

Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self Study Guide

**Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting
Self by Rebecca Walker**

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Plot Summary

In this biography, Rebecca Walker tells her story of growing up as the daughter of Mississippi's first legal interracial marriage. In addition, her mother is well known writer, poet and playwright, Alice Walker.

Rebecca Walker's personal story draws the reader in from the beginning, as she describes life in Mississippi, starting with her first birthday. Then, the family moves to New York, where both of her parents continue their involvement in the civil rights movement. Walker writes about her relationship with her father's white, Jewish family, those that accept her and those that hold her at a safe distance. As a young girl, much of this separation fails to make sense. Walker fails to see her parents open-minded view in the world around her. Her parents, throughout the book, fail to prepare Walker for encounters with those people who continue to harbor bigoted views.

During Walker's childhood, her parents divorce. At first, they both live in the New York City area. Walker lives with her mother in a much simpler neighborhood than her father, now a successful mainstream lawyer. Soon her father remarries, this time to a white, Jewish woman. It is Walker's stepmother who helps her through many of the milestones of adolescence, including her first period. For many years, Walker feels close to her stepmother, even calling her "Mom". In her late teens, however, she begins to feel resentment towards her stepmother for the distance she feels, emotionally, between herself and her father.

At the beginning of Walker's middle school career, her mother moves to San Francisco. Thus Walker begins two lives. She lives two years at a time with her mother, then two years with her father. She feels that every time she moves, she must sever all ties and develop a type of amnesia. Also, the friends she keeps become more dangerous. Walker finds vastly more acceptance in the projects and ghettos of both Brooklyn and San Francisco. While staying with her father, she spends time with the Hispanic population, who appear closer to her skin color. The Hispanics refer to her as "mulatto". Her activities with them include drugs and wild parties where fights often break out. Once, a much older boyfriend learns of a drug dealer who allowed Walker to experiment with a potent, new drug. The drug dealer later ends up dead, and the murder remains unsolved.

In San Francisco, Walker largely raised herself. Her relationship with her mother consists of notes and monies left on the dining room table. She frequently stays over at friends houses, sleeping with boys. She also travels all over town via the bus system, sometimes to smoke in Japantown. Walker starts being sexually active in the sixth grade. She also goes, with a friend, to Planned Parenthood to get birth control. She begins taking it before she gets her first period. At age fourteen, Walker goes with her mother and boyfriend to have an abortion.

After this incident, Walker enrolls in private school. She begins to thrive more academically. When Walker graduates from high school, her father comes to San

Francisco for the first time. The meeting between her parents is awkward. Walker states that, in her quest to find her identity, she refuses to wear one mask. She identifies with all oppressed cultures, whether they are her own are not.



Part 1

Part 1 Summary and Analysis

Rebecca Walker starts her autobiography with several vignettes of her life. She shares stories from her childhood in snapshot-like snippets. As a preface, she confesses her feelings about her mixed heritage. She confesses that it is hard to remember details of her life; she says her personal history exists in broken pieces in her mind.

This gives Walker a broken sense of self. She concurs with a friend who believes that a time of incarceration is welcome, because the rules are well defined and life exists without the risk that freedom brings.

Walker desires the constraints of institutional life in a way, because she never knew restraints as a child. She was encouraged to step out and experiment as a young child.

On Walker's first birthday, her mother fed her two of her favorite foods, chitterlings and chocolate cake. She celebrates with her indulgent parents, though her father, a lawyer, leaves right after to go to work. Walker encourages her readers to seek out the details of their own birth, to ask after the details of the day, not just the dry facts.

This autobiography fails to give pertinent details of Walker's family, but, though the snapshots shared by Walker, the reader learns that her father is a civil rights lawyer, Caucasian, in Jackson, Mississippi. Walker is born seven months after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Questions of Walker's identity begin on the day of her birth, when nurses double check the races of her interracial parents. Walker pictures herself as a baby as the character in a movie or a poem by Langston Hughes. However, she admits this might be "melodramatic".

Life in Jackson exists as a parade of visitors to Walker, as family visits occur regularly, along with international visitors for her writer mother.

One of the more memorable visitors of Walker's childhood is her father's mother, Grandma Miriam, who visits from Brooklyn. She fawns over her only granddaughter, but treats her black daughter-in-law with indifference, though she buys them washers and sewing machines.

The theme of forced independence arises early in Walker's life, when her father encourages a shaky preschool-aged girl to walk by herself down the block to her nursery school. Walker does as her parents encourage, with much trepidation. She loves her nursery school teacher, Mrs. Constantine, who reminds her of a black version of her Brooklyn grandmother.

Tender family moments occur often in the house in Jackson. Once, Walker remembers sneaking into her parents' room to watch Johnny Carson, only to be caught by her family. A tickling match ensues. Another night, her father hosts in poker night in the

house because he must stay home to protect this family from a threat by the Klan. He takes time away from the poker game to tell Walker a story about how he chose her from all the girls in the world. Life in Jackson, because Walker could be innocent of the threat by groups such as the Klan to an interracial couple, was idyllic.

At the end of this section, Walker flashback to how her parents met. In 1967, they marry, though interracial marriages are still against the law. She describes her parents as idealists. Her mother believes in the power of words, as a writer. Her father believes the law has the power to change society. He is a lawyer. Walker insists her conception and life are not a tragedy. She seems to be poetic in this assertion, as though she tries to convince herself.

She relates this flashback to an incident at Yale, when a white Jewish student asks her if she is "possible" because she is Black and Jewish. She often wonders the same thing and is disturbed that this strange, drunken young man voices her private concerns

Part 2

Part 2 Summary and Analysis

In the first section, labeled Brooklyn, Walker includes letters she wrote to her mother and a childhood babysitter, Louisa. Walker writes to Louisa about her new house and friends in Brooklyn. She shares a mugging her father suffers on the way home from the train stations and the details of a fight her parents have. When the fights break out, Walker reacts by hiding.

When Walker writes to her mother, she describes visits to Grandma Miriam's house. Grandma spoils Walker, which she confesses to her mother, though she hopes that her mother will not object to her grandma's generous television allowance. She also begins to share some of her grandmother's prejudice, but does not seem to recognize it as such.

Visits to Grandma Miriam also include Grandma taking care of Great Grandmother Jennie. Jennie never reacts to anyone's presence, and Walker's father believes this is caused by trauma she suffered as a Jew in communist Russia.

Walker begins to wonder what causes people to be connected by blood. Her own parents reject the belief that "blood is thicker than water". The actions of others, though, seem to prove this false, though Walker feels none of this connection with her own family. She resents that her light skin causes strangers to guess wrongly about her heritage. She longs to be recognized as Jewish.

In the move from Jackson to Brooklyn, Walker remembers vivid details about packing their things. She recalls the vast feel of Brooklyn, and the new people she met. Louisa, a young law student, becomes one of Walker's babysitters. She "rescues" Walker from the city and takes her to the beaches of Long Island. Louisa buys Walker her first sunglasses and bikini. In junior high, Walker begins to be made fun of for not being "black enough". She credits her feeling of value and articulate nature to Louisa, who taught Walker to "fit in".

Part 3

Part 3 Summary and Analysis

Much of Walker's tensions within her family, both her close family, and her extended family. She shares her memories of her favorite uncle, Jackie. Walker appreciates that Jackie is not afraid to touch her, as most of her white, Jewish family tends to be. In addition, Walker relates to the tensions in Jackie's family, because he also married an outsider, a Catholic. Jackie's children have much more entertainment and toys than Walker enjoys in her own home.

After some time, though, Walker realizes that her mother never visits Uncle Jackie's house, and Walker cannot imagine her mother interacting with these people. This casts a pall on Walker's visits with her Jewish family at Jackie's, not allowing her to enjoy her extended family.

To avoid the uncomfortable feelings, Walker locks herself in the bathroom until someone notices her absence or needs in the bathroom.

Moreover, Uncle Jackie never visits Walker's house. She cannot imagine his reaction to her mother's multicultural decorations, stemming from her many visitors. Even in adulthood, Walker shares that her interactions with her white cousins remain awkward. She lacks trust from them. She fears they might be bigoted after all.

As a symbolize of growing and changing in her life, Walker remembers her last bath with her father. She does not bathe with him this time, but she bathes from the sink as he bathes in the tub. She compares his pale skin to her own copper colored complexion.



Part 4

Part 4 Summary and Analysis

The changes in Walker's parent's relationship begin when her mother moves a king sized bed into Walker's room and begins sleeping with her every night. Each night, her mother falls asleep, weeping. The young girl does not understand the tension in the home, but knows something is hurting her mother and offers her some comfort. Each night, Walker's father returns late and kisses both good night.

Then, one night, her father's future second wife visits while her mother is out of town. The white, Jewish woman brings marshmallows for Walker and visits with her father well into the night. Walker reveals that, within a year, the woman moves into the brownstone with her father, when Walker and her mother move to a much smaller apartment.

Walker receives the news of her parents divorce calmly, and pretends that everything is okay. However, when she sleeps at her father's house, she must sleep alone, and feels fearful.

For most of Walker's life, she remember silence between her parents, but as an adult, she learns that they fought behind closed doors, hiding much of the disagreements about her father's work and her parents shifting priorities. In her own words, Walker's parents grew apart.

While in Jackson, Walker's parents worked in civil rights together, but in Brooklyn, they operated in separate circles, though with the same civil rights goals in mind.

The changes in society affect their relationships well. Walker explains that, whereas during the peace-loving times of Martin Luther King Jr, interracial marriage is viewed as progress, during the time of Black Power, interracial marriage carries the stigma of treachery to one's race.

In addition to the stresses on her mother from their racial backgrounds, Walker's mother becomes a feminist in a more political sense. She joins groups that loudly support the new movement. Due to all of these shifting social viewpoints, Walker begins to feel like the product of a failed movement.

When Walker moves to the small apartment with her mother, she enrolls in a new, public school. Though in the third grade, her mother insists the school place her in honors classes. She is soon reading on a seventh grade level.

Each morning, before school, Walker steals the change from her mother's purse. Sometimes, after school, she visits the home of her friend Sarah, whose parents are also interracial. However, Sarah's home seems warm, normal and whole. She has the goodies and toys, much like Uncle Jackie's children had. Walker never stays long, because she feels much envy for the home that Sarah has and everything it represents.



Walker fears something is wrong with her, that her home differs so much from Sarah's. That day, before her mother gets home, Walker spends the change from her mother's purse and buys gum. She eats six packs.

Instead of warm, family activities, in the evening, Walker's mother dictates her wishes for her funeral.

At her new school, Walker develops a liking for a young boy, Bryan. She does not know what she likes about him, other than his popularity. She fails to trust many of her friends with the secret, however. She does tell Sarah, but lacks even total trust in her. To feel more comfortable with her friends, Walker buys them small tokens with her change collection. She feels more comfortable with her friends after this.

The lack of trust, however, proves merited when Sarah tells Bryan about Walker's crush. Bryan reacts with a public denouncement, not of Walker, but of her race, when he professes that he does not like black girls. This drives Walker to prove how she is not a black girl. She makes a spectacle when her white stepmother to grandmother picks her up from school. She downplays any connection to her black roots.

The shame of her heritage comes to a head when she lands a part in her class play, the Wizard of Oz. She begs her mom to stay home, claiming her presence will cause too much anxiety and Walker will forget her lines. However, she does not want her class, especially Bryan, to see her very black mother. After the show, however, Walker feels shame at her attitude towards her mother; she desires for her mother, more than anyone else, to tell her she did a good job.

At the end of this section, Walker as an adult compares childhood memories to cuts from shards of glass. She feels the opinions of others have always defined her.

Part 5

Part 5 Summary and Analysis

In this section, the author looks back at a time she spent with her mother's family in Atlanta. She stays with her uncle Bobby, his wife and two sons. She relishes her freedom here. However, she fails to fit in with her black family, as is evidenced by her aunt's failure to cornrow her hair. At Uncle Bobby's, though, she enjoys staying up late with the boys and watching sports. One day, though, she witnesses Uncle Bobby beat one of his boys with a belt. Though she knows her mother forbade him to physically discipline Walker, she fears him.

Like her mother's absence at Uncle Jackie's, Walker's father never visits her mother's family in Georgia. This emphasizes the differences in Walker's life and makes her feel that something must be wrong with a part of her. Her cousins refer to some of her habits as "cracker". Though Walker fails to understand the meaning of the slur, she knows that it signals something missing deep within herself. However, in Georgia, Walker learns to shoot and be tough. She admits that she likes playing with boys more than girls usually do. Frilly, girl things fail to hold her interests. She spends some time with her maternal grandmother but fails to bond with her female cousins.

Upon returning to Brooklyn from Georgia, Walker moves with her father and stepmother to Washington, DC. She does not see her mother for months after the move. During the trip, Walker realizes she has a home that she refers to as "dad's house" and one that is called "mom's house" but wonders if she has a house. Shortly after moving to DC, Walker reads *The Diary of Anne Frank*. She relates very closely with the tortured young girl and suffers nightmares for weeks after. Sometime after moving to DC, Walker begins to refer to her stepmother as "Mom". She feels both giddy and guilty about the title, but it is her stepmother who guides her through young adolescence and puberty.

Though Walker attends a mostly black school in DC, she feels rejection. Her ballet teacher blames her black features for her failure to perform. She fears befriending another biracial boy because he receives much teasing and Walker assumes she will suffer if she comes to his defense. However, when Walker wants a part in the school's play, *Grease*, she finds she fails to gain acceptance from the black girls that appear to be running the show. Walker's stepmother goes to the school to speak for her, but finds that the teachers really have little say in the casting, and no one will stand up to the girls in charge. Timidly, Walker changes her mind about wanting the part.

At a time when Walker is feeling insignificant and outside of the action, her mother comes for a visit. Alice Walker comes to DC to do a reading at the Library of Congress. During the shows, Walker feels like she is someone, because she gains recognition through her mother's celebrity. However, after two nights, Walker's mother leaves town and Walker's identity shifts once again. After some undetermined amount of time, Walker moves with her mother to San Francisco. There, she goes to an alternative



school and gains her first boyfriend, Dakeba. They make out often on the playground. However, part way through the school year, Dakeba breaks up with Walker in favor of her best friend, Bethany. He even joins in with a school bully in beating Walker. Yet, when her father calls from DC, Walker pretends as if everything is okay because she believes that is what she is supposed to do.

At some point in their friendship, Walker and Bethany take the bus several hours out of the city to spend the night with Bethany's mother (Bethany lives with her grandmother). After inspecting the sorry condition of her mother's pantry, Bethany gives her some money. The two girls sleep outside. Years later, as an adult, Walker sees Bethany, now a skinhead. She gains no recognition and weeps for the young girl friends she has lost. Walker's parents work out a custody agreement in which Walker spends two full years with each parent. The moving makes it hard for Walker to gain close friends. She fails to attach to people.

Part 6

Part 6 Summary and Analysis

In San Francisco, Walker befriends an older girl, Colleen. She meets Colleen through a neighborhood boy, Michael, who she develops romantic feelings for. Because she feels that being herself is not enough for Michael, she lies about her age. She admires Michael's freedom with his bicycle and asks for her own. Though her mother refuses, her grandmother sends the money from Brooklyn.

Walker fails to have even the confidence to pick out her own bike from Sears, but does so with much trepidation. Soon, two neighborhood girls attempt to steal the bike, to put Walker in her place. Michael stands up for her.

Often, Walker admires the way Colleen and Michael stand up for themselves. Though they admire Walker for her worldly knowledge of far away places like New York City, Walker fails to grasp the sense of self that the older children show. Walker feels that Colleen is truly a black girl.

Furthermore, Walker envies the family life that Colleen and her younger sister share. Often, Walker's mother keeps herself too busy for her daughter. She hires girls from the neighborhood to take Walker shopping for school. Often, the house has no real food; Walker eats out nearly every night. She feels poor and ashamed when Michael teases her about the lack of food.

However, around Michael, Walker feels "womanly". She enjoys his physical presence. Soon, he begins pressuring her to visit late at night, and when her mother is away. She begins by refusing, but fears that she will eventually give in.

Then, one night, Michael says he feels ill, and she offers to make him tea. When he arrives, Walker is wearing a camisole of her mother's. She lies about being a virgin, and the two young people have sexual intercourse in the study. Walker fears that she did not feel what she was supposed to feel. Michael leaves immediately after.

Soon after their escapade, Colleen warns Walker about Michael; she calls him a "player". Because she still fails to trust her friends in San Francisco, Walker holds back the true details of her relationship with Michael and claims she has another boyfriend.



Part 7

Part 7 Summary and Analysis

Walker continues to gravitate towards friends much older than her. The reader easily forgets that she is only going into the sixth grade. Her newest friend, Lena, involves Walker in wild parties where they experiment with marijuana and alcohol. After these parties, the two girls compare stories of sexual escapades. Because of their relationship with boys, Lena suggests they both go to Planned Parenthood for birth control pills, which they do. Walker takes the prescription too, though she is not sure she needs it. In fact, the reader learns in the next section, Walker has not begun menstruating yet.

Lena and Walker spend much of their time roller-skating around San Francisco. They buy cigarettes from vending machines and smoke them in Japantown. Over the years, Lena and Walker drift apart. As an older adolescent, Walker learns that the "photography sessions" that Lena attended, and that Walker always envied, were really sexual sessions. In addition, the "photographer" molested Lena during her early youth. Walker drives her former best friend to the police station to make the report five years after the fact.

Race is one subject that Lena and Walker never discussed, and Walker continues to wonder about her identity. Her mother has a photograph of a direct relative that was a slave. Walker wonders if she would be valuable to her fully black ancestors, because she is of mixed race.

In sixth grade, Walker gains a new friend from her apartment building, Lisa. Lisa teaches Walker how to steal. At first, stealing seems exciting, but Walker quickly begins to feel that, because no one caught them stealing, no one really cares about them. Walker begins to feel like her mother should rescue her from the dangerous aspects of her lifestyle, but she continues to mostly be on her own. When Lisa and Walker enter the "bad" high school, Walker learns to project a tough image in order to preserve herself. Even when the feelings appear most natural to those around her, Walker feels like a fake. She attends a senior party with Lisa and, after, witnesses a mob where violent fighting breaks out. Though Walker does nothing but go along with the crowd, she sympathizes with the victim, and feels guilty about not helping.

At the end of sixth grade, Walker packs her things and leaves to live with her father for two years. She feels that the constant moving requires a sort of amnesia, that she forgets those that she leaves behind and assimilates into her new lifestyle. When Lisa comes to say goodbye, Walker, having already prepared for the white side of her life, ignores the young girls' knocking. When Lisa had asked Walker about her future, Walker had no answers. She fails to think beyond her next move.

As an adult, Walker confesses that she still had no routine. Any attempt to instill a routine only leads to anxiety. She also realizes, after a whole childhood of moving

around, she has few possessions beyond what she needs to live. She attaches no emotional value on her things, simply picks them and discards them as needed.



Part 8

Part 8 Summary and Analysis

Upon arriving on the East coast for two years with her father, Walker attends a summer camp, made up on mostly upper middle class, white, Jewish youth. At the camp, there are three other black girls and no black boys. Walker, though, avoids the black girls, because she does not want to cement the truth about her race for any those are unsure about her background. Walker new best friend, who she meets at camp, is Jodi Berman. Jodi's mat mitzvah is Walker's first, and it is very elaborate. At the camp, she also befriends Laurel; Laurel and Walker date Avi and Aaron. When she makes out with Aaron, Walker feels like she is outside of her body, watching. She fails to really connect with much of the atmosphere at camp.

Even among the girls at the camp, though, there are battle lines to be drawn. Walker and her friends refer to the richest and snobbiest of the girls as JAPs, or Jewish American Princesses. With the pressure to fit into the right crowds, Walker worries that her attitude, while not "black" enough in San Francisco, sticks out a little too much at Fire Lake Camp. Her blackness appears to make others afraid. One year, at camp, Walker is elected as a sing captain, a great honor for someone of her age. The adults in charge refuse to give her the honor, because they claim it encourages her bad attitude. One college age counselor, Stephanie, defends Walker's right to be a captain, however. Walker's time at camp is about minimizing the differences between her and the other campers.

In an aside, Walker describes how her memory works. She feels it is like a guard at a hotel. Her friends fail to see her fear, though to lives inside of Walker, it is very real. Her friends admire what they take to be strength. Walker realizes her parents raised her to expect admittance; they failed to make her aware of any borders drawn because of her race, sex or status.

However, Walker confesses that she feels like she is trembling inside, even when she appears calm outside. Her memories of times of injustice stop any progress she makes in coming to terms with her identity.



Part 9

Part 9 Summary and Analysis

At her father's home in the Bronx, Walker travels away from her safe, suburban neighborhood for the courser, Latino population down the street. Both Walker and her best friend, Melissa, have relationships with Dominicans. Often, after school, the group of older adolescents does drugs and experiment with new drugs on the streets. One day, they try a new pill from their dealer, and Walker, as the youngest in the group, suffers a scary trip. Her boyfriend, Ray, comes to rescue her and gets very angry with the rest of the group. He says nothing more to Walker, but soon after, the dealer turns up dead.

Walker continues to feel more at home in the Spanish Bronx, though. She feels her "mulatto" background is more accepted in this population than either the Black or the White world. One day, while babysitting for another Jewish family, she comes across the husband's stack of Playboy magazines. She wonders how this makes his wife feel.

Soon after, she gets her first period. Considering the amount of growing up to occur in Walker's life up to this point, the often important milestone seems like a nonissue to Walker, other than it is her stepmother, and not her mom, who is there for the event.

During this stay at her father's, Walker begins to resent her stepmother. She feels that her parents' ignorance about her personal life places her in unsafe situations. Then, her father's move of the family to Larchmont deepens the resentment. In order to explain her skin at the new and very non-diverse school, Walker claims to be from Spain. Soon, she has a new boyfriend, Luca. She takes advantage of her friendship with Luca's sister, Tina, and often spends the night, even skipping school. Soon, though, Luca feels peer pressure about the interracial dating situation and breaks up with Walker. Due to her resentment and alienation from her parents, Walker talks to no one about the situation.

Ten years later, Walker returns to Larchmont for a bridal shower. As she talks with her former classmates, she realizes that, while she desired for protection, it was Walker that protected those in need. She often stuck up for the outsiders and offered support to outcasts.

Part 10

Part 10 Summary and Analysis

As an adult, Walker confesses that she envies her white stepsister's predictable life. Walker, however, makes decisions through a process sometimes devoid of logic. When the time comes for Walker to leave Larchmont and move back to San Francisco, she confesses her discomfort to her father, who brushes off her concerns. By the time Walker arrives in San Francisco, Walker possesses quite an attitude, which her mother blames on her "permissive" stepmother. However, Walker's mother continues to depend on Walker to show the usual independence. Whenever the mother and daughter have a moment of strife, Walker's mother responds by leaving letters on the table. Walker chooses her own high school, with no input from her mother.

In high school, Walker feels alone. She chooses to go to the high school her boyfriend, Michael, graduated from. Her reputation as Michael's girl precedes her. The boys that went to school with Michael look out for her, especially when Michael is around, such as during football games. Her new best friend in high school is Maya. She also befriends Jesse, a white boy who acts black. She comes to relate to Jesse, because she recognizes his struggle to try to fit into a world in which he does not belong. She also envies the support he continues to have from his family, though he lives so differently from them.

However, Walker describes her relationship with Michael during the first part of her freshman year as on again off again. When her mother goes out of town, Michael spends the night, and the couple engages in all manner of intimate encounters. Midway through the year, Walker fears she is pregnant. Her mother, very matter of factly, tells her to schedule an abortion. Walker goes through the experience with little feeling. After the procedure, Michael, Walker and her mother go to a movie. Soon after this, Walker says that the troubles in her personal life stem from her school. She asks to enroll in private school, and her mother calmly agrees.

Parts 11-13

Parts 11-13 Summary and Analysis

Walker confesses that, throughout her life, she feels awkward in her own body; she fails to concrete her identity. The white parts and black parts seem at war. With some relief, though, she describes how she has "rhythm". All black people, Walker claims, desire to have rhythm; if one they seem an awkward person, especially in dancing, they tsk and say that person has no rhythm.

Thanks to her mother, however, Walker learns to dance with the rhythm and moves of her fellow black friends. This helps her to fit in, which makes Walker feel valuable. Attention from boys her age and older also give Walker a sense of value.

After the abortion, Walker's mother permits her to apply to a private school, but offers little help. Alice Walker does accompany her daughter to the first interview. However, when the headmaster of the school informs them, on a wrongful assumption, that the school offers no financial aid, an offended Alice Walker storms off. When the acceptance letter later comes in the mail, Walker returns alone. She continues to feel alone at school, where the mostly white student body holds her at a distance for the first several years. Rather than befriend the students, Walker relates to her teachers. She relishes the way they cause the students to think and analyze, which is different from the superficial education of the public schools Walker attended. When Walker sees Michael, he remarks that Urban School brings out the "white girl" in her.

During her education at Urban, Walker must complete an internship; she chooses one at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. There, she finds her blackness to be special. She continues to write to Michael in San Francisco, but fails to tell him of the new, city culture of which she is a part. Moreover, she fails to tell him that all of her friends at white. Walker begins to realize, in high school, that her multicultural background causes her to be perceived as intimidating to white and snobby to blacks. The dissidence everywhere she goes contributes to her personal confusion about her identity. For much of high school, Walker continues to only be comfortable around her teachers. During a summer break, Walker works on the crew for a movie being made based on her mother's play. She befriends a fellow crew person, Andrew, who is also half-Jewish. They soon become involved romantically in a much more serious way than any relationship Walker has had so far. He is twenty-one and she is fifteen, but tells Andrew she is seventeen.

Walker becomes drawn to his life in Hollywood and travels often to spend time with him, even after the movie job ends. Andrew's father balks at the interracial marriage and makes no secret about it; Andrew's mother, however, accept Walker warmly. Walker, however, worries that Andrew thinks more like his father. She does, however, break up with Michael. He reacts with offense at the fact that she dumped him for a white man.

Parts 14-17

Parts 14-17 Summary and Analysis

Andrew and Walker continue to spend every weekend together, using the money earned from the filming to take late night flights. Then, Andrew takes Walker north to meet his friends and family. During an evening with his friends, one man uses the n-word. Walker reacts with much offense.

Later, in private, Andrew defends his friend, pointing out good qualities that his friend possesses, and his loyalty, despite his lack of exposure to people of color. This episode and Walker's outcast feeling during it remind her of the outcasts that her own parents were when they became the first legally married interracial couple in their state. Though Walker sees her mother's vision and seems to appreciate it, she says that she feels no reason to adopt it as her own. She resents being the object of this social reform; perhaps contributing to this is the fact that her father no longer fights the social change war.

As an adult, Walker shares a question from a mother about preparing her own biracial daughter for the real world. Walker advises the mother to give the girl the truth, even when the young mother resists this tactic. Walker assures her, even as she leaves the seminar, that the truth is always the best weapon.

During the end of high school and through college, Walker begins to travel. The first trip she discusses, though not her first trip, is one to Bali. She enjoys feeding the monkeys and communing with them in the forests. She also visits a bathing temple, where she spends time in meditation and relaxation.

When Walker begins to travel with her mother, they travel, as Walker describes it, as artists. This enables them to see the locals in a way that tourists miss. It also causes the locals to accept Walker and her mother. During this time of her life, a female black lover asks Walker what it feels like to have white inside of her. Walker feels that the questions are some sort of a test. Walker realizes that the white part of her always represents something that is missing in her life. She feels that the white part of her heritage causes her to lack something that would allow her to be accepted.

To her lover, Walker shares that she feels sympathy for all types of oppression, being they blacks, Jewish or other. She feels no need to align herself specifically with one over all the others. Finally, in twelfth grade, Walker feels accepted at the Urban School. She becomes president of her class. Also, she changes her last name to Walker, feeling that it matches her identity better than her father's obviously white, Jewish last name. Walker becomes political. Her father gains new interests and questions Walker as an anti-Semitic, which offends her. When her father comes to San Francisco, for the first time, for Walker's graduation, the reunion of her parents makes the whole family

uncomfortable. She shares many awkward conversations and take a few pictures in which all three look unhappy.

In the closing chapter of the book, Walker remembers the death of her Jewish grandmother. She attends the graveside service with her father and they both mourn. She remembers the change in her grandmother, who originally gave her father up for dead when he married a black woman. Eventually she accepted Walker, but never totally acknowledged her true race.

As a result of the varied people and occurrences in her life, Walker closes by saying that she refuses to "wear any mask" or align with one group to the exclusion of another.



Characters

Rebecca Walker

In this book, Rebecca Walker tells the story of herself, from birth through adolescence. Occasionally, she relates a scene from her adulthood to the events in the book, but largely, the biography covers her coming of age.

Rebecca Walker is born in Jackson, Mississippi, to the first legally married interracial couple in Mississippi. Her father works as a civil rights lawyer, her mother as an author and activist. From an early age, Walker's parents encourage independence. They push her to walk to preschool, down the block, by herself. Later in life, Walker seems to take this push for independence as avoidance, if not neglect. From her early teen years on, Walker experiences few meaningful interactions with her parents. Her father, after giving up his activism for mainstream law, brushes aside her concerns. Walker's mother avoids confrontation and communicates with her daughter through notes left in the kitchen in between her many trips.

Early in Walker's childhood, the family moves to Brooklyn, a world away from her beginnings in the south. However, throughout childhood, Walker feels like an outcast. She appears obviously too black to fit in with the privileged, white, Jewish children. However, her mixed race fails to give her credibility with wholly black people. Her own grandmother seems in denial of Walker's true identity.

Late in childhood, Walker's parents divorce and she begins the fragmented life of two years on the east coast with her father and two years on the west coast with her mother. The constant moving causes Walker to develop survival strategies, such as a resistance to become too close to people or objects, because nothing in her life feels permanent.

Walker also begins to identify herself by those around her. She begins hanging around with friends who are frequently in trouble. She starts having sexual intercourse at about age twelve and goes on birth control, without consulting her mother, even before she begins menstruating. Despite this, though, she becomes pregnant at fourteen. After having an abortion, she asks her mother to enroll her in private school.

In her studies in private school, in San Francisco, Walker begins to find some identity. She continues to feel like an outcast among her peers, but connects with her teachers. Moreover, she feels a connection to her studies, which prove more in-depth than those at her previous school. In her late high school years, Walker confesses that the whiteness in her represents all that she lacks to fit in to society somewhere. However, her mixed race allows her to empathize with all social outcasts, instead of choosing one cause. Walker changes her last name from her father's Jewish surname, Leventhal, to her mother's, Walker.



Alice Walker

Rebecca Walker's mother, Alice, exists on the periphery of the whole book. She impacts Walker's life in short bursts. Alice Walker travels extensively, leaving her daughter home alone for whole weekends from early in adolescence. She leaves enough money for food and bus fare, never asking what kinds of meals her daughter eats in her absence. It appears that Alice Walker avoids direct contact with her daughter, choosing instead to write letters and hire help. She frequently employs an older girl to take Walker shopping for school or other necessary chores.

Alice Walker's activism, though, assures her daughter that Rebecca was not an accident or a baby conceived solely to challenge social norms. Regardless of her strained relationship with her mother, Rebecca feels sure that her birth resulted from a loving relationship that desired a baby.

Walker seems to point out some hypocrisy in her mother when the two pose for photographs for a biographical article about Alice Walker. Alice claims the two to be best friends. Rebecca Walker reflects that they act more like sisters, in that they take turns taking care of one another, versus a mother-daughter relationship that would allow Rebecca to rely on her mother. Beyond that, though, they fail to have enough meaningful interactions to be considered close friends. Rebecca, however, goes along with the claim for the sake of her mother's public image.

Mel Leventhal

Mel Leventhal begins the novel as an encouraging and engaged father. He teaches and dotes on his only daughter. Though he is white, his work for civil rights invites some interesting characters into the Leventhal household.

Soon after the family's move to Brooklyn, however, Walker's parents divorce. Very soon after that, Leventhal remarries, this time to a white, Jewish woman. Immediately, Walker feels left out. She becomes convinced that her father intends to erase his past by building the white, Jewish, upper class life he always wanted.

As Walker approaches adolescence, her father leaves civil rights work for mainstream law. He begins to brush off Walker's feelings of being an outcast. She approaches him with concerns about improper treatment, but he ignores the concerns, claiming Walker to be paranoid and unfair.

Throughout her teens years, Walker fails to have a close relationship with her father. He comes San Francisco for her high school graduation, which she points out is his first trip west in her whole life. In spite of this, she tells the reader her choice to change her last name represents her journey towards her new identity, but in no way reflects ill feelings toward her father. However, Mel Leventhal refuses to accept this explanation.



Michael

Michael is Walker's boyfriend in San Francisco, her longest serious relationship. He is at least four years older than Walker. They even remain together during her first two years back east, though she never claims to be faithful during that time. When Walker is fourteen, she becomes pregnant with Michael's baby. Michael and Alice Walker accompany the young girl for the abortion. Soon after, Walker's choice to attend private school divides the couple. Michael claims the school causes Walker to act too white. They carry on a strained relationship until Walker meets and falls quickly in love with a technician working on her mother's film. Michael becomes irate when she chooses a white man over him.

Grandma Mariam

Walker's father's mother refuses to accept her son's interracial marriage. Never does she acknowledge her black daughter-in-law. When the family moves to Brooklyn, Miriam does accept Walker, but only by apparently ignoring her mixed race. Through Grandma Miriam, Walker learns of her Jewish heritage and family. As a child, she envies the closeness of her Jewish family, but cannot picture a place where she and her mother fit in. In the closing chapter of the book, Walker remembers that Grandma Miriam's funeral is the only place she ever saw her father cry.

Uncle Jackie

Mel Leventhal's brother and his family seem to enjoy an easy closeness that stands in stark contrast to Walker's turbulent home life. Walker envies the closeness of the family. While she admires Uncle Jackie's wit, though, she feels disloyal for enjoying herself in a home where her mother is neither welcome nor comfortable.

Judy Leventhal

At first, Walker feels close to Judy, her stepmother. Her father's home offers much more normality than the disjointed relationship she shares with her mother. It is Judy who guides Walker through many of the milestones in a young woman's life, including her first period. However when the Leventhals move to a predominately white and upper middle class Jewish neighborhood outside of DC, Walker begins to resent her stepmother because she perceives a lack of acceptance of Walker's background. Walker feels that her stepmother means to erase the blackness in her stepdaughter. Their relational remains strained for the remainder of the biography.



Linda

Walker's cousin from Boston comes to visit while the Walkers live in Jackson. The two girls enjoy a close bonds despite their very different backgrounds.

Uncle Bobby

Bobby is Walker's mother's brother. When Walker goes south to spend time with Bobby's family, she enjoys the different family dynamic. The family members spend much time together. Walker enjoys late card parties and motorcycle rides.

Bethany

Bethany is Walker's first close friend in San Francisco. The two girls, in fifth grade, travel throughout the area via the public bus service. On one occasion, they take the bus out of town to see Bethany's mother and give her some money.

Lisa

Lisa is a white friend of Walker's in California. Walker admits jealousy for what she perceives as Lisa's privileged life as a model. Later in life, though, Walker learns that the photo shoots were actually sexual sessions and Lisa was also molested. Walker drives the other teen to the police station to report the attacks.



Objects/Places

Soul

Walker describes her Soul as an illusive part of herself. She believes it exists higher than intellect. The book represents a quest to define Walker's soul.

Jackson

Jackson is Walker's birthplace. Living there, her family enjoys harmony within, despite various pressures from without.

Brooklyn

From Jackson, Walker's family moves to Brooklyn. There, they all begin to drift apart.

Bronx

After her parents divorce, Walker and her mother move to the Bronx, which represents a poorer lifestyle. When Walker begins interacting with the Hispanics there, she notices that, though her father only lives down the street, he never could fit in.

San Fransisco

Walker's mother moves to San Fransisco, which causes Walker to cross the country every two years and leads to much fragmentation in her life. Walker points out several times that her father cannot understand her life in San Fransisco because he never visits her there, except for her high school graduation.

Washington DC

When the Leventhals move to a suburb of DC, Walker feels more isolated than ever before. Walker feels like and outcast not only to those in her neighborhood, but to her father and his new, all white family.

Urban School

After having an abortion at age fourteen, Walker asks to attend private school. She chooses The Urban School for its progressive educational philosophy. During the interview process, though, Alice Walker suffers a large offense when the superintendent informs them, based solely on sight, that the school offers no financial aid. Though



Walker gains admission, later, by letter, her mother fails to visit the school again and Walker takes the task of enrolling completely upon herself.

Birth Control

Walker becomes sexually active both because she desires to fit in with her much older friends and because she begins to value herself based upon her relationship with others. When her older female friend goes to Planned Parenthood to get birth control, Walker also takes the pills, not even knowing if she needs them. About a year later, she begins her period.

Bicycle

Walker first admires Michael because of the freedom he seems to have, riding around the city on his bicycle. Walker's father sends the money for her to get her own, and her mother's boyfriend takes her to pick one out. The bicycle represents a new kind of freedom for Walker.

Museum of Modern Art

Walker enjoys a time of internship at the Museum of Modern Art. Though she has lived in Brooklyn and the Bronx, Manhattan feels like a new world to her. She parties in the clubs and meets colorful, new people that accept her as she is.



Themes

Family/Belonging

From a young age, Rebecca Walker attempts to define herself through her family. When Grandma Miriam's reluctance to accept Walker becomes apparent, Walker wonders how she can fit into her extended family. Her father's side of the family seems to exhibit the most reluctance to accept Walker and the black side of her identity.

When Walker's parents divorce, her ability to identify to her family becomes even more strained. Walker often fails to make connections even with her peers that come from similar families. When she meets other Jewish young people with black family members, the subject never comes up.

Furthermore, Walker never shares a meaningful conversation about her race with her parents, in spite of their background in the civil rights movement. When Walker brings up this subject as an adolescent, her father brushes aside her concerns.

The most strain upon Walker's identity comes when her father remarries, this time to a white, Jewish woman. Walker bounces between a solidly middle class lifestyle with her mother, in which she befriends other blacks and the Jewish upbringing her father insists upon, including going to a camp full of other young, Jewish youth. When Walker lives with her mother, she exists mostly alone and must grow up quickly. However, her father provides more age appropriate environments.

Walker fails to gain a sense of belonging in her own family. When her mother shows her a picture of an ancestor who lived as a slave, Walker wonders if the woman would accept her mixed race granddaughter. Walker grows to view the white part of herself as something lacking in her life, something that prevents her from gaining acceptance, even among her own family.

Self and Race

Walker identifies herself and those around her by their race. Because of this, Walker often wonders where to place herself. When they move to Brooklyn, Walker notices the racial divide exists, just as it did in the south. She seems too white to be accepted by blacks and too black to obviously fit in with whites. When Walker acts white, the blacks feel she acts snobby. However, when mannerisms from her black culture appear around her white peers, they become intimidated by her.

In the close of the book, Walker's lover asks what it feels like to have white inside of her. Walker contemplates not only the question itself, but the implications of an honest answer. She fears that an honest answer will cause some sort of nonacceptance by her lover. Walker frequently fears racism in her peers, of either race. However, when her



lover asks what the whiteness feels like, Walker confesses that her white part feels like something that she lacks, something that stands in the way of any true acceptance.

One group that accepts Walker are the Hispanics in the Bronx. Walker feels that, because they appear of the same complexion, she fits in. Ironically, in being somewhat dishonest about her race, Walker fits in. When she lies by omission, and allows people to believe her to be Hispanic, she gains acceptance.

Another way that she gains acceptance, especially among her Jewish peers, is by lying and saying she is Spanish. This gives credibility to her background and, instead of an unsure and mixed race, she pretends to have an exotic, European heritage.

Knowledge and Independence

Walker confesses to anxiety when, as a preschooler, her parents insist that she walk to preschool together. This sets a precedence for the independence that Walker's parents force upon her, often seemingly before she is ready. Often, Walker feels fear about doing things on her own.

After her parents divorce, Walker spends even more time alone. Because of her mother's frequent travel and speaking engagements, Walker spends weekend alone. After they move to San Francisco, Walker's mother leaves seemingly every weekend, only leaving notes and money for Walker to care for herself. Often, their house lacks basic food supplies, and Walker eats out. Even when her mother is home, the two correspond mainly through letters.

For many milestones in Walker's life, she grows up alone. When she gets her first period, it is her stepmother who helps her through this. For other things, like going to a new school or shopping for school clothes, Walker's mother hires an older girl to accompany her daughter.

The knowledge gained by her independence serves to make Walker a strong individual that fearlessly pursues what she wants. Often, however, she often has trouble deciding what she wants to pursue.

Style

Perspective

Rebecca Walker tells her autobiography in first person. She gives only her point of view throughout the book. Never does Walker speculate upon the feelings of others in the events that she describes. This is true of her parents; she shares what happens from her point of view only. She honestly expresses her feelings at the time of the event, from the perspective of a child at that age. Never does Walker attempt to guess the motivations behind the actions of others.

In general, Walker views others as unaccepting of her, because of her mixed racial background. However, rarely does she point out specific people that fail to accept her. In the end, Walker worries that her lover's questions about race indicate nonacceptance. Also, she feels that her stepmother resents her blackness, but this assumption fails to have any supporting evidence to make it seem rational to the reader. Many of Walker's anxieties appear to be a result of her young age and immaturity.

Tone

The tone of the novel comes across to the reader as mostly serious and highly educated. The vocabulary of the book serves as evidence of Walker's high level of education. Often, especially when discussing events from later adolescence and adulthood, she uses higher vocabulary. Even when analyzing her past, she utilizes specific terminology and even psychological jargon.

Occasionally, Walker uses slang or dialect to characterize those in her biography. This appears when she visits family members in the south, as well as some of her more colorful friends from the lower class.

Occasionally, the tone of the book turns light and even humorous, as Walker relates enjoyable and funny stories from her childhood. Often, though, she uses her language to add to the feelings of unease and anxiety that she tries to convey. Often, Walker feels out of place and unsure of what to say. This comes through in her tone. Also, Walker uses some language to convey foreshadowing about people who will turn out to be something other than what they appear. For example, Walker talks at length about a friend who poses for a photographer, causing Walker to envy her friend's seemingly glamorous lifestyle. Later, though, Walker learns that the girl is subject to illegal activities, including molestation and sexual exploitation.

Structure

In 322 pages, Rebecca Walker tells her story from birth through her high school years. She divides the book into unnumbered chapters. Some chapters she titles, others are

blank. The chapters are mostly brief, covering a few months or a year of her life. In the beginning of the book, each chapter covers years of Walker's life. The action in the middle of the book slows down, then speeds up slightly again towards the end. Walker's adolescence from age ten to fourteen receives the most attention.

The chapters are grouped into larger sections. These sections receive no heading, but the book's design itself adds this grouping by inserting a page full of grey text, taken from later in that section and inserted in an artistic fashion.



Quotes

"Freedom can feel overwhelming. I would not trade it, but sometimes I want to be told what to do."

p. 4

"I'm the one in the Langston Hughes poem with the white daddy and the black mama who doesn't know where she'll rest her head when she's dead: the colored buryin' ground behind the chapel or the white man's cemetery behind gates on the hill."

p. 13

"I am not a ***, the product of a rape, the child of some white devil. I am a Movement Child." p. 24

"Protecting myself, I decide I'd rather not know if my cousin is just another racist hick from Staten Island." p. 49

"So Sarah tells Bryan and then Bryan tells me, in front of his friends, after school one day when it is cold and there is dirty gray snow on the ground and we all are leaving to go home, that he doesn't like black girls."

p. 69

"Now as I move from place to place, from Jewish to black, from D.C. to San Francisco, from status quo middle class to radical artist Bohemia, it is less like jumping from station to station on the same radio dial and more like moving from planet to planet between universes that never overlap."

p. 115

"It doesn't occur to me that intimidating might be another word for black."

p. 178

"I think that the house is very Father Knows Best and the move is some kind of plot my stepmother has concocted to kill me, to wipe away all traces of my blackness or to make me so uncomfortable with it that I myself will it away."

p. 204

"When my father tells me I'm exaggerating about my feelings about Larchmont, I want to kill him, but more than that I want to kill my white, holier -that-thou, perfect Jewish stepmother, because I'm convinced if it wasn't for her my father would still be mine and would listen to me and would tell me to be proud of who I am, that i was born for a reason and that being black and white is better than being just one thing and screw people who can't deal."

p. 216

"I don't always make choices the standard way, the way people nowadays call healthy."

p. 225



"My lover asks me late one night, when we are all bundled up and close under our comforter and our child has long since gone to be with his grandparents for the summer, what it feels like to have white inside of me."

p. 302

"My blood is made from water and so it is bloodwater that I am made of, and so it is a constant emphatic link with other which claims me, not only carefully drawn lines of relation. I exists somewhere between black and white, family and friend. I am flesh and blood, yes, but I am also ether."

p. 319



Topics for Discussion

Besides race, discuss what causes Walker to struggle with her identity.

Define identity per the themes of this book.

Who is the most influential person in Walker's life? Explain with citations from the text.

What does moving represent to Walker?

What do books symbolize to Walker?

Describe the ironies in Walker's relationship to her mother.

Discuss the progression of Walker's feelings towards her stepmother.

How would Walker story different, had she been born 20 years later? Or 20 years earlier?

Are Walker's romantic relationship helpful or harmful? Support your answer.

Discuss ways you identify with Walker in this book.