May take a walk. Ev and May both have difficult mothers and that is something that binds them together. Ev introduces May to her eldest brother, Athol, who has arrived with his wife and children to spend the summer at Winloch. Athol is a handsome version of his father but lacks his charisma. They next meet another of Ev's brothers, Banning, who is opposite of Athol in his heavier appearance and jovial demeanor. Banning has also come to Winloch with his wife and children and May watches as their au pair tries to keep the children out of harm. Athol sees John's dog, Abby, walk by and states that he wishes their father didn't employ John and when Athol is running the family he will send John away.

In Chapter 12, Dinner for the entire Winslow clan is held at Trillium, the main cottage at Winloch, now inhabited by Birch and Tilde. May asks Birch if Bittersweet had passed inspection or whether she needs to buy a ticket home to Oregon and he blows off her question as a ridiculous notion. May mingles a little bit but eventually fills her china plate and stands against the wall, out of the way of the Winslows. May spots a beautiful Van Gogh painting hanging in the cottage and Indo approaches her as she marvels at it. The painting had been given to Indo by her mother because the boys in the family inherited more money than Indo did and her mother wanted her to have something more. Tilde interrupts them and May walks outside and hears her brother's voice on the wind.

In Chapter 13, John arrives at Bittersweet and Ev embraces him freely, leading May to understand that it is John that Ev has been sneaking out to see. John has brought a package for May that contains a stack of stamped envelopes addressed to May's mother who has sent them in the hopes that May will write this summer. May does write letters to her mother but she never sends them because they are filled with details of how lovely life is with the Winslows in contrast to her life at home.

On the night of the summer solstice, the Winslows hold a Midsummer Night's Feast on the Dining Hall lawn. Before the festivities begin, Birch makes some comments about missing Jackson even though he doesn't mention his name. Jackson's mother and Birch's sister, CeCe, is not in attendance. Many of the family members perform Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and toward the end of the evening, Indo



introduced May to Galway and May can't help but be embarrassed because of their first sighting of each other.

In Chapter 14, Indo encourages May and Galway upstairs in the big Dining Hall building to check out the family's archive material. Indo thinks it will be delightful if May and Galway can work together because they both like digging into good stories. Indo would like May to find a manila folder with details about Indo's Van Gogh painting. May is able to excuse herself and she heads toward Bittersweet in the dark when soon Galway catches up to her and gives her a flashlight. Galway apologizes for peeking in at May in bed that morning when he had been looking for Ev. May calls Galway a pervert and takes off on her own. Ev arrives home looking disheveled and denies having been with John. May cuts pictures out of magazines and catalogs and begins to make a collage of the Winslow family.

In Chapter 15, Ev is spending less time at Bittersweet and John is noticeably absent too. May spends time in the archives looking for the manila folder and is eager to find some Winslow secrets in the process. The papers are in ruins and completely unorganized but she finds some of Samson's original papers as well as some bankruptcy papers. It seems as if the papers increased in volume when Birch's father, Bard, took over the family business in the mid 1930s.

One morning, May heads to her favorite spot on a rock near the water and she meets Ev's younger sister, Lu, there. Even though she's no more than 14-years-old, Lu is very precocious and talks to May about all the animals that live in the area, especially the turtles which are her favorites. Lu can tell that May really loves Winloch and May confirms that it is heaven.

Analysis

Mabel's name has been changed to May for the summer by Ev who says it is prettier than Mabel, however it is just the beginning of the efforts to integrate Mabel into the upper class Winslow clan with their distinctive names.

It is interesting to note that Athol has such strong negative feelings about John being employed at Winloch. When he states that when he is in charge of the family, John will no longer be employed there. This is a strong statement to make about someone who is a good employee and who should be of no real consequence to Athol's life. The reader may not take note of the statement but it is significant that the author has started to plant an idea which will play out by the end of the story. It will become very clear why Athol thinks John is undesirable at Winloch and she will create suspense as the story extends.

The author also creates some suspense when she writes that Mabel hears her brother's voice on the wind one night as she is walking home. Up until this point, there has been no mention of Mabel having any siblings and it creates some mystery as to why her



brother came to Mabel's mind at this point in time and what impact he has had on her life.

The author uses an interesting tactic to show what is on Mabel's mind when she writes letters to her mother. Mabel is very frank about her experience with the Winslows and how she enjoys them much more than her own family. However, Mabel doesn't mail the letters because they would be hurtful for her mother but this is a good way for the author to share what is on Mabel's mind.

Discussion Question 1

According to the way Birch responds to Mabel, does it seem as if the Bittersweet inspection was critical?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Indo so adamant about finding information about the Van Gogh painting?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Mabel not mail her letters to her mother?

Vocabulary

sprawled, decode, atrocious, queried, psychopath, ubiquitous, towheads, propaganda, charisma, jovial, disheveled, impeccably, capri, décolletage, yawl, mizzenmast, demitasses, alabaster, exhilarating, eccentric, giddy, decadent, quibble, impeccable, inconsolable, crescendo, falsetto, partook, blithely, nondescript, disquisition, swath



Chapters 16 - 21

Summary

In Chapter 16, May and Lu become fast friends and they convince Ev to go with them to Flat Rocks to go swimming one day. After they spread their towels, May opens her copy of *Paradise Lost*, making sure to tuck in the letters to her mother in the back of the book. Ev leaves right after lunch and May can't help but notice Lu's furtive glances at a boy named Owen swimming with some of Lu's cousins. As the day wears on, more and more of the Winslows come to Flat Rocks to swim and sun. At dinner that night, Indo asks May about what she has found in the archives and if she is interested in inheriting Indo's cottage. Indo reveals that she's not looking only for the manila folder, but for anything untoward but May doesn't have a clue what that means. Ev interrupts with the news of a sailboat ride tomorrow and she demands that May come along.

In Chapter 17, Ev, Lu and May are waiting on the dock for the sailboat to arrive. Ev tells the girls that the whole point of the voyage is to go to lunch. There are two boys on board, Eric, who is tall, handsome and clearly meant for Ev; and Murray, who is squat with a scraggly beard and obviously meant to be May's date. Lu is happy to see that Owen is on board. It doesn't take long for Eric to entice Ev below deck and May is stuck with Murray who is trying hard to get her drunk on champagne.

A little later, they dock and walk to a country club for lunch because Ev had really wanted to go there. When May excuses herself from the table, she runs into John who is a waiter at the club. John panics and makes May swear that she won't tell anyone she has seen him working there. When May tells John that Ev is here with Eric, she can see his jaw clench and knows that John loves Ev. May tells John that he should be fighting for Ev.

In Chapter 18, the group boards the sailboat for the return trip home and they anchor near Winloch so they can go swimming. Ev and Eric begin kissing passionately and Murray moves in to kiss May but she stops him. May is able to get Ev away from Eric temporarily and tells her that they should get home but Ev is drunk and having a good time and doesn't want to leave. May tells her that she's not having a good time with the lecherous Murray and Ev calls her a lesbian. Murray moves in on May again and his groping is making her sick. Suddenly May hears Galway's voice telling Murray to stop what he's doing. Galway was walking on the deck and tells May to climb over the sailboat and get into his dinghy. Ev emerges from below deck and she climbs down into the dinghy and then Galway steers them home.

In Chapter 19, the next morning May wakes early and finds that Galway had slept on the wicker couch at Bittersweet all night. Galway wants to know if Murray had hurt May but she says that he didn't. While Ev continues to sleep, Galway and May go to the Dining Hall for breakfast and Masha makes them a hearty meal. They decide to explore the archives some more and head for the attic. Galway tells May that his Grammy Pippa



will be at Winloch tomorrow for the wedding of his cousin, Philip, to his college sweetheart.

Galway also admits to May that he's sorry he peeked in the window at her that morning but that he liked what he saw. May laughs nervously and turns their attention back to the papers. Galway also explains that the Van Gogh painting never really belonged to Indo; it belongs to the Winslow trust. May shows some papers to Galway that show that the Winslows had hundreds of thousands of dollars in assets just two short years after the Great Depression bankruptcy. May is curious how the Winslow family rebounded so well so quickly after such financial devastation and she vows to get to the bottom of it.

In Chapter 20, Ev is upset by how she behaved with Eric and treated May on the boat trip and May tells her that she is better than the behavior she exhibited. Ev states that she is toxic and May should probably stay away from her. The next day, May stops in to see Indo who still will not tell her what she wants May to find in the archives which is frustrating for May. Indo wants her to understand who the Winslows truly are and thinks that reviewing the papers will be a good start.

Philip's wedding is a success and a great party with all the Winslows attending. Galway introduces May to Gammy Pippa who declares that May is someone special and they should keep her, a comment that confuses May. May stumbles in the grass and Birch makes a comment about her drinking so she runs away toward Trillium and Galway follows. As she wanders in the dark cottage, she notices that the Van Gogh painting is gone and she then hears Athol say that it is put away when outsiders are on the property like they are for the wedding. When Galway catches up to her, she tells him that she thinks Athol thinks she is about to steal something. Galway brushes it off and tells her he wants to show her something.

In Chapter 21, Galway leads May to the woods behind Trillium and finds a specific tree with rungs nailed up the side. They climb up to a treehouse where they watch the stars and meteors in the sky and then fireworks begin to explode and May realizes it is the Fourth of July. Galway moves closer and kisses May and then tells her he has to return to Boston tonight because of the work he does for immigrant rights. May returns to the wedding reception for awhile and then heads to the archives and thinks dreamily about Galway. May reviews more documents and learns that Birch had an older brother named Gardener and she wonders why he didn't inherit and projects that maybe he died as a child. She also sees that Birch's father, Bard, took over the family from his father, Banning, in 1936 even though Banning lived until the 1950s.

May wonders if Bard had done something amazing to save the family from ruin and she rushes to the phone to call Galway to share the news. May is startled when a woman answers the phone and says that Galway isn't home yet. In her shock, May heads outside to the woods where she hears what she thinks are the cries of a dying animal but soon realizes that it is Ev. She sees Ev and John making love and notes how happy Ev is.



Analysis

May carries her copy of *Paradise Lost* with her during much of the summer but doesn't really dig into it too much. Clearly May is living her own version of a lost paradise based on what she had imagined the Winslows' life to be. There is so much secrecy, greed and deceit woven through the Winslows and their history that it is difficult to sort out anything redeeming about the family. The author of *Paradise Lost*, John Milton, addresses the fall of Adam and Eve and their subsequent expulsion from the Garden of Eden which speaks to the theme of good vs. evil. The same similarities can be drawn with the Winslows. They truly have thrown out the concept of doing only good and push the limits of propriety, decency and integrity. While they may not have been expelled from their own personal version of paradise, they do suffer losses, one by one as family members are killed or commit suicide, paying the ultimate price for the sins of the family as a whole.

Good vs. evil is a common theme in literature and Mabel learns that there is much that is evil within the family and she must decide to go along with it or fight for what is right. The author gives some clues to the way May is leaning in her decision but it won't be revealed until the very end of the story what path May chooses.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ev behave the way she does with Eric on the sailboat on the way to lunch?

Discussion Question 2

Why would it be so startling that the Winslows rebounded from bankruptcy just two years after the Great Depression?

Discussion Question 3

Is Indo being deliberately evasive regarding what she wants May to find in the Winslow archives?

Vocabulary

laden, ample, cumulative, deadpanned, purebred, sloop, scat, permeated, cavernous, regale, spinnaker, capsize, sparse, canoodled, wry, unabashed, rebuke, sylphlike, paroxysms, paranoid, formidable, spinster, grimaced, specter, cynical, socialist, fiefdom, phalanx, pretentious, wistfully, downtrodden, feral



Chapters 22 - 27

Summary

In Chapter 22, May spends much of her time swimming and thinking about why Galway would want to get close to her when he clearly has a wife or girlfriend at home. She also can't stop thinking about seeing Ev and John making love and longs to have that experience herself. One morning Ev leaves very early, saying that she is being forced to spend some time with Tilde in Canada. May decides to spend some time with Indo but when she arrives at her cottage, Birch is there and tells her that Indo has just gone in for a nap. He then invites May to have tea with him at Trillium where he tells her how glad they are that May is looking after Ev.

May is surprised to learn from Birch that there is no such thing as inspections of the cottages and says that Ev has had trouble with honesty in the past. He tells May that Ev is about to come into a lot of money from a trust and he can only project that she wanted Bittersweet to be in good condition to impress her father, the executor of the trust. Birch apologizes for Ev and asks May asks her to keep their conversation a secret. Birch tells May that in addition to lying, Ev has also tried to hurt herself before so he asks May to let him know if Ev exhibits any disturbing behavior.

In Chapter 23, May tries to visit Indo again and acts disinterested when May wants to talk about the manila folder and the archives. Indo gives May a tattered book and tells her to keep it a secret. May leaves, wondering what in the world she would find within the book's pages.

In Chapter 24, Lu surprises May with a friendship ankle bracelet she made and May entertains her for hours even though she would rather be digging into the book Indo gave her. Lu decides to take May to Turtle Point and they take a little rowboat across Winslow Bay to a rocky shoreline. As Lu leads May to the area where the turtles live, she stops short when she sees the carcass of a large turtle on the path. As they move on, they encounter several more dead turtles and Lu, overcome, begins to sob.

In Chapter 25, Lu vows to call the local university tomorrow to talk to someone who might be studying the effect of global warming on the turtles. Tilde and Ev return to Bittersweet and Ev, who is in a bad mood, locks herself in the bedroom. May locks herself in the bathroom to read Indo's book. May soon learns that the book is the diary of Kitty Winslow, Birch and Indo's mother. Kitty writes of B. and their life and May assumes she means her husband, Bard. Based on the diary entries, May determines that the journal was started after the Great Depression started in 1929.

The next day, Ev senses that May is mad at her and May tells her that she was upset that Ev didn't tell her beforehand that she was going to Montreal with Tilde and that she could just abandon May like that. Ev and May make up and spend a wonderful evening together, one that May will recall one day as the last one of its kind.



In Chapter 26, May wakes and realizes that Galway will be returning today and she will have to decide whether to ask him about the woman who answered his home phone. May joins Ev and John in his truck and she soon learns that they are going to John's mother's (Mrs. LaChance) cottage to tell her something. Ev is convinced that Mrs. LaChance hates her and she is reluctant to enter the house. Mrs. LaChance sits in a wheelchair and is cared for by a woman named Aggie who had been John's nanny. When Mrs. LaChance sees Ev, she gets hysterical and orders her out of her house.

Ev runs out and May follows trying to help Ev understand that it's possible that Mrs. LaChance doesn't like Ev because the Winslows have taken care of her for years after her husband died. Ev sends May to get John and May can hear Mrs. LaChance that John can love any girl but a Winslow girl.

In Chapter 27, it is Winloch Day and everyone must wear white clothes as they participate in the day's festivities of food, football and fireworks. May dresses in a new white dress that Ev had bought her in Montreal and they help Tilde with party preparations. When Galway's name comes up, Lu suggests that he's probably with his girlfriend and May tries to remain calm. Later on, with all the Winslows dressed in white and gathered on Trillium's lawn, May realizes that she is now a part of the Winslow world represented by the photo that had hung in her and Ev's dorm room.

Later in the day, Ev's Aunt CeCe joins the family party and May thinks that she still looks devastated by her son's suicide. Only a few people move to greet her and May notices that Birch and Indo are not among them. Tilde rushes in and whispers something in CeCe's ear and CeCe replies that she's not going to ruin anything.

Analysis

Secrecy is a way of life with the Winslows. When May stops by to see Indo, Birch acts suspiciously and tells her that Indo is napping. May can't help but feel that Birch has done or said something to silence Indo from being so free with the family stories she shares with May and how she encourages May to dig further and further into the Winslow archives.

Birch plunges May even further into the aura of secrecy by aligning her with his intentions of keeping tabs on Ev. Birch makes it clear that Ev is prone to lying to get what she wants and Birch wants someone with some credibility like May to keep an eye on her. If May were having second thoughts about dealing in the family's secrets, she's in no position to back out now. By aligning with Birch, she has agreed to behave like he does and she has crossed the threshold of questionable behavior. Sometimes the line between good and evil can be very thin.

It is interesting and ironic that the Winslows must all wear white clothing for the Winloch Day festivities. The color white is usually used to convey purity and innocence and it's becoming clear that very few of the Winslows could hold up to much scrutiny on their motives and behaviors.



Discussion Question 1

In what ways has Ev disappointed May so far this summer, including lying about the inspection of Bittersweet?

Discussion Question 2

Why would May think that Mrs. LaChance hates Ev because the Winslows have taken care of her since the death of her husband?

Discussion Question 3

If Galway has a girlfriend, why can't May just let it go and stop thinking about it?

Vocabulary

dismissive, subsequent, revelation, tousled, compatriots, scrutiny, elaborate, ramifications, dissembling, archive, intractable, noncommittal, enraptured, dinghy, naivete, gamut, precarious, ogled, thrum, rigor mortis, hewed, feigned, unabashedly, transgression, eccentricity, impeccable, smithereens, eavesdropping, pristine, solemnity, sherpa, chastised, rift



Chapters 28 - 33

Summary

In Chapter 28, May enjoys the party for awhile but then rambles toward Galway's cottage where she spends a little time poking around outside. Suddenly, May hears a woman's scream coming from the direction of Athol's cottage so she heads that way. When she arrives, she sees Athol having sex with the au pair on an outside table. May runs back to the party where she encounters Ev who tells her that she is pregnant but May must keep it a secret.

In Chapter 29, May does some calculations and realizes that Ev was pregnant before they came to Winloch and wonders whose baby Ev is carrying. The next morning, Ev tells May that she and John have been planning to leave as soon as she receives her trust money. May is furious that Ev has had secret plans that would include abandoning May. When Ev sees how much the news has hurt May she tells her not to worry because they aren't leaving now after all because he wants to bring his mother and Ev won't do that.

Since Ev's plans no longer include May, May dives into Indo's diary in the hopes that she'll please her and inherit her cottage as promised. May notes that Kitty gives days and seasons in her diary but she never states the year. Among the entries about her life, Kitty notes that "We are being joined this week by Claude, Paul, and Henri" (pg. 190). She also writes something that saddens May: "B. has been carrying on with one of the maids, P. He has assured me it's over, but it is a mess nonetheless, one I shall be paying for myself, that weighs heavily upon me" (pg. 190).

May is reading Kitty's diary when she is interrupted by Galway who has come to apologize to May for not coming for Winloch Day and asks if he can take her out to make up for it.

In Chapter 30, May tells Ev that she is going out with Galway and Ev admonishes her to be careful and not to get her hopes up about joining the Winslow family. Lu has been spending lots of time with a marine biologist from the university but they still haven't discovered what has happened to the turtles. One day May joins Lu and Owen for a trip across the bay to gather more samples and it is easy to see Lu's commitment to the project.

In Chapter 31, Galway arrives to take May out but she is upset because she is underdressed. Galway insists that there is no need for her to change but she ends up leaving the restaurant because she feels uncomfortable. May confronts Galway about the woman who had answered his home phone when she called and he says that he is getting out of a bad relationship. The woman had been a friend of his and he hoped it could have been more but it didn't work out. They go to a burger joint which saves the evening. May reveals to Galway that she has a brother who has taught her that she is



capable of things that other people are not. Galway contends that she can't be bad and May knows that she is going to get what she wants: Galway.

In Chapter 32, Lu, Ev and May set out for Flat Rocks to swim and sun. May watches others in the Winslow family and their children playing in the water and is happy when Galway shows up to spend time with her. Later in the afternoon, Tilde joins them and watches the little ones who are in various stages of undress as they play. Suddenly, Tilde spots eight-year-old Hannah who is swimming nude and she shouts to her to put her swimsuit on immediately. When Hannah doesn't move quickly enough to suit Tilde, Tilde marches toward the girl and roughly wraps her in a towel.

In Chapter 33, May and Galway return to Bittersweet after dinner to get John and Ev to go skinny-dipping. Lu, Owen and some of their friends also go along. May boldly undresses before Galway and they dive in, happy to float in the cool water at night. Galway and May eventually leave to go to Galway's cottage and they make love for the first time but not before May makes Galway promise that he is no longer with his girlfriend.

Analysis

The author has left a wealth of information in this section regarding the past and its impact on the present. She has planted nuggets of foreshadowing that will come to fruition as the story extends and the clues she presents here are critically important to the understanding of the book.

May's intention of becoming one of the Winslows is tested when she learns that Ev has had plans to run away with John. Up until this point, it seems as if May has just been flirting with the idea of ingratiating herself into Ev's family but now she's serious. She knows that inheriting Indo's cottage may be an impossibility due to family rules, but now that Ev, her meal ticket, may be disappearing, she determines that if she is to become a Winslow she must find some dirt in their history. Blackmail is as good a reason as any to get what you want; at least that's what she is learning from being around the Winslows.

This is the beginning of May's test as to her true character. What is she willing to do to get what she wants. The inner conflict of good vs. evil is taking hold and it will be interesting to see what May decides. She has already alluded to the fact that she is capable of evil when she tells Galway that she has a brother and that he had taught her that she can do things that other people can't. Up until now, May's brother has been a secret so May fits right in with the culture of secrecy bred by the Winslows.

Kitty's diary also provides so much information for the reader regarding the Winslow family indiscretions which will be revealed at the end of the story. As elements of foreshadowing, she plants the seemingly innocuous idea of "Paul, Claude, and Henri" coming to visit. They are more than mere house guests who are staying until they decide where to go next. There is a sinister element to their arrival and the author will



reveal, through May's discoveries, the true meaning, and the nature of the Winslows' surprising wealth after the Great Depression.

The family also has huge secrets when it comes to inappropriate sexual behavior and the author alludes to it when Kitty writes in her journal that "B. is carrying on with a maid." This is not simple indiscretion with the help; there are surprises and far-reaching consequences to come. Related to this is Tilde's frantic reaction to seeing eight-year-old Hannah playing and swimming in the nude. Inappropriate behavior is widespread in this family and has been for many years. Tilde, as the reader will soon see, takes on the role of championing for those who are most vulnerable in the Winslow universe.

Discussion Question 1

How has Ev betrayed May by revealing that she has plans to run away with John?

Discussion Question 2

Why does May get so upset when Galway takes her to a nice restaurant and she thinks that she isn't dressed appropriately?

Discussion Question 3

How does May plan to work herself into the Winslow family?

Vocabulary

gradual, festivities, yapping, banish, sparse, sobriety, rutting, au pair, melodramatic, Tannenbaum, intrusion, drafty, incessantly, obsessed, fathom, fortitude, blustery, condescending, realm, disgruntled, provocative, impeccably, bistro, frites, camaraderie, maitre d', inadvertently, risotto, elite, vague, gesture, sulked, gaping, bickered, platonic, sparred



Chapters 34 - 39

Summary

In Chapter 34, May awakens in Galway's cottage and when he wakes, they go to the Dining Hall where Galway fixes them breakfast. Afterwards, they head to the attic to dig into the archives again. They discover that Banning Winslow (Birch's grandfather), had deposited two hundred thirty five thousand dollars into his account in May of 1933. Huge deposits were made in the following months until there are millions in the account. They can't determine where the money came from; all they know is that Bard (Birch's father) married Kitty in September of 1932. May and Galway are soon interrupted by the sound of Birch's voice coming from downstairs. Galway goes to speak to him but May can't hear what they're saying.

In Chapter 35, Galway has to return to Boston for work and promises that soon he will tell the family about his relationship with May. May returns to Bittersweet and sleeps eighteen hours before she realizes that Ev is gone. May recalls her promise to Birch to let him know if Ev is ever in trouble so she dresses and heads out for Trillium but she stops at Indo's cottage first. May finds Indo lying unconscious on the floor in a pile of clothes. May screams for help and Lu and Owen run toward her and then rush to Trillium to call 911. When Indo comes to, she doesn't recall what happened to her and tells May that she doesn't want any doctors. She then launches into a diatribe about blood money the Winslows created and still live on. Indo's mother had made her promise to keep the secret but she can't do it anymore. She advises May to pay attention to the "when" of things and to bring the Winslows down.

In Chapter 36, Lu comes to Bittersweet to tell May that she is being sent to sleepaway camp in Maine to separate her and Owen. Lu asks May to intervene with her parents but May can't get involved. May packs a few things in a bag to spend the day at the beach but she is stopped by the arrival of Birch, Tilde and Lu. Lu has told her parents that Ev is gone and Birch is furious that May didn't tell him. Birch demands to know where John took her but May doesn't know. Before they leave, Birch tells May that Indo's episode the other day is a downturn of her cancer which has spread to her brain. He tells May to not pay attention to any eccentric ideas that Indo may have given her. Birch then asks May if she has talked to Daniel lately and he understands that he gets good treatment at the facility where he lives. Birch reminds May of her promise to keep him informed about Ev and May is shocked into silence.

In Chapter 37, May is shaken by Birch's words and wonders how much he knows about her life. May considers that maybe Birch is an ally and thinks about throwing Kitty's journal into the woods where she is taking a walk but doesn't. May comes upon a cottage she has never seen before and is surprised to find that CeCe lives there and she invites May in for lunch.



In Chapter 38, CeCe's cottage is rundown but spotless inside. May tells CeCe of Indo's cancer and CeCe is not surprised that Indo is dying from it because she has lived on anger, blame and deceit for years. May asks about Jackson and CeCe tells her that before he shot himself, Jackson had had met with Indo at her home in Boston, Genevra at school and then Birch at his home. In the hopes that CeCe might be comforted by seeing her mother's writing, May shows Kitty's journal to CeCe. CeCe tells May that Kitty was not her mother; she is the daughter of a woman named Annabella, a maid seduced by Bard. Annabella was dismissed and Bard and Kitty raised CeCe.

While looking at the journal, CeCe notes that the entries were written in monthly order but in different years. May asks CeCe about the journal entry about B. carrying on with one of the maids, P., and CeCe gets upset and tells May that she has to leave and not tell anyone she was at CeCe's cottage. She advises CeCe to be careful because the family will make her do things she doesn't want to do and they'll never let her forget them. No one is safe according to CeCe.

In Chapter 39, May returns to Bittersweet and pulls out all the old calendars that she and Ev had stored away in the crawl space when they got rid of Aunt Antonia's old things. May takes them and the journal to the bathroom and locks herself in so she can compare Kitty's journal with calendar dates and years. After reviewing more journal entries, May realizes that the B. she was writing about could have been Birch, not Bard. If that's the case, then it could very well have been Birch, and not Bard, who had carried on with the maid, P. May startles herself when she recalls that Mrs. LaChance's name is Pauline.

Analysis

Birch's reach is extensive, and he has access to information that can hurt people. Also, he is not afraid to use it as a threat or manipulation tool. An example of this is when Birch asks May if she's talked to Daniel lately and he's glad to hear that he gets such good care at the facility where he lives. May has kept her brother, Daniel, and his residence at a special home a secret this summer because it's a private matter she doesn't want to discuss with the Winslows. Clearly, Birch has done investigation into May's past to find topics and events that could embarrass her or make her vulnerable in the event that he needs to silence her. He does just that with the mention of Daniel. It will be revealed that May had a lot of care for her disabled brother, Daniel, and almost let him drown on purpose one day so that she might be relieved of this burden of care. This accident resulted in his needing special care in a medical facility, a source of great pain and guilt for May who tries to keep that part of her past quiet. Birch is masterful in manipulating people and knowing how to find their vulnerable spots so he can get them to do what he wants. Although May has suspected Birch of such unethical behavior in the past, this is the first time he has done it to her and she is shocked by his audacity and the extent of his cruelty.



Discussion Question 1

Why is Indo so fixed on May's discovering the Winslows' big secret and exposing the family in some way?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Birch try to attribute Indo's eccentricities to a return of her cancer?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Birch's mention of May's brother, Daniel, rattle May?

Vocabulary

nestled, exhalations, halyards, giddiness, mussed, insatiable, scrutiny, transformation, roused, bile, pessimism, gruff, vehemently, exasperated, sentimentality, sulkily, exasperated, scoffed, prerogative, disdain, covered, eccentric, innocuous, shroud, asthmatic, philosophical, au contraire, illegitimate, chronological, revelation, barricaded, oblivion, murky, lament



Chapters 40 - 44

Summary

In Chapter 40, May determines that Kitty's journal spans not one year, but fifty, and that the B. Kitty wrote about could have been her husband, Bard, or her son, Birch. If the maid, P., was Pauline, that could mean that Birch is John's father and John is Ev's half brother. If Ev is pregnant with John's baby, then she is pregnant with her half brother's child. All this news makes May want to run away from Winloch but before she goes, she decides to hide the journal under a floor board on Bittersweet's porch. May packs her essentials and heads out into the night hoping to get to a phone at the country store and call her mother.

May stops at the Dining Hall to leave the papers about Kitty's journal and calendar in the attic archives and is shocked to see that the attic is completely bare. May runs out of the hall and begins the trek out of Winloch. Before long, a truck approaches and she realizes that it is John and Ev so she flags them to stop. Ev pulls May into the truck at the same time that she tells her that she got married.

In Chapter 41, John and Ev take May to Bittersweet and John states that he is going to see his mother and Ev wants to know if he is going to tell her about their plan to leave in a couple days because Ev's trust money has come through. John doesn't answer and May follows him out to his truck wanting to know if he is going to let Ev leave her there. May realizes she is being petulant and asks John for a ride to town the next time he goes. Ev tells May that she and John will be going to California and John wants to take his mother along but Ev doesn't want that. Ev then shocks May by telling her that Galway is married.

The next morning, May confronts Masha about the maids who had worked at Winloch, especially any whose names started with P. To force Masha into talking, May tells her that Ev and John are sleeping together. Masha doesn't want to say but eventually tells May that there had only been one maid whose name began with P.

In Chapter 42, Lu wakes May up to tell her that she is leaving for camp. John arrives soon afterward, and May considers telling him that he and Ev are half siblings. John offers to take May to town so they jump into his truck and head out of Winloch. May insinuates that John's mother may know something that prevents her from liking Ev so John screeches to a halt and demands to know. May has no choice but to tell John that Ev is his half sister.

In Chapter 43, John doesn't say a word, just opens the truck door so May can leave. May doesn't blame John for leaving her on the road because the news that he and Ev are half siblings is shocking. When May finally reaches the country store, she has decided that she doesn't want to talk to her mother so she buys some licorice and walks



the six miles back to Winloch. May doesn't know what to tell Ev so they just wait for John to return.

In Chapter 44, the next morning Ev is upset because John was supposed to pick her up early and hasn't shown up yet so she and May set out to find him. As they approached John's mother's cottage, they can hear his dog barking as if she's exhausted. When they enter the cottage, they find that Pauline has been strangled to death. They can still hear the dog whining so they head outside. Ev takes off to find John and May lets the dog free from under the house where someone had blocked her exit with an old door. May rushes to catch up with Ev and they see John's dead body lying on the rocks under a cliff.

Analysis

Life at Winloch is getting more complicated and heavy with secrets and May doesn't know how to handle it. She has begun to uncover secrets about Birch's parenting not only John but also her cousin, Jackson. This indiscreet and inappropriate behavior is only the tip of the iceberg of what is to come related to Birch's character and behavior. Nothing is like it seems to May anymore and she feels a need to escape. But what keeps her from running away? May has a curious nature but she is still driven by a strong desire to live a more privileged life, the American Dream of wealth and position, and inside she wants to know if there is still any hope for her in this area anymore.

Even though Birch's behavior is reprehensible, May is even more shocked by the fact that Ev not only knows about John being her half brother, but she had actually pursued a relationship with him and is pregnant with his child. Ev had always lived a life that was so different from May's but now May sees that the differences are too many for her to be comfortable with. It's then that May decides to tell John the truth about his relationship to Ev but it's not clear if she's doing it for John's benefit or hers. May knows that if Ev leaves with John to move to California, May's dreams of becoming integrated further into the Winslow family will evaporate and she doesn't want that to happen.

May's piecing together of some of the secrets has put people on a dangerous slide to tragedy. John and his mother are the first victims. It is assumed that John has strangled his mother after he learns from May that Birch is his biological father. John's apparent suicide as a result of guilt also extends from May's revelations of Winslow secrets. But who should own the guilt? The person who discovered and revealed the facts or the person who committed the offending behavior to begin with? This will be a question whose answer will be revealed as the story extends but the author wants the reader to consider all possibilities at this point.

Discussion Question 1

What are the potential problems if it is confirmed that Birch is John's father?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Ev wait until now to tell May that Galway is married?

Discussion Question 3

Does it appear as if John has killed his mother after learning that Birch Winslow is his father?

Vocabulary

spanned, imbued, paranoia, decoder, recesses, mirage, wretched, petty, bleary, jostled, paternity, minutiae, macadam, repentant, collages, wheedling, insistent, glower, relentless, contend, barricade



Chapters 45 - 50

Summary

In Chapter 45, May locks Ev in the bathroom at Bittersweet and goes to the Dining Hall to call Galway to tell him what has happened to John and his mother. May is convinced that John killed his mother after May had told him that Birch is his father. Apparently, he then jumped to his death out of guilt. The police took May and Ev's statements and Galway questions her about what she had said to John yesterday but May claims that she can't remember. May then confronts Galway about his being married and orders him out of the cottage.

No one can find John's truck and because Ev knows that John wouldn't let it out of his sight, Ev is convinced that someone else had murdered John and his mother and drove away in his truck. One morning, May notices that the bolts in the cottage have been removed and the holes sanded and painted over.

In Chapter 46, May finally rouses after days of sleep and heads to Flat Rocks where she unties a dinghy to row for a bit. She is startled by Tilde who gets into the boat with her. Tilde tells May that John's truck has been found in Canada. Apparently a drunk found it parked behind the local bus station, stole it and drove it north. A storm rushes in and Tilde helps May row the boat to a little cove for shelter. Tilde then begins to tell secrets about her life with Birch and how she was so young when she married that she didn't know what being a Winslow would be about. Tilde tells May that if she wants to be a Winslow, she shouldn't mistake knowledge for power and to not mistake silence for blindness. Tilde warns May that she must keep Winslow secrets or no one will be able to protect her.

In Chapter 47, May wakes Ev and directs her to eat and dress because they are going to Bead Beach. Lu had once explained to May that when the wind swept in off the outer bay and stirred up the clay from the lake bottom, it would sweep the clay onto the sand where it would dry in bead-like shapes. May chooses this time to tell Ev that John was her half brother. Ev simply smiles and tells May that Jackson killed himself because someone told him that Birch was his father. May realizes now that not only is Birch CeCe's brother but also the father of her child, Jackson.

Ev also reveals that she knew John was her half brother and that everybody knows that Birch can't control himself. Birch is partially forgiven, though, because he always took care of CeCe and Pauline and their children. May thinks of the bolts that Tilde had installed on the doors of the cottage and wonders if Tilde has actually been trying to protect her. Ev suddenly strips down, jumps into the water and swims toward the horizon. May lets her swim and heads back toward the cottage.

In Chapter 48, May stops at Indo's cottage and finds Aggie, Mrs. LaChance's nurse, visiting. Aggie feels terrible that John has killed his mother and says that she should



have never left her alone with him that night. May finds Indo propped up in bed and goes on a tirade about Birch's inappropriate sexual behavior and wonders why no one in the Winslow family ever stopped him. Indo speaks as if Birch is incorrigible but completely incapable of the things May accuses him of. Then it occurs to May that Birch had probably violated Indo too. Indo loses her temper and says that the poison has infiltrated the whole family.

May is shocked when Indo accuses her of being greedy to become a Winslow and learn all the secrets. She declares that May never wanted to help her bring her family down, she only wanted to assimilate. Indo further shocks May by telling her that none of the things are Indo's to give because they are all stolen. Indo states that her mother kept track of everything that was stolen in her journal in the beginning. When the family faced ruin, they began to steal things like goods, deeds and investments. Indo knows that the family will never make reparations, which is what Indo had wanted, and not even May can help Indo now.

In Chapter 49, May runs from Indo's cottage not sure of who she is anymore. For the first time that summer, May wonders what her brother, Daniel, would do. She also knows that she has to find out what the Winslows had stolen and continue to steal. May runs to Bittersweet to look at Kitty's journal again but Ev is sitting on the porch near the floorboard under which May had hidden the book. As they talk Ev realizes the floorboard is loose and pries it up only to find that there's nothing there. May demands that Ev give her the journal but Ev doesn't know what she's talking about. That night they go to bed but May lies awake wondering where the journal could be. Just as she's about to drift off to sleep, May hears sounds outside and gets up to see Galway outside and he says that he need her help with Lu.

In Chapter 50, once they are on the road, Galway tells May that Masha received a phone call tonight from Marian, the counselor at Lu's camp in Maine. Apparently Lu has attempted suicide and has been depressed for three weeks so someone from the family should come right away. As they drive through the night, Galway apologizes for lying to May about being married. He states that the marriage was a legal contract to help someone. When they arrive at the camp, Marian thanks them for coming.

Analysis

Secrets can be devastating, toxic, and in some cases, fatal. The secret that was kept from John about who his father is has apparently pushed him over the edge, pushing him to kill his mother and then leap to his death in grief and guilt. The depth of the secret plunges even deeper when Ev admits to May that she has known all along about John's parentage and pursued a sexual relationship in spite of his being her half brother. Perhaps Ev has inherited her father's proclivity for indiscriminate sexual behavior, lying and manipulation to get her own way.

Tilde, however, represents a different side of secrets. When she has a frank conversation with May in the dinghy, she reveals that she not only knows about her



family's secrets, but she also knows how to use them to her advantage and protect those who are vulnerable. Tilde wants May to be more realistic about how people behave and to use secrets to her advantage. This will be necessary if May chooses to become one of the Winslows. May must also abide by the Winslow code of keeping secrets because that's the only way she'll be protected by the family.

May is not without her own secrets too. She thinks again about her brother, Daniel, whom the author has chosen not to reveal too much just yet. Daniel's situation will soon become a factor in Birch's ability to blackmail May and her secret will no longer be private.

Even Galway has secrets, the main one is that he is married and had done so in order to help someone. May will need more details before she feels comfortable with this knowledge.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways does Tilde show to May that she's more in control of the Winslow family than May had thought?

Discussion Question 2

What does May think about Ev when she realizes that Ev knew the truth that Birch was the father of both John and Jackson?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Indo accuse May of being greedy?

Vocabulary

cascading, barricade, traumatized, sear, insistence, wakefulness, duvet, specter, indignant, speculations, matricide, thunderheads, churned, assent, mythic, relentless, percolating, anguish, reinvigorate, terrain, orbs, inexorable, scrawny, rickety, sanctum, dowager, stamina, metaphorically, covetous, bankruptcy, legacy, disarray, jimmying, godforsaken, oblivious, deviate, specter, effusive



Chapters 51 - 55

Summary

In Chapter 51, Marian tells Galway and May that she hadn't called anyone about Lu before now because Lu didn't want her to and seemed terrified at the prospect. She leads them to Lu's cabin, telling them that she doesn't know what set Lu off but whatever it was had been traumatic. Lu is overwhelmed to see May and Galway. May can see that Lu is distraught so she sits by her on her bunk and encourages her to talk about what is going on.

In Chapter 52, Lu tells May and Galway that she had only pretended to go to camp when all the while she hid after Tilde dropped her at the bus station. Lu, posing as Tilde, called camp to say that Lu would not be coming to camp. Instead Lu and Owen had planned to live in an abandoned cottage on Turtle Point. John had picked Lu up at the bus stop, worried about deceiving Lu's parents but believing that Lu and Owen's love should be given a chance. Lu was to hide under a tarp in the bed of John's truck so no one would see that she didn't go away to camp.

John parked the truck at his mother's house and Lu waited the coast was clear and she could get out. She realized that another truck had pulled in and parked very close to John's truck so Lu is stuck for awhile. When Lu heard shouting, she decided to get out of the truck bed but when she heard a woman's scream, she went closer to the cottage. When Lu peeked in the window, she saw Birch strangling Mrs. LaChance and John was lying on the floor. John woke, saw what was happening and chased Birch outside. Lu followed them but stayed in the shadows of the forest. Birch and John were physically fighting until John lost his balance and fell backward over the edge of the cliff.

In Chapter 53, Galway is not surprised to learn that his father murdered John and his mother. Lu continues her story and says that she had nowhere to go for help because her parents thought she was at camp so she took John's truck and drove to the bus station where she eventually took a bus to camp. Galway leaves to speak to Marian and Lu and May pack Lu's things. Galway returns, tells May to put down Lu's suitcase and tells May to get in the truck. Galway talks privately to Lu for a few minutes and then gets in the truck, leaving Lu. May is frantic because they can't leave Lu but Galway tells her to trust him.

May is outraged that that they are leaving Lu. Suddenly Galway stops the car near a large boulder and soon Lu sprints out of the woods and gets in the car. Galway had to create a scenario where it looked like he was leaving Lu at camp so that Birch would not know that Galway had rescued her. Galway also silenced Marian by telling her he knows about her gambling problem and bribes her to keep her mouth shut about Lu. Marian can then tell Birch that Lu ran away.



In Chapter 54, Lu falls asleep and Galway tells May that when he was younger, he found his father raping an au pair. Days passed and nothing happened until one night Athol accused Galway of cheating at cards and Birch beat Galway with a fireplace poker, breaking Galway's ribs, wrist and ankle. May wonders what concessions Tilde had made that allowed her to tolerate Birch's behavior just so she could remain a Winslow. Galway wonders what could have driven Birch to go to Mrs. LaChance's cottage in such a rage that fateful day and May tells him that she had told John that Birch was his father and he was upset. It is possible that John wanted to confront Birch and invited him to the cottage. Birch had been careful to drive a maintenance truck so even if someone had suspected him of murder, no one would believe it was him because he doesn't usually drive those trucks.

May also tells Galway about Ev's being aware that John was her half brother and how she is pregnant with his child. She also told him that Jackson was the result of an incestuous conception between Birch and CeCe and that news had driven him to suicide. Birch had raped his sisters and probably other female relatives too. Galway drives a little while longer and then pulls off to the side of the road, exits the car and vomits. Later that day they stop for a meal and Galway tells May that someone is waiting for them in a town called White River Junction.

In Chapter 55, in White River Junction, Galway hands Lu over to Galway's wife, Marcella, who is going to help Lu leave the country and be safe until her father is either in jail or is dead. When they have a few minutes alone, Marcella tells May that Galway had helped her and her mother get to the U.S., even marrying her so that she could get a green card, and she is indebted to him. Before Lu leaves with Marcella, she promises to send May an untraceable email as soon as she is safe.

Analysis

Lu continues with the Winslow family practice of secrets. Not only did she not go to camp, she lied to the camp personnel by posing as her mother. She doesn't really see anything wrong with these deceptions because she has lived in a culture of secrecy her whole life. Ironically, it is Lu's secretive behavior that ultimately reveals the source of much of the family's distress when she witnesses her father kill John and his mother. It is sad that Galway is not even surprised that his father is a murderer. He has lived a life of abuse and speculation about his father's behavior; the murders simply validate what he has already known.

It is interesting to note that even though most of the Winslows go along with Birch's behavior and secrets, there are some like Jackson, John and Galway who know that this type of behavior is not right. They are the only ones brave enough to challenge Birch, knowing that they risk wrath and retribution from him.

The American Dream personified by the Winslows is enacted by Galway in the immigrant work that he does. Not only does he help people achieve better lives by coming to America, he has personally invested himself when he marries a woman so



that she may get a green card, enter the country and create a better life for herself and her mother. Birch has berated Galway for his lifestyle but Galway truly lives his convictions even though he is in opposition to his father most of the time.

Discussion Question 1

How did Lu plan to spend the remainder of the summer and how did she think she could get away with not going to camp?

Discussion Question 2

What has happened in Galway's life that he is not surprised that his father is capable of murder?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Galway feel comfortable entrusting Lu to Marcella's care?

Vocabulary

wielded, gloominess, gestured, emerged, emaciated, unbeknownst, entwined, motive, trauma, incomprehension, clatter, flung, anonymous, bemused, abated, precaution, confront, subsequent, elopement, incestuous, delving, intrigue, sympathetic, sauntered, admiration



Chapters 56 - 60

Summary

In Chapter 56, Galway and May return to Winloch, ready to confront Birch in front of Tilde. They intend to tell him that there was a witness to the murders of Mrs. LaChance and John. When Birch learns that Lu has run away from camp, he will suspect that Lu is the witness but she will be far away from his grasp by that time. When Galway and May enter the Dining Hall, all the Winslows are gathered for some sort of ceremony. Birch smiles smugly at Galway and May and when he starts to speak, May realizes that this is a memorial service for Indo. May realizes that the best way to memorialize Indo would be to carry on her work so she exits the room and runs as fast as she can.

In Chapter 57, May runs to Birch and Tilde's cottage to look again at the Van Gogh painting. Gammy Pippa surprises May who didn't know that anyone else was in the house. She tells May that Jackson had come to her before he died wanting to know who he was and Gammy Pippa had told him. May can tell that Gammy Pippa knows that it was May who told John about his parentage too and it makes May uneasy. She tells May that the truth is a noble thing but May better be prepared for all the consequences that come with it, especially if she plans on becoming part of this family. May wants to know the truth about the Van Gogh and Gammy Pippa tells her to take it down and look at the back. May does as she is told and sees a swastika surrounded by German words.

In Chapter 58, May recalls meeting Indo for the first time and how she alluded to Paradise Lost, the book May was carrying. Indo told May that the reference to the fruit of the forbidden tree, the apple, represented more than knowledge; it symbolized moral responsibility and the constant decisions between right and wrong. Indo had advised May to resist Lucifer's rhetoric and how darkness infects those who can't resist a good tale.

May returns to the Dining Hall where Indo's memorial service has ended. Galway is the only person to speak to May and she can't help but wonder if he knows the secret of the swastika on the back of the Van Gogh. Eventually most of the Winslows depart, leaving only Birch, Tilde, Athol, Banning, Galway and Ev. Galway speaks first and tells Birch that he and May know that he has murdered Pauline and John, that they have a witness. Ev becomes distraught. Galway continues with the itemization of Birch's crimes including the rape of his sisters, maids, and probably many more. Galway tells Birch that he and May will be going to the police to tell them everything.

Ev blurts out that May has been writing terrible things about the Winslows in letters to her mother and claims that Ev is a lesbian. May is caught off guard by Ev's betrayal. Galway reiterates that he is going to the police because he wants justice.

In Chapter 59, Birch zeroes in on May, telling her that her parents had assured him that she would perform well in the position they had offered as Ev's chaperone. Birch



declares that May has failed miserably, seducing his married son, nosing about in Indo's business, allowing Ev to elope. Birch states that arrangements like these used to be common: an ugly girl would serve as companion to a privileged girl, sometimes for a lifetime. May contests what Birch is saying but is silenced when she learns that her parents have been paid a large sum of money for May's time with the Winslows.

Birch finds it ironic that May can make criminal claims about him when May has also committed a crime by trying to kill her own brother. Birch tells the story about how May was responsible for her developmentally delayed brother because her parents worked all the time. One day, when May had tired of the care of her brother, she took him to the river and let him wade into the water and be swept away. Her brother didn't die but was never the same and had to be institutionalized. May admits that she tried to kill her brother and Birch orders her from the cottage.

Birch then speculates that the witness Galway had mentioned is going to be boarding an international flight with false identification which is a crime and that she could be stopped and sent to an institution because she is mentally unstable. May tries to negotiate with Birch, offering to stay silent about the murders in exchange for letting Lu go. Tilde interrupts and wants to know what May is talking about. May tells Birch that Lu has plans to contact May as soon as she is safe so May will know whether or not Birch got her and May will go to the police. They shake hands on the agreement and Birch leaves the cottage.

In Chapter 60, it is several years later and May recalls the fateful day when she challenged Birch and how she had agreed to keep her mouth shut about the murders, but not about the swastika on the back of the Van Gogh. She thinks about how the Winslows' fortune rose just as Hitler ascended and how she speculated that they profited from the deaths of murdered and encamped Jews during the Holocaust. As May walks toward the cottage, Tilde pulls up beside her and tells her to get in the car. Tilde likes May's influence on her children and doesn't want her to leave.

Tilde tells May that she had requested her to be Ev's college roommate and that every person has a price. Tilde tells May that Indo had tried to enlist many people to help her bring down the Winslows. Tilde offers to return the Van Gogh if May will agree to stay. She will locate the descendants and establish a foundation. Tilde encourages May to align with the Winslows and opportunities will abound. Tilde then pulls Kitty's journal from her bag revealing that it was she who had taken it from under the floorboard where May had hidden it. Tilde flips to the page where Kitty wrote that they were going to host Claude, Paul and Henri. Tilde explains that "Claude" meant a painting by Claude Monet; "Paul" meant a painting by Paul Klee; and "Henri" meant a painting by Henri Rousseau. Tilde is offering May an invitation to make a difference in the wrongs that had been committed.

Tilde admits that all the years she was married to Birch, she could bear his behavior as long as her babies were safe. When Birch killed John and threatened to kill Lu, Tilde knows that no one is safe now. As fate would have it, Birch went swimming late that summer and had a heart attack and died. As Birch's coffin is lowered into the ground,



Tilde catches May's eye and May knows that Tilde caused Birch's death, probably by giving him a pill of some sort before his morning swim. After Birch's death, a will reveals that Winloch belongs to all remaining Winslows who gather and agree to right the wrongs about the stolen paintings.

In the present day, May and Galway are married with children and she does the best she can to forget the atrocities perpetuated by the Winslows before she was one of them.

Analysis

The story reaches its climax when May confronts Birch about his crimes. Up until this point, there had just been speculation about the Winslows but now May has proof that Birch forced himself sexually on his sisters and other women in the Winslow households. She also has proof about the Van Gogh painting which supports her suppositions that the Winslows had stolen from Jews during World War II and profited from their pain. Birch thinks that he can blackmail May by bringing up the fact that he has been in contact with May's parents and that he has actually paid for May to be Ev's chaperone this summer, all unbeknownst to May.

Birch also shocks May by bringing up the subject of her brother, Daniel. He wants everyone to know that May is also capable of murder because she tried to let her disabled brother drown in a river. Betrayal of personal information is not sacred to Birch and he has no qualms about sharing May's secrets with the rest of the Winslows. Birch, however, is not the only Winslow to have betrayed May. Ev has also betrayed May by essentially abandoning her as the summer progressed, leaving May to fend for herself among the cunning and manipulative Winslows.

Surprisingly, Tilde, who was cold and aloof toward May, has pulled her into her confidence and provides information on how to succeed as a Winslow. She helps May develop a foundation to return or compensate the Jews who had been robbed of their artwork in order to help redeem the Winslow legacy. Perhaps Tilde was the most manipulative Winslow of all; she was able to get rid of her hateful husband by giving him a pill prior to his going swimming so that he would have a heart attack and die, implicating no one.

Discussion Question 1

What does Gammy Pippa reveal to May about the Van Gogh and about truth in general?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of *Paradise Lost* in the book?



Discussion Question 3

Why has Tilde become May's unexpected ally?

Vocabulary

fortified, benevolence, indicted, intoned, devastated, mourner, quiver, materialist, lavish, souk, maniacally, platitudes, hypocrites, buoyantly, anecdote, afterlife, exasperated, histrionics, agitation, magenta, swastika, bookish, stentorian, eulogize, acquisition, chronology, spurring, spewing, wretched, riotously



Characters

Mabel Dagmar

Mabel "May" Dagmar is a dowdy young woman who attends a prestigious East Coast college on a scholarship. She has a frosty relationship with her parents who run a dry cleaning business in Oregon. Mabel is out of place with her sophisticated roommate, Ev Winslow, who befriends her suddenly and invites her to spend the summer at her family's compound on Lake Champlain in Vermont. Mabel is out of place in this world of privilege, but she aspires to more in her life and wishes she could be part of the Winslow clan.

Mabel does have some domestic skills which come in handy when she and Ev share Ev's cottage. She is always out of place with the Winslows, though, because she does not have any money which means she has no new clothes. She has not had the social experiences that they take for granted.

Mabel is more down to earth than most of the Winslows, however, and she has more common sense that allows her to think quickly in emergencies. Mabel has never been in love before, and she falls quickly for the charms of Galway, the Winslow family's black sheep, who also happens to be married. Mabel has a discerning and inquisitive mind which allows her to dig into the family archives and ferret out some unsavory secrets. Mabel has to make the decision about whether or not she wants to be part of this duplicitous group.

Genevra "Ev" Winslow

Genevra "Ev" Winslow is a wealthy girl who attends a prestigious college in New York. She is very spoiled and lives a life of privilege that her roommate, Mabel, can only dream about. Ev is cunning and manipulative in her relationships with people. Mabel slowly becomes disillusioned with Ev after they arrive at Winloch. Ev tells her that she will inherit her cottage, Bittersweet, only if it passes a cleaning inspection by her father. Mabel later learns that Ev has lied about this and only used Mabel to get the hard work completed.

Ev proves to be untrustworthy as she abandons Mabel at different times during the summer. Ev can also be very mean spirited. She calls Mabel derogatory names and treats her poorly when she is not in the mood to deal with Mabel or when Mabel challenges her on something. Ev is not someone who can be a true friend because she sees everyone as a means to an end. This is not surprising, though, because she has witnessed how her father has behaved in this way for years.

Ev exhibits very questionable behavior when she engages in a sexual relationship with John, knowing full well that he is her half brother. Again, Ev behaves in a manner of



getting what she wants, regardless of the circumstances because she has witnessed her father's ruthless behavior all her life.

Birch Winslow

Birch Winslow is the patriarch and head of the Winslow family. He is descended from Samson Winslow, a wealthy businessman who created the Winloch compound for the enjoyment of future generations of Winslows. Birch has a commanding presence which he tempers with conviviality when he wants to do so. Birch takes his responsibility as head of the family very seriously and intervenes in what other family members are doing.

Birch's wealth and position afford him privileges of which he takes full advantage, and he has no qualms about manipulating people to get what he wants. Birch can also be cruel when trying to outwit an opponent and will stop at nothing to squelch someone weaker than he is. Birch's most hideous qualities are his sexual predator behaviors and his ability to commit murder.

Tilde Winslow

Tilde Winslow is Birch Winslow's wife. Tilde is tall, thin and aristocratic. As matriarch of the family, Tilde rules with her husband in the family's personal issues. Tilde can be distant and aloof, even with her children who seem to have no real warmth for her. Tilde, however, is aware of her husband's flaws. She has agreed to overlook them in exchange for living the privileged life of a Winslow. A major duty in her role as Birch's wife is to protect her children from his sexual predator ways. Tilde can be just as calculating as Birch. When she has tired of the crimes he has committed and the fear he has instilled in the family members, Tilde secretly gives Birch a pill which causes his heart attack death while swimming.

Galway Winslow

Galway Winslow is the son of Birch and Tilde Winslow. Galway does not always fit in with the family because he values things other than the pursuit of money. Galway's work helps immigrants and underprivileged people, which is on the opposite end of the spectrum of his family's pursuits. Galway even married a woman so that she could enter the country and get her green card. Galway is smitten with Mabel because she is so different from most of the women in his life. Eventually, he marries her. Galway could be considered the black sheep of the family because he bucks his parents; but, he is the one who is able to help others, especially Lu, when they need protection from his father.



Athol Winslow

Athol Winslow is the eldest child of Birch and Tilde Winslow. He is the heir apparent to the Winslow family and will take over when his father dies. Athol and his wife enjoy the finer things in life. Their cottage is elegant and sophisticated as opposed to some of the others who are more shabby chic in their decor. Athol has some of the same characteristics that his father does, such as ruthlessness and indiscriminate sexual behavior.

Banning Winslow

Banning Winslow is the second son of Birch and Tilde Winslow. Banning is laid back and not intense like the rest of the Winslow family members. Banning is also overweight, so he is unlike the thin members of the family. Banning knows that he will probably never be head of the family. He is content to enjoy the privileges of wealth without the responsibilities.

Lu Winslow

Lu Winslow is the youngest child of Birch and Tilde Winslow. Lu is a sensitive girl who is interested in the natural elements at Winloch. Lu also discovers young love with a boy named Owen. Lu has some idea about her father's ruthlessness, but she is completely disillusioned and terrified when she sees him commit murder. Lu is prepared to testify against her father, but he dies before anything can proceed legally. Lu follows her true passion and becomes a marine biologist.

Linden "Indo" Winslow

Linden "Indo" Winslow is Birch Winslow's sister. She is an eccentric, old woman who engages Mabel immediately upon meeting her to help her in her quest for truth about the family. Because wealth and inheritance was distributed mainly to the males in the family, Indo did not receive as much as her brother. She claims that a valuable Van Gogh painting hanging in his cottage is rightfully hers. Indo is outspoken, but she grew up in another generation and has no real power in the family. She values truth and wants the Winslow family secrets to be revealed and made right to the people who have been affected by their greed and criminal behavior.

John LaChance

John LaChance works for the Winslows at Winloch. Even though he is a laborer and Ev is a girl from a wealthy family, he falls in love with her. His love for Ev intensifies after she tries to make him jealous by seeing another boy. John learns that his biological father is Birch Winslow, which means that he is Ev's half brother. When John attempts



to confront Birch on this news, there is an altercation, and John falls over a cliff to his death.

Mrs. LaChance

Mrs. LaChance is John's mother. She lives in a rundown cottage at Winloch and is taken care of by the Winslow family. Mrs. LaChance is bitter about the Winslows because Birch seduced her when she was a maid for the family and she got pregnant with John. Mrs. LaChance does not like Ev because she is a Winslow. Mrs. LaChance does everything she can to keep John away from her.

CeCe Winslow Booth

CeCe Winslow Booth is a member of the Winslow family and sister to Birch who impregnated her when they were younger. CeCe's son, Jackson, committed suicide when he found out that Birch, his uncle, was his biological father. CeCe mourns for Jackson, while others in the family do not appreciate her emotional drama.

Jackson Booth

Jackson Booth is the son of CeCe and her own brother, Birch. Jackson commits suicide when he discovers that his uncle, Birch, is his biological father.

Masha

Masha is the Winslows' cook at the Dining Hall. She is a plump woman of Russian descent. She does not talk much, but she does not miss anything that goes on in the family.



Symbols and Symbolism

Paradise Lost

All summer, May carries around her copy of *Paradise Lost*, the epic poem written by John Milton in 1667. It is the Biblical story of man's fall from grace, including Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The book is symbolic because of Mabel's perception of Winloch being paradise on earth. However, as Mabel discovers more of the Winslows' secrets, she realizes that Winloch is not a paradise at all. It is merely a beautiful place to visit.

Door Locks

When Mabel first arrives at Winloch, she is baffled by the installation of door locks and bolts on the inside of the cottage door as well as the bedroom and bathroom doors. She later learns that Tilde had them installed to protect Ev and Mabel from Birch's sexual advances.

Manila Folder

Indo has enlisted Mabel's help in trying to locate a manila folder which she claims will hold the details regarding her Van Gogh painting. Symbolically, the folder is a simple object, but it carries Indo's huge hopes for finding out more about her family and her own inheritance.

Van Gogh Painting

The Van Gogh painting that hangs in the Trillium cottage is a rare and valuable piece of art. Indo claims that it was given to her by her mother as an inheritance. However, Mabel learns that the Winslows stole the painting from Jews during World War II so the painting can't possibly truly belong to Indo. It is a beautiful piece of work that symbolizes a horrific period in history and the Winslows' ability to capitalize on other people's grief and misfortune.

Turtles

Lu had grown up watching the turtles on an island at Winloch. When the turtles die mysteriously, she is heartbroken and determined to find out what has caused their deaths. The turtles symbolize the loss of innocence for Lu this summer. Her idyllic childhood dies along with the turtles she loves when she begins to learn the secrets of the Winslow family.



The Diary

Indo gives May her mother's diary in the hopes that May can get to the core of the Winslow family's secrets. Symbolically, May is able to ferret out the family's secrets of the past as she unravels the current issues that plague the Winslows.

Bittersweet

Bittersweet is Ev's cottage at Winloch where she and Mabel spend the summer. She has inherited it from an aunt who has died and it is hers to live in and care for. Symbolically, the name of the cottage, Bittersweet, describes the summer for Ev and May who learns of the family's dark past and secrets that haunt its members. May wanted a perfect summer with the perfect Winslow family. What she got, at best, was bittersweet.

Winslow Family Names

All of the Winslow family members have unusual and distinctive names such as Birch, Tilde, Athol, and Galway which, symbolically, set them apart from less privileged people with common names.

Friendship Bracelet

Lu gives May a friendship bracelet which she has made herself. This is symbolic because Lu has not known her very long but she senses that May is someone whom she can trust. Lu hopes for an authentic relationship because her life has been filled with the cunning manipulations of her family.

Water

Water is symbolic in the book because it features in many transitional arcs for the characters. Tilde sets May straight about being a Winslow in the middle of a thunderstorm on the bay. Birch dies while swimming in the lake. Ev and May are assaulted by a couple of boys with whom they have gone boating. Water typically symbolizes healing and cleansing and in this story, water creates points of transition in which the characters will be forever changed, as if cleansed of their old lives.



Settings

Winloch

Winloch is the Vermont compound owned by the Winslow family. It was established by the family patriarch, Samson Winslow, in the 1800s and has remained with the Winslows ever since. Winloch is a lovely site nestled among pine trees and lakes. It is kept in pristine condition. Each Winslow has a cottage there that is named for a particular flower or plant.

Bittersweet Cottage

Bittersweet Cottage is located in the Winloch compound in Vermont. Ev inherits the cottage after the death of an aunt. She and Mabel spend the summer there.

Trillium Cottage

Trillium Cottage is located in the Winloch compound. It is the grandest cottage on the estate and is the summer home of Birch and Tilde Winslow.

Maine

Maine is the setting for the camp where Lu is sent to get her away from Owen. Galway and May drive to Maine to pick her up when they are notified that she has tried to harm herself as a result of being distraught over witnessing her father murdering two people.

New York

Ev and Mabel attend a prestigious college in New York. They share a dorm room and celebrate Ev's birthday at a grand party there.



Themes and Motifs

Good vs. Evil

Good vs. Evil is a common theme in literature. In *Bittersweet*, Mabel is in the midst of the powerful Winslow family which she hopes to make her own one day. She is drawn in by the allure of wealth and privilege. Before long, she realizes that she will be tested and shocked by many things that she learns about the Winslows. Mabel learns that there is much evil within the family and she must decide to go along with it or fight for what is right.

Mabel learns that the Winslow family accumulated its wealth at the expense of those more unfortunate than themselves. During World War II when Jews were being annihilated by Hitler - the height of evil--the Winslows capitalized on their fate by stealing and selling valuable works of art. Instead of feeling some sense of horror, or even compassion, for the fate of the European Jews, the Winslows took advantage of the situation to further their goals. Mabel hints at this to May because she wants the truth about her family's ill-gotten gains to be revealed. She wants to bring the family down for their behavior.

Mabel also struggles internally with her own code of good vs. evil when she must decide if she wants to lean into what it would take for her to become a Winslow. She is set up as the voice of truth to Birch's criminal behavior, validating her position of good as opposed to Birch's evil nature. Mabel will have to determine if she can learn to exist in the world of the Winslows.

The American Dream

Samson Winslow was a self-made man who built a business empire for the benefit of his family. His father was British, and his mother Scottish. However, Samson wanted the American dream for himself--unlimited possibilities and unending happiness. Part of Samson's dream was the building of the Winloch compound filled with Winslows which would remain in his family long after he was gone.

The American Dream is something that most people aspire to achieve. The opportunity for success and upward mobility for a family as the result of hard work is the ideal for many people. Mabel is no different in her views of what she hopes to achieve for her life. Coming from a modest family, Mabel is in awe of the wealth and privilege enjoyed by the Winslow clan and determines that she wants her piece of that dream. Mabel had not counted on there being a challenge to her ethics, however, when she sets her mind on achieving the dream, and she will have to find a way to live with her own code and get her piece of the Winslow pie.



Galway is the closest of the Winslows when it comes to helping others achieve the American Dream. He marries a woman so that she and her mother can enter the United States and improve their lives.

Secrets

The Winslow family foundation is built on secrets. Mabel gets indoctrinated into this fact on her first day at Winloch when Indo approaches her and asks her to help uncover some family secrets in exchange for inheritance of a cottage. The diary that Indo provides to Mabel is a great source for secrets yet to be revealed. It's interesting to question whether Mabel would be so interested in digging into the family secrets if she did not have an ulterior motive of hopefully becoming a Winslow one day.

The Winslow secrets are not just minor infractions. They have murdered, stolen, and raped their way through history. Mabel is able to determine that after the Great Depression when the Winslows lost all their fortune, they sold fine art stolen from European Jews during World War II. This capitalization on the horrible misfortunes of others shows ruthless and cold characteristics. The Winslows stopped at nothing to advance their own fortunes.

Family secrets also take the shape of Birch's indiscriminate sexual behavior. It is not only documented but also known within the family that he had raped maids, impregnated his sisters, and probably abused other female family members as well. There is no real end to Birch's criminal behavior as he kills John and his mother. Birch's crimes were kept secret because he could afford to buy people's silence.

Wealth and Privilege

Mabel falls in love with the idea of the Winslows from the moment she sees the photo of them dressed in their summer whites on the lawn at Winloch. When she experiences Winloch in person, she is smitten with the wealth and privilege that they take for granted. Never before in her life has May experienced such ease of living among such lush surroundings, where even cottages are finer than the nicest houses she has ever been in.

The Winslows wear their wealth easily, and May envies their long, slim bodies and blonde hair, which are symbols of easy lives with no troubles. Before she had experienced Winloch, May had envied Ev's wardrobe and cannot imagine having such fine things to wear.

All is not as it seems, however, and May soon digs down to discover the flaws and fatal behaviors of the Winslows. Even though their wealth and privilege can buy them many things, they still have deep-rooted psychological problems. An example of how they are treated differently from other people is when John and his mother are found dead and the local police come to Winloch to question Ev and Mabel, not demanding that they come into the police station to be questioned.



Birch's wealth and connections allow him access to private information and he is able to dig up information about Mabel's brother and knows where Lu is headed for supposed safety after Galway tries to help her escape the country. The only one who can match Birch's reach is Tilde and she is the one who also has connections as a result of her wealth and privilege, ultimately ending in Birch's surprise death.

Betrayal

In order to keep secrets private, members of the Winslow family rely on manipulation and the threat of betrayal to keep people quiet. This is most evidenced through Birch's behavior. When May challenges him on his crimes, he very quickly brings up the topic of how May once almost let her disabled brother die in a river.

May first experiences the Winslow betrayal when Ev essentially abandons her as the summer extends. She takes off to spend time with John, leaving May alone much of the time. Then when Ev gets angry with May, she very quickly retaliates, abandoning her and calling her derogatory names.

The ultimate betrayal among the Winslows, though, is Birch's inappropriate sexual behavior with his sisters and probably other women in the Winslow family, too. He betrayed an inherent trust that should exist among siblings when he violated them sexually. It takes an outsider, May, to confront Birch about his crimes of murder and rape. Ironically, Birch never considered that his wife, Tilde, could be capable of betraying him. However, she does in the end when she gives him a pill that will cause him to have a heart attack while swimming.

Styles

Point of View

Bittersweet is told from the first person narrative point of view. This means that the author tells the story directly in the words of the protagonist, Mabel. As the narrator, Mabel uses the pronoun of "I" throughout because the story is being told just as she sees it or experiences 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 Mabel goes from present day to flashbacks in the story, she still maintains the first person narrative point of view. The story is hers, and the reader will learn only what the author wants him or her to learn. The first person narrative point of view tells the narrator's story, and the reader must take into account who the narrator is to understand the perspective. For example, a child will see a story from a different perspective from that of an adult and the reader should make allowances for that.

An example of the first person narrative point of view is when Mabel states, "I had no idea where Ev had been over Christmas break--she certainly hadn't been with me. But I wasn't lying completely--I'd been in Baltimore, forced to endure my Aunt Jeanne's company for the single, miserable week during which the college dorms had been shuttered" (Chapter 2). The author not only provides information from Mabel's perspective about what she did, but also projects into Mabel's thoughts about the impact the actions will have on her life. If this were written in another point of view, the speaker would be able to say that Mabel went to her aunt's in Baltimore for the school holiday.

Language and Meaning

Because Bittersweet is set in modern day, the language is current for the times. The author uses 21st century terminology and euphemisms in narration and dialogue to show authenticity. The author uses things like current movies and pop culture icons so that the modern day audience can relate to them.

The author also keeps the language authentic to the characters. For example, Tilde is cool and aloof which comes through in her dialogue. "'Perhaps you can tell us, Mabel, where our daughter was over Christmas break.' Her voice was reedy and thin, with the brief trace of an accent, indistinguishable as pedigreed or foreign" (Chapter 2). Birch, in contrast, is effusive and engaging until he is trapped or under attack when his dialogue becomes clipped and sarcastic.

Overall, the Winslows are a wealthy family who speak in the dialogue and style of privileged people. They tend to be controlled and sarcastic with very dry senses of humor.

Structure

Bittersweet is comprised of 400 pages that are divided into 60 sequential chapters.



Quotes

Well of course I'm concerned," she said with a pout, "because if we don't get that little hovel shipshape in less than a week, I won't inherit it. And then you'll go home and I'll have to live under the same roof as my mother.

-- Ev (chapter 4 paragraph 8)

Importance: Ev is a spoiled rich girl and she manipulates May into helping her clean her cottage, Bittersweet, for the summer. May later learns from Ev's father that Ev has a history of lying and using people and she has done this to May in order to get her cottage cleaned.

She's just--she's not--she's everything I'm afraid of becoming," I said finally, trying to explain something I'd never said out loud.

-- Mabel (chapter 4 paragraph 6)

Importance: Mabel can't stand her mother and is very impatient with her. Being able to spend the summer with the Winslows is a huge relief to Mabel who dreaded going home to be with her mother all summer. This is something she and Ev have in common.

I don't just need the folder. I need solid evidence of anything untoward.

-- Indo (chapter 16 paragraph 6)

Importance: Indo has enlisted May's help in finding some important information but she isn't able to tell her exactly what it is she's looking for. It's not clear if Indo knows what has to be found and wants someone else to bring it to light or if she really isn't sure what she's looking for but knows that something isn't right somewhere in the Winslow lineage.

What are you, some kind of lesbian?

-- Ev (chapter 18 paragraph 6)

Importance: When May tries to get Ev to stop drinking and behaving inappropriately with Eric, Ev gets instantly mad and lashes out at her. This is yet another example of Ev's cruelty and May is wondering if she has made a bad choice in spending the summer in Ev's world.

We are being joined this week by Claude, Paul, and Henri. B. and I are so looking forward to offering them shelter until they decide where to settle.

-- Kitty (chapter 29 paragraph 1)

Importance: Kitty mentions information about her life in her diary but this statement is important because "Claude, Paul, and Henri" are not people, they are paintings painted by the artists Claude Monet, Paul Klee and Henri Rousseau. The Winslows were the liaison for these famous works of art which were stolen from their Jewish owners during World War II.



B. has been carrying on with one of the maids, P. He has assured me that it is over, but it is a mess nonetheless, one I shall be paying for myself, that weighs heavily upon me.
-- Kitty (chapter 29 paragraph 2)

Importance: Kitty writes in her journal about "B" carrying on with one of the maids. At first, May assumes "B" is Kitty's husband, Bard. It is only later that May uncovers that "B" is Birch, Kitty's son, who has been carrying on with the maid, P, who is Pauline, later Mrs. LaChance and John's mother. Birch is actually John's father and not Pauline's husband, Mr. LaChance.

It's good to help. But sometimes terrible things just happen and there's nothing you can do about it.
-- May (chapter 30 paragraph 6)

Importance: May admires Lu's commitment to learning what is happening to the dying turtles but she tells Owen that sometimes bad things just happen. This is important to the story because of the personal tragedies inflicted on many of the Winslows because of the unethical and inappropriate behavior of some of the the others and there is nothing that can be done.

I think... more than what you are, is what you think you are. If you believe you're the most powerful man in the world, and act like it, people respond. If you think you're nothing, you are.
-- Mabel (chapter 31 paragraph 3)

Importance: Mabel is finding her way in the Winslows' world, and she is discerning that a big factor in the way a person is treated is how he or she acts in the world. Wealth doesn't guarantee class just as not having money can limit someone to having no confidence. How a person is perceived in the world is how that person projects his or her character.

Put your clothes on, Hannah, you can't run around like that anymore. It's fine for the babies, but you're a big girl now!
-- Tilde (chapter 32 paragraph 2)

Importance: Tilde is aware of her husband's inappropriate sexual behavior with women in the family and she wants to protect them as best she can. She wants Hannah, who is swimming naked, to begin to feel modesty and cover up so that she won't be vulnerable to Birch's possible advances one day.

Oh, and Mabel," Birch said, turning just as he reached the driveway, "I've been meaning to ask you. Have you called Daniel lately? Your mother says the care he's getting at Mountainside is fantastic. I know your father works hard to keep him there. Let's remember your promise to keep me informed.
-- Birch (chapter 36 paragraph 8)

Importance: Birch shows the control that he has over Mabel when he lets it slip that he



has been in contact with her parents and that he's aware of her brother, Daniel. This is meant to both shock Mabel and let her know that Birch is really in control of her and her continuing stay at Winloch.

Do not mistake knowledge for power. And do not mistake silence for blindness.
-- Tilde (chapter 46 paragraph 2)

Importance: Tilde tries to instruct May on what it's like to be a Winslow. Just as Tilde had to learn, so must May if she wants to be part of the family. Tilde wants May to understand that she knows more than May thinks and just because she doesn't say anything about what's wrong in the family, doesn't mean she's unaware of it.

Horrible things happen in this world," he said finally, "but I'll do everything in my power to keep you safe.
-- Galway (chapter 53 paragraph 7)

Importance: Lu is distraught because she had witnessed her father killing John and his mother. Galway can't change their father or the horrible crimes he has committed, but he can offer Lu some comfort and a sense of safety that has been missing from her life.