

# **Breathing Lessons Study Guide**

## **Breathing Lessons by Anne Tyler**

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# Plot Summary

Maggie and Ira Moran set out for a friend's funeral and end up going on a journey through the past to discover people and events can never be changed and you will always end up right back where you started. Maggie's best friend from childhood, Serena Gill, has just suffered the death of her husband, Max. Maggie and Ira travel from Baltimore to Deer Lick, Pennsylvania, in order to attend his funeral. While there they see their old friends from childhood and adolescence. They reconnect with the faces of their past and they are all forced to a realization of their own progress toward death. Rather than having a funeral for Max, Serena makes all of her friends sing and re-create the ceremony of her wedding. After the funeral, she plays a video of her wedding. In seeing their decades past images, everyone begins to remember their old dreams and desires. They remember what they had and what they lost, what they wanted from life and what they ended up with.

These images of her past make Maggie think of other failings in her life and she decides to fix her son's marriage and bring her ex-daughter-in-law and granddaughter back home with her. She and Ira begin the long drive home and Maggie begins to plot how she is going to convince Ira to make a stop at her ex-daughter-in-law's house. Their journey is derailed when they are run off the road by an old Chevy. In order to get revenge on the driver, Maggie impetuously tells him his tire is falling off as they drive past. However, she is horrified to realize the driver is a helpless old black man who will probably think she is a racist. Maggie makes Ira turn around and they try to tell the man, Mr. Otis, they made a mistake but he is convinced his tire is falling off. Maggie and Ira eventually drive Mr. Otis to a nearby gas station where his nephew works and will be able to tow his truck. Maggie and Mr. Otis become fast friends and Mr. Otis tells them about his failing decades-old marriage. Ira mulls over the fact that Maggie always seems to get along so well with people. He thinks the world must be as she sees it and not as he sees it because he is never able to connect with people the way she does.

After this detour in their journey, Maggie is able to convince Ira to go to their ex-daughter-in-law's house in Cartwheel, Pennsylvania. They arrive to find their granddaughter has grown into a child when they both still remember her as a baby. Their ex-daughter-in-law, Fiona, is not particularly happy to see them but it is clear she still loves their son Jesse. Maggie then attempts to arrange a meeting between Jesse and Fiona but she makes the same mistake she did when she was arranging their marriage so many years ago. She goes overboard with her story and lies to Fiona in order to convince her Jesse still cares about her. Fiona and their granddaughter, Leroy, return home with them and Jesse eventually arrives as well. While it is clear Jesse still loves Fiona, Maggie's lie is discovered and Jesse and Fiona are both too prideful to admit they care without Maggie's lie holding them together. Once again, Maggie finds herself alone with Ira as Fiona, Leroy, and Jesse all leave the house. Maggie goes upstairs to her room with Ira and they go to bed early in order to prepare for the long drive they will have the next day.



Through the journey of Maggie and Ira *Breathing Lessons* explores the world of human relationships and connections--marriage, friendship, and family. Maggie's friend Serena marries Max because she feels it is time to marry and because she feels marriage to Max will provide her with the sense of normalcy for which she has always secretly yearned. Serena is friends with Maggie because she is the only person who really accepts her and Maggie is friends with Serena because she fascinates her. Maggie married Ira because she believed she had found her soul mate and the one man she could lean on as a tower of strength. Ira married Maggie because he wanted desperately to be connected to someone and to be wanted. Jesse married Fiona because he wanted a child and Fiona married Jesse because she was desperately in love with him. Each of the characters in the novel yearns to be the center of someone's universe. So they marry the person they think will provide them with this sense of centrality or they try to create a family that will make them feel necessary and valued.



# Part 1, Chapter 1

## Summary

Maggie and Ira Moran wake up on Saturday morning and prepare to drive from Baltimore, Maryland, to Deer Lick, Pennsylvania, for the funeral of Max Gill, the husband of Maggie's best friend from childhood. Maggie goes to pick up their Dodge from the body shop while Ira goes to his frame store to leave a note for his customers. Maggie finds the car has been excellently repaired and almost looks like new. As she is driving out of the garage, she thinks she hears her ex-daughter-in-law's voice on the radio saying she is getting remarried and she is so distracted she runs into a Pepsi truck. She meant to hit the break but accelerated into the road instead and damaged the front fender of the newly repaired Dodge. She is still so flustered she leaves the scene of the accident and drives off to pick up Ira at the frame store. The sign for the store still says "SAM'S FRAME SHOP" even though Ira took over the store many years ago when his father claimed he had a "weak heart." Ira is slightly surprised by the shape of the car but accepts the damage with sorrowful resignation. Maggie tells him Fiona said on the radio she was getting remarried. She reports Fiona said the first time she married for love and it hadn't turned out well so this time she is marrying for security. Ira isn't as upset as she would like.

Maggie begins to reminisce about the childhood of her two children, Jesse and Daisy, and she talks about how Jesse still loves Fiona. Maggie then progresses to a discussion about her granddaughter, Leroy, and Ira asks her if she remembered the map. Maggie suggests they visit Cartwheel, Pennsylvania, the home of Fiona and Leroy after Max's funeral. Ira discovers Maggie did forget the map and she continues to be preoccupied with thoughts of Fiona and Leroy saying Fiona will need a babysitter during her honeymoon. Throughout most of this discussion Ira has been a silent partner and it is explained Ira doesn't talk much in general and he often whistles songs that convey the thoughts and feelings he doesn't express through speech. Maggie notes that he is whistling Patsy Cline's "Crazy" and argues perfectly sane people take care of their grandchildren.

Maggie recalls how Serena advised her to marry Ira because he was such a mystery and then married the most down-to-earth, least mysterious man she could find--Max. Maggie wonders what Max would have thought if someone had told him thirty years ago that he would be dead of cancer. She realizes her most vivid image of him is an image from one of his stories. Max was always telling stories and one of them was about the time his fraternity brothers played a trick on him and dropped him off on Carolina Beach when he was passed out after drinking. Instead of being angry, Max woke up, took off his clothes and swam in the ocean all by himself, watching the sunrise. Now, Maggie can almost feel the warm ocean air on bare skin and the shock of the cold, salty water. She thinks she could almost be there herself but she is saddened to realize this is the only part of Max that is left.



As they drive down the familiar highway, Maggie recalls how she used to go on “spy trips” to see Leroy and Fiona and catch up on their lives. She recalls that she and Ira went to Leroy’s first three birthdays but then they soon realized that they weren’t welcome. So Maggie began secretly spying on her granddaughter’s life until one day she realized Leroy didn’t even know who she was.

Maggie thinks about how peculiar Ira is about death, how he avoids all mention of death and refuses to enter a hospital. Maggie herself works at a nursing home and is surrounded by death, so she cannot understand Ira’s fear and aversion. Ira and Maggie pull off the road to get a map and Maggie plots how she will reunite her family. She remembers how much Ira loved Leroy and thinks she just has to remind him. She thinks how depressing it is the way people get separated and lose touch. She remembers how she and Serena promised not to grow up and become their mothers. How they promised to enjoy life and love their families rather than be bogged down by housework and responsibility.

Ira and Maggie pull over at a diner so Maggie can get something to eat and Ira can look at the map. Maggie quickly strikes up a conversation with the waitress at the diner, although she knows it always embarrasses Ira when she “takes up” with strangers. The waitress and Maggie talk about their children and Maggie tells her that her daughter, Daisy, is leaving for college the next day. They commiserate with one another over the way their children fail to appreciate them. Maggie says her daughter once looked at her and asked her, “Mom? Was there a certain conscious point in your life when you decided to settle for being ordinary?” (30). She begins to cry and can tell that Ira is horrified. The waitress comforts Maggie and tells her about her own difficulties with her children and how her son is lazy. Maggie thinks about her own son, Jesse, who dropped out of high school to start a band and has never let go of his dream even after he married Fiona, had a baby, and got divorced. They leave the diner and Ira is irritated Maggie would bring up their private family business with strangers and that she blames Fiona’s departure with Leroy on him. Maggie gets so angry she makes Ira pull over and let her out and she begins to walk back to the diner, dreaming of starting a new life on her own.

Maggie thinks about how everyone thinks she is an incompetent klutz and how she used to think marriage would be a fairytale and Ira would always look at her the same way he did on the night of their honeymoon. She arrives back at the diner to find the waitress talking to someone else so she waits among the shelves and remembers one of her patients at the nursing home with whom she fell in love. She recalls she used to imagine running away with him even though he was about seventy-years-old. Maggie loved him because he was austere and dignified and because he saw her as someone who was competent, capable, and skilled. She recalls how he saw her in a ridiculous situation one day and after that they were never close again and she always knew he disapproved of her. In that moment she realized he was simply another version of Ira, he had represented the version of Ira who didn’t disapprove of her. At that moment Ira shows up in the diner, puts his arm around her, and guides her back into the car.



## Analysis

The beginning of the novel sets the tone for Ira and Maggie's relationship throughout the story. Ira is the dependable, capable, caretaker who accepts Maggie's quirks and accidents with sad resignation. Maggie wants others to see her, and wants to see herself, as an intelligent, capable woman but she is always coming across as bumbling and accident-prone. She is scatterbrained and her conversation is all over the place and Ira is frustrated and baffled as he attempts to keep up. However, it is obvious while she is occasionally irrational and accident prone, Maggie is not stupid. She is intelligent enough to have picked up on Ira's unconscious tendency to communicate his thoughts and feelings in the songs he whistles. He is often surprised by her ability to read his thoughts but she is simply reading his actions. She is a gifted reader of people and this allows her to connect with people more easily than Ira. The only person Ira can connect to is Maggie and so he is jealous of her attention and her affections, or so Maggie believes.

Maggie's ability to communicate and connect with people has developed out of her ability to empathize. She is actually able to physically experience the wind and the water when she remembers Max's story about the beach. She places herself in his shoes and vividly recalls his personality and his joy for life. But she is sad to realize this is as much life as Max will have from now on. He will only survive in the memories of those who knew him. Maggie truly cares about people and this explains her ability to attract and interact with them. Ira is irritated and baffled by Maggie's close connections with people because he is totally incapable of achieving the same thing. Ira is obsessed with technicalities and facts because he is unable to connect with people while Maggie is obsessed with family and human connections because she is unwilling or incapable of living in the world of facts. She has been disillusioned by her difficult marriage and the failed relationships she is surrounded by and so she tries to fix the world and make it resemble the happy perfection in her imagination.

## Vocabulary

extensive, cavernous, mangled, querulous, shiftless, festive, suave, unsettling, trivial, vivid, resentful, careening, sly, surreptitiously, lusterless, knobby, absurd



# Part 1, Chapter 2

## Summary

Maggie and Ira arrive in the tiny town of Deer Lick and they are the first to arrive in the church. Much to Maggie's disapproval, Ira begins to play his special, complicated version of solitaire on a church pew while they wait. Serena the widow arrives and Maggie sees she is just as unusual and exotic as ever. She and Maggie go to the bathroom. Serena tells Maggie about Max's slow mental and physical deterioration. She tells Maggie one time Max forgot who he was and kind of stepped outside his own life. Serena wonders what it would be like to look around one day and not recognize anything. She thinks an outsider's perspective would be like looking at your life without the curtains. Maggie thinks about how she and Serena have always gone through the various stages of life together but how Serena was always just a bit ahead of her and would tell her about everything. She recalls how Serena was the one who told Maggie marriage was not a fairytale and motherhood was extremely difficult and that it just might not be worth the effort. Serena tells Maggie she resented Max's illness and felt as if a weight was lifted from her when he finally died. But then she suddenly realized he was gone and she had lost her partner and companion in life and she suddenly missed him.

Serena tells Maggie just about all of their old friends from childhood are coming to the funeral. Serena asks Maggie to sing "Love Is a Many Splendored Thing" with Ira like she did at Serena and Max's wedding. As Serena asks other people to sing and participate in the funeral, Maggie realizes Serena is recreating her wedding ceremony. This re-creation only amplifies the changes in life and appearance that have taken place.

Maggie recalls how Serena was always a bit scandalous in high school with her unmarried, bartender mother and her unusual fashion choices. Maggie wonders if beneath Serena's determination to be different was a yearning for an ordinary life. Maggie recalls how Serena always went for the ordinary boys in high school and how she married plain old, simple Max and how their marriage seemed so happy and perfect. She recalls, however, Serena once complained about having always to carry Max. She then remembers how she turned down other boys in high school because they were too soft, too pliant - because she didn't want to marry someone like her father, someone who would embarrass her with his nonsense and merriment.

When the moment comes for Maggie and Ira to sing their duet, Maggie is forced to stand up alone and sing because Ira is completely unwilling to humiliate himself by participating in the re-creation of the past. But then one of the boys she turned down in high school stands up and sings with her and she realizes he wasn't too pliant, he was just kind and thoughtful. She thinks identity is all a matter of comparison. If she had married the kind boy from high school she would be a completely different person. Instead she had married Ira and by comparison she had become an overly emotional,





silly mess of a woman. She realizes she had been so intent on not turning into her mother, she had become her father.

## Analysis

It is ironic when Serena ponders the idea of viewing your own life with the detached realism of an outsider because in Maggie's opinion she does this already. She has always been the one to tell Maggie the truth about life and relationships and to destroy all of her romantic delusions. Serena was the one who told Maggie that marriage was not all romance and joy, that instead it's a grueling give and take full of compromise and difficulty. Serena was the one who told Maggie having children was incredibly difficult, so difficult it might not even be worth the effort especially when the children don't appreciate the effort. And now Serena is the one telling Maggie about how she always wanted to be independent and free but widowhood is not all that great either because you lose your only partner. You lose the one person who you fight and argue and battle every day, but you also lose the one person who is with you through every single moment of every day. You lose the one person who can understand what you mean with just a look, who can sympathize with your circumstances because they are in the same ones, and who you can rely on just as they rely on you. You lose your partner.

Maggie thinks the saddest thing about Max's funeral is Serena's attempts to recreate her marriage and escape to a happier time in her life. What makes Serena's attempts at escape so sad is the fact that recreation is impossible. Recreation merely highlights the changes of time. The people are all older and closer to death themselves. They have all changed and aged and suffered loss. They all have difficult children and failed marriages. And they have become separated from one another by time and distance. The sorrow of loss, not just of Max but of opportunities and dreams and youth, is only amplified by this attempt at re-creation.

## Vocabulary

pivot, spriggy, wiry, silhouette, vague, bewildered, retroactive, conspire, laughingstock, stodgy, officious, preoccupation, indulgent



# Part 1, Chapter 3

## Summary

After the funeral, everyone goes to eat food and talk and Maggie tells Serena about her children and granddaughter. Maggie complains that Leroy is exposed to secondhand smoke because she lives with her maternal grandmother. Serena tells Maggie to let her go, to let it all go. She says life is all about pruning and disposing anyway. She says that you start distancing yourself from your children from the day of their birth so they will be able to get along without you. She says you go through life discarding your belongings and your friends, your dreams and your illusions until you are finally prepared for death. Maggie notices people don't talk much about Max, instead they talk about gardening and the World Series. They talk about what is going on in their lives and in the world at large.

Serena decides to show a movie of her wedding and calls everyone together to watch. Maggie looks around and imagines they are all back in high school in Mr. Alden's civics class and they are about to watch a slideshow projection about democracy. But as she looks around, Maggie realizes all of her classmates have been aging just as she has and they are no longer the same people she went to school with. But at the same time she feels a kind of kinship with them because they have all gone through the same things and moved on together. As everyone watches the younger versions of themselves in the video, Maggie remembers her high school boyfriend and how they had planned to marry after he graduated from college. She recalls her job cleaning windows at the new nursing home and how she took breaks to go and talk to the patients and how they eventually all congregated in the rooms where she cleaned so that they could entertain her and be entertained themselves. She took her job at the nursing home because she liked being needed and she liked the way they talked to one another and told stories all for her benefit.

Maggie remembers how her boyfriend went off to college and she stayed in town working at the nursing home and singing in the church choir. She remembers how one day one of the old ladies said the Moran boy had died in a training accident at Camp Lejeune. Maggie recalls noticing the Moran boy and that he had an air of self-possession. She recalls the vivid details of his hands, his posture, and his hair. She remembers this was her first realization of mortality and her generation was just a part of the larger stream of time. By the time her boyfriend visited her at home she had not seen him in some time and they had grown distant because their only communication had been through letters. When he asked Maggie if anything was the matter she surprised herself by telling him one of her favorite people had just died. Her boyfriend recalls Ira Moran saying he hadn't realized they were close. After her boyfriend returned to college, Maggie decided to write a letter of condolence to Ira Moran's father and tells him his son was special and he was the most wonderful person she had ever met. The next time she went to choir practice, Ira Moran showed up and took his old spot in the choir. Maggie couldn't even look at him because she was so embarrassed. She



questions the old lady who first reported Ira's death and learns it was the Rand boy who died, not Ira Moran. Ira asks to walk her home after choir practice and she reluctantly agrees and blurts out she got him confused with the Rand boy. Ira asks if she will write to the Rand boy's father and she tells him to go ahead and laugh. He refuses and asks her to go out with him sometime. She tells him she has a boyfriend and says goodbye.

She tells Serena about Ira and Serena exclaims over how good-looking he is and how mysterious. Maggie recalls she began to change into someone unstable, giddy, and accident-prone when she was around Ira. She remembers Ira wanted to go to college and become a doctor but he could never scrape enough money together. He never seemed discouraged though and she admired his stoicism. Serena asked Maggie and Ira to sing a duet for her wedding and at the rehearsal Maggie's boyfriend showed up. When Ira learned Maggie wouldn't be going out for pizza with everyone else after the rehearsal he walks off alone as if he wouldn't be welcome without her. The day of the wedding Serena tells Maggie she is marrying Max because it is time to get married. When they arrive at the church Ira is nowhere to be seen and Maggie ends up running all the way to the frame store to get him. She meets his father and realizes how much Ira's family depends on him and drags him down. His father regards her with suspicion and then mocks her sympathy, saying she moved on awfully fast after Ira's supposed death. By this time Ira has entered the room and defends Maggie and says he will marry her whatever his father says. They kiss each other outside the store.

Maggie returns to the movie of Serena's wedding and thinks how no one back then would have suspected how serious everything would turn out to be. The movie makes her nostalgic and she goes to find Ira. She discovers him in Serena's room playing solitaire. She feels as if she has fallen back in love with her husband. She feels strong and free and begins to kiss him and suggests they make love. Just then Serena comes into the room and discovers they are about to make love in her room just after her husband's funeral. She kicks them out and Ira and Maggie get back in the Dodge.

## Analysis

Everything surrounding Max's funeral is an attempt to ignore or deny the concept of the inevitable approach of death. Serena attempts to retreat to the past and remember the beginning of her life with Max rather than remember his end. The other people at the funeral don't talk about Max and reminisce about his life, rather they talk about what is happening in their lives and in the world around them. They act as if the whole thing is a class reunion in order to forget that someone they knew, someone who was around their age, is dead. Maggie is also not immune to this need for escape. She goes back in time and remembers the early days of her courtship with Ira and the beginning of her career in the nursing home. Just like her classmates at Max's funeral, the people in the nursing home would gather around Maggie and talk about their lives and pretend death was not a swiftly approaching reality. For the people at the home, Maggie was a symbol of life and youth and they gathered around her like moths to a flame. They found comfort in her presence because they were able to forget their age for a moment.



Maggie found comfort in their presence because they reminded her of her youth and she felt needed.

Back at the funeral, as Maggie and her classmates retreat into the past to avoid the realities of death, Ira retreats into the game of solitaire. When she is recalling the early days of her relationship with Ira, Maggie mentions he wanted to go to college and become a doctor but now he supports his family and runs his father's shop. Ira suffered the loss of his dreams, his childhood, and his independence even before he married Maggie. So much loss has caused him to "let go" just as Serena suggests to Maggie. He has retreated into his own world and become utterly self-sufficient. All he needs is a deck of cards and a place to be alone. He sits alone and discards his hand of cards just as he isolates himself from everyone else and attempts to shed his attachment to things and people. He can't handle the pain of loss anymore and so he pretends, to himself as well as other people that he no longer cares.

## Vocabulary

pruning, shucking, composite, earnest, virtuous, drab, reflectively, marvel, gratified, inkling, bleak, tedious, stern, frivolous, intricate, varnished, brusque, sparse, taunting, radiant



## Part 2, Chapter 1

### Summary

Ira contemplates the wastefulness of the human race and the waste of his own life. He thinks about how he is fifty years old and has never accomplished anything important or even accomplished any of his dreams. He thinks about how his wife seems to take life for granted and wastes her time with pointless detours and distractions, living from second to second rather than looking to the future. He thinks it is another example of her wastefulness when she continues to care for Fiona when Fiona obviously doesn't care about them. Ira thinks Maggie's career is even wasteful, caring for people who forget you as soon as you leave their bedsides. He recalls how he hates being dragged into some imagined emergency by Maggie and getting involved only to discover he has been wasting his time and there was no emergency to begin with. He recalls how Maggie chased down a thief who stole her pocketbook and could have been killed when she should have just resigned herself to the loss of the pocketbook.

As Maggie resumes the topic of visiting Leroy and Fiona he reminds her of the painfully awkward visits on her birthdays past. He also silently recalls Maggie's fruitless spy visits to watch over Leroy. Ira realizes Maggie is plotting to have Fiona and Leroy come live with them. Maggie complains Fiona and Jesse still love each other and are unhappy. She says their marriage is like "some out-of-sync dance where every step's a mistake," and that if she can just get them together she can fix it.

As they argue they draw up behind a slow old Chevy and Maggie tells Ira to honk. But Ira decides to pass the truck although he doesn't tell Maggie this. Maggie reaches over and honks the horn just as Ira starts to switch lanes and this startles him and they run off the road. They yell at each other for a moment and Maggie tells him to catch up to the truck so they can get its license number. He wonders where she gets the energy for her determination and drive. As they pass the truck Maggie motions to the driver that his tire is falling off in order to get back at him and make him have to pull off the road.

After they pass the truck, Maggie is stricken with guilt because the driver was an old black man who is probably going to get injured because he is old and will probably think she is a racist. She makes Ira turn around and they pull off the road behind the old man. They introduce themselves and he says that his name is Mr. Daniel Otis. They try to explain they made a mistake but he continues to think his wheel is falling off. After much discussion Ira finally drives the truck along the side of the road so he can see the tire isn't falling off but the old man and Maggie both think they see the wheel wobbling. Ira eventually has to drive the old man to a nearby Texaco and he and Maggie wait with him for his nephew to arrive with a tow truck. Maggie and Mr. Otis begin to talk and Ira thinks a mere husband is never enough for Maggie. She always has to invite other people into their lives. As Maggie and Mr. Otis chat away merrily, Ira feels left out. Mr. Otis tells Maggie his wife threw him out of the house because she was angry at him over something he did in a dream and he left because he was angry at her for being so



silly. He says he has been living with relatives and out of his truck ever since. He talks about how terrible it is so many people are divorcing nowadays.

Ira thinks about his own family and the noisy, happy families he used to watch and want to have one day. He thinks of the waste his life has been and how Jesse is a failure who doesn't even have a realistic goal in life and Daisy is too uptight to enjoy life. He recalls Jesse's description of marriage as the same old song and dance over and over. He thinks of the same old jokes and gestures, consolations, and sympathy that go on in his marriage as well as the same old resentments and arguments brought up over and over again. He recalls how he felt left out as a child because he was so much younger than his sisters but not the baby because his sister Dorrie had mental disabilities. He recalls how his mother devoted herself to religion and totally neglected her family. He remembers how his father was always busy working, cooking, cleaning and being father and mother. He always felt as if he was just an extra until the day his father decided he was just too tired to keep it up and developed a "weak heart." He remembers being gratified at first by the need of his family and then realizing he would have to give up all of his dreams. He remembers Maggie dropping into his lap "like a wonderful gift out of nowhere." He realizes the world must be more like Maggie sees it because she is the one who gets along well in it, the one who gets to know people and seems relatively happy.

He remembers how Maggie thought up a disguise for his socially fearful sister, Junie, so she could go out in public and feel confident as a different person. He remembers how she begged to go to Harborplace and see the festivities she had seen only on TV. So he took Maggie, Junie, Dorrie and his father all down to Harborplace but it was foggy and cold and no one was there. He recalls how his sisters clung to his arms as they walked around the harbor and how the fog wrapped around them and he felt suffocated by the realization he would never be free. He felt suffocated by his own failure and the loss of his dreams.

At that moment Mr. Otis's nephew shows up and berates him for his ridiculous behavior in fighting with his wife and living out of his truck. Mr. Otis says at least he will have something to remember, at least he will die with the knowledge he was one half of a "knock-down, drag-out, heart-and-soul type of couple" (169), instead of being divorced and living all alone for the rest of his life like his nephew. After being assured the nephew will help Mr. Otis, Maggie and Ira get back on the road and Maggie returns to her plan to visit Fiona and Leroy. Ira finally gives in.

As they drive along, Ira remembers why the trip to Harborplace was spoiled. His sister Dorrie had taken out her treasured fan magazine with Elvis Presley on the cover because she adored him and Ira, irritated by his own failures and his family's dependence on him, and had exclaimed the guy was dead and buried. Dorrie's eyes filled with tears and Ira was immediately flooded by sadness and compassion. He had hugged both of his sisters then and realized the true waste was not the fact he had given up his dreams to support his family. The true waste was the fact he didn't realize how much he loved them. But the feeling had faded and he had forgotten again and moved on with his life.



## Analysis

Having lost just about everything, Ira retreats into the solitude of his own mind where he cannot lose anything else. While Maggie fights against her losses and attempts to arrange the circumstances and people around to reflect her wishes, Ira has given up. Like Serena, he has recognized the fact life is about discarding and losing everything in slow, incremental stages. As a child he felt left out of his family because he had no purpose and no role. His dreams of a happy, noisy family were dashed by the cold reality of his strict mother, busy father, and distracted sisters. When he graduated from high school with dreams of going to college and becoming a doctor, those dreams were taken away by his father who suddenly gave up on life and forced Ira into the role of caretaker. If life is about losing everything and slowly discarding everything that matters, then Ira was almost in the grave by the time he took over his father's shop. In a way, Maggie's letter of condolence to his father raised him from the grave. She was mistaken in her belief he had been killed in a training accident, but she was not mistaken in that he was half-dead with the pain of loss. Her letter gave him new life when he realized someone actually thought he was special and wonderful.

But once again his dreams were dashed when his children refused to cooperate with his dreams of a happy family. As more people enter his life he sees Maggie drifting farther and farther away from him. She cares about other people so much, and he comes to believe she cares about complete strangers more than she cares about him. His son, instead of doing something with his life as Ira wishes he could, dreams of being a rock star, drops out of high school, lives at home, has a child out of wedlock, and is then divorced. He loses his dreams of his son's success and all contact with his only grandchild. His daughter is too uptight and preoccupied with rules and perfection to enjoy life. She thinks she is better and smarter than anyone else and so she is unable to let herself go or have meaningful friendships.

The cycle of neglect and lost dreams continues with Ira's generation and then into Jesse's. Ira's father, depressed by the insanity of his wife and the burden of his family, eventually gives up on taking care of his family. He was never there for his children emotionally, but now he refuses to be there for them in any other way. Ira dreams of having a rambunctious, happy family but his depression at the loss of his dreams has left him cold and stoic so his happy-go-lucky son thinks he disapproves of him and he is not wrong. Ira's disapproval causes Jesse to lose his self-confidence and he finds comfort in grand, unrealistic dreams that can never be reached and therefore, never failed. Because Jesse believes he is a failure he is defensive in the face of all criticism and finds it difficult to be vulnerable with other people. He finds it impossible to tell Fiona how he really feels about her and so he loses both Fiona and his daughter, Leroy. And finally, Leroy is left with a fractured family, a father and grandparents she doesn't know, and a sour-tempered grandmother with whom she spends most of her time.

## Vocabulary

impetuous, whim, fidget, surmise, withered, incidentally, rendezvous, scurry, dogged, cavalcade, bleak, interloper, abdicate, steadfast





# Part 3, Chapter 1

## Summary

Maggie thinks about all of the losses and absences she has experienced in her life, including the absence of her daughter-in-law and her granddaughter. She thinks about how close she and Fiona became while Fiona was pregnant and needed her for support and advice. Ira and Maggie pull up in front of Fiona's house and see a skinny little, pale, blonde tomboy standing in the yard and trying to throw a Frisbee. They are stunned by how much older their granddaughter has grown. They get out of the car and Leroy has no idea who they are. Maggie introduces herself and Ira to Leroy and tells her about how she used to live with them. Leroy calls for her mother and Fiona comes to the door. Maggie notices she looks beyond her and Ira to see if Jesse is with them. Fiona invites Maggie and Leroy inside and they sit down. Maggie asks Fiona about her wedding plans and discovers the woman she heard on the radio was not Fiona, in fact Fiona doesn't even have a boyfriend. Leroy and Ira go out to play with the Frisbee and Maggie and Fiona are left alone. Maggie tells Fiona the woman who called the on the radio said that she was marrying this second time for security because the first time she married for love and it hadn't worked out. Fiona calls the woman a ninny and says if marriage was such a drag with someone she loved, it wasn't going to get any better with someone she didn't. Maggie agrees. Maggie and Fiona have a beer like they used to do when Fiona was pregnant and the conversation becomes a bit easier.

Maggie tells Fiona when she heard the girl on the radio she felt as if she was speaking for the whole world and she felt so unhopeful all of the sudden. When the girl said she was marrying for security she felt as if the world was shriveling up and withering away. She goes on to talk about how Jesse and Fiona have always been meant for one another and how they still love one another. Fiona says Jesse came once for Fiona's fifth birthday and he brought all of these girly cuddly types of presents for his tomboy daughter. She says when he came in he asked who Leroy was and exclaimed "But she's so--." And this was after she had fixed Leroy up in the alley behind their house and pinned up her hair and told her she looked beautiful and then he walked in and just destroyed her. Maggie protests he was just exclaiming over how much she had grown and Fiona says she could have cried for her. Fiona says she yelled at Jesse for coming in and saying and bringing the wrong toys. Maggie wonders why this always happens with them and why they are always misunderstanding one another.

Maggie begins to win Fiona over by talking about how much Jesse misses her and Leroy and how he cries sometimes and how he sometimes thinks of coming over but runs out of courage. Maggie tells Fiona about how Jesse's most prized possession after she left was her soapbox with the tortoiseshell lid. She tells Fiona he would close his eyes and smell it because he goes by smell the way she does. Fiona says she thinks about being with him sometimes but she knows the whole cycle would just start over again. Maggie asks if she doesn't think it's time someone broke that cycle. Slowly Maggie begins to nudge Fiona toward the idea of coming back with her for the weekend



with Leroy. But then Fiona's mother shows up and says she would rather see Fiona dead than back with Jesse. Maggie goes to the bathroom while they argue and thinks it is essential to play her cards right just now. She then slips into Fiona's bedroom to use the phone and call Jesse. Jesse lives in an apartment now and she calls him to tell him to come home for dinner. Maggie is able to slowly convince Jesse to come over by telling him Fiona has been talking about how much she loves him. She says they're both just afraid to lose face. Maggie exaggerates Jesse's excitement when she tells Fiona he will be there for dinner and doesn't tell Fiona he lives in an apartment rather than in their house. Fiona goes to pack a bag for her and Leroy.

## Analysis

For Maggie the girl on the radio becomes a symbol of her own disappointment and disillusionment when she says she is going to marry for security. As she has grown up Maggie has slowly had every romantic notion and happy daydream destroyed by the harsh realities of the world. She has been forced to realize romance is not all it's cracked up to be and neither is marriage. She has come to realize children can be as much of a difficulty as they are a joy. Sometimes your children don't appreciate you or even like you. As she has gotten older she has felt her world shrinking as her friends have disappeared, her dreams have faded, her children have grown up and all she has been left with is solitary old Ira. When she hears that girl on the radio talking about how she married for love the first time and it didn't work out and now she is marrying for security that is just the final straw. She doesn't want anyone else to be disillusioned and disappointed. She is too empathetic to take any more.

So she decides she will just have to get Fiona and Jesse back together again. She will just have to make sure they become a family once again with Leroy and she has to make them live happily ever after. For the first time this chapter shows the reader just how manipulative and crafty Maggie can be. She plays on Fiona's desires and takes advantage of her weaknesses so Fiona is left with no choice but to go with Maggie. At the same time she does the same thing with her son, carefully selecting the information she gives him and allowing him the time to think so he won't refuse. For the first time the reader sees clear evidence of the fact that Maggie isn't silly or bumbling at all, she is clever and reads people incredibly well. She gets inside their minds and is able to compel them to act according to her wishes.

## Vocabulary

obscure, lackadaisical, nudge, furtively, alighted, reverie, fulsome, hamper, haphazard, squabbles



## Part 3, Chapter 2

### Summary

When Maggie tells Ira Fiona and Leroy are coming for the weekend, he is truly astonished and wonders how in the world Maggie is able to work miracles so quickly. Ira reminds Maggie they have to take Daisy to college the next day and Maggie says she remembers. Ira says he knows her and knows she is plotting to throw Fiona and Jesse together. Maggie replies he doesn't necessarily know her at all. Ira wonders how Jesse will react and Maggie tells him she has already talked to Jesse and he is coming to dinner.

Maggie wonders why Ira is so negative about Jesse when he is so generous and kind and affectionate. She thinks about how compatible families are just lucky because their personalities just happened to blend well, but for many families the children are simply not compatible. She remembers how Jesse practically disappeared from their lives after he discovered other children. She remembers him as a teenager, wearing tattered jeans and black t-shirts but still laughing. She remembers when he first discovered girls and how they were always coming over. How she at first felt threatened on behalf of her son before she realized the girls didn't stand a chance, and then she felt proud and rueful. She remembers how Jesse went through the house turning on the radios and listening to music and then leaving them on after he left the house. She remembers how someone once told him he had a good voice and after that his dream was always to have a band. She remembers how hard Ira was on him and how difficult it was for Jesse. She wonders "What it must be like to be Jesse! To have a perfectly behaved younger sister, and a father so seamless and infallible!" (225). She herself feels this way sometimes so it is not hard for her to imagine. She wishes Jesse didn't have just her sense of humor but also her knack for adapting and seeing the best in things. She thinks she might have been too easy on Jesse and "She would have made a better mother, perhaps, if she hadn't remembered so well how it felt to be a child" (226).

She remembers how perfect Daisy was a child and how Ira called her Lady-Baby. How she used to get up early in the morning and choose her outfit for the day and ironed even better than Maggie. How she was always over at other houses with "perfect" mothers. She remember when Jesse told her he had gotten a girl pregnant but she wanted an abortion but he wanted to keep the baby because he wanted something of his own. He told her he truly wanted the child and he had gotten all of these baby books and planned to build a crib and learned all of this information about children. He asked Maggie to go talk to Fiona for him because he was afraid he'd say the wrong thing. So, against her better judgment, Maggie meets Fiona and her sister before they walk into the abortion clinic and talks Fiona into coming back home with her. She tells her Jesse has bought all of these books on childcare and he was planning to build a crib. Fiona is convinced but Maggie only feels tired and confused. Jesse is in bed and Maggie runs up to wake him up and then returns downstairs to wait with Fiona. But he doesn't show and she runs upstairs again and he is taking a shower. She yells at him to come



downstairs and goes into his room out of desperation but can't find the baby books or the plans for the crib. She suddenly realizes he never had any intention of building the crib, it was just a whim or something to say. So she runs downstairs and grabs some of Ira's doweling rods and presents them as proof to Fiona that Jesse is building a cradle. So Fiona stays and decides to have the baby.

She remembers how Jesse and Fiona moved in and Daisy stayed home and her friends came over to look at Fiona's stomach. She had a full, happy house. But after a while Fiona didn't want to go to hear Jesse's band anymore and she felt it was unfair that Jesse got to go out while she had to stay at home. They begin to argue in circles about the same things over and over. Then Fiona goes into labor and at the hospital she says she wants Maggie in the delivery room and not Jesse but Maggie is not allowed to come in. Maggie sits alone, waiting because Ira refuses to come to the hospital and she begins to cry. People come over to comfort her and she can't tell them she is crying because she set this whole thing in motion without thinking of the consequences so she tells them her daughter-in-law went into labor early. Maggie remembers Jesse saying he loved Leroy and thought she was perfect but now that she was born he had nothing to look forward to or anticipate.

Jesse and Fiona continue to argue until one day everything blew up when the whole family went to the Pimlico Race Track for Ira's father's birthday. Jesse sees some friends and then leaves Fiona with Leroy when he goes off to talk to them. Eventually Fiona shouts for him to get down to her and help her with the baby. Jesse and Fiona start arguing and Fiona talks about Jesse's precious cradle and how he never even built it after he swore he would. He says he has no idea what she is talking about and that the thought might have crossed his mind but he would never build a cradle with Fiona and his father standing back and telling him what a hopeless clod he is the whole time. Fiona says Maggie showed her the rods and Ira says that the dowel rods were his. Fiona exclaims she married Jesse for that cradle and Maggie says is ridiculous. Ira tells her to be quiet and then tells Fiona if she married Jesse for a cradle she was sadly mistaken. He says Maggie always tries to alter people's lives to make them reflect her view of how they should be. But the fact is, he says, Jesse is not capable of completing any task or taking any responsibility. That he lost his job and has been hanging out with friends rather than looking for a new one. Fiona gets Jesse to give her the keys to his van and leaves with Leroy. Maggie tells Ira she will never forgive him. They return from the race track to find Fiona and Leroy gone, although Maggie continues to insist they will return. Maggie remembers how Jesse found a job and stopped hanging around the house so much, Daisy resumed her time over at Mrs. Perfect's house, and Maggie was on her own once again. One night she was crying in the kitchen and Ira sank into a chair across the table from her and put his head in his hands. Suddenly, Maggie realized he was just as sad and tired and lonely as she was. He was out of hope because his son had not turned out well and his daughter didn't think much of him. After that night things began to improve and Maggie was able to move on with her life.



## Analysis

Maggie sympathizes with Jessie because he is so much like her. He lives from moment to moment and he holds great influence over other people. He is incredibly social and his ability to connect with people makes him crave human companionship. She projects her own feelings towards her husband and daughter onto Jessie and imagines he feels like he is such a disappointment to his father and can't compare to his perfect sister. She feels like a disappointment to the both of them. However, while she is projecting her own feelings onto Jessie she is correct in thinking he feels like a disappointment to his father. Ira's coldness and stoicism towards his son are mostly a result of his own insecurities but Jessie interprets them as disgust at his own shortcomings.

Like Maggie, Jesse is able to talk people into doing what he wants them to do and not even Maggie is immune to his power. When he asks Maggie to talk to Fiona and convince her to keep the baby, Maggie knows in her heart that she shouldn't comply. She knows he isn't really going to stick with the role of fatherhood and husband. She knows when he says that he just wants something of his own that he will eventually realize the baby isn't even really his and he will lose interest in it. He will eventually realize his baby is actually an independent human being and he will go his own way. She knows if he can't even say the right words to Fiona himself then she has no right to try to convince her for him.

But she goes to Fiona and because she is Maggie, she convinces her to come home with her and stay with Jesse. She knows Fiona could still leave at any time when she brings her home with her and she knows she was right about Jesse's ultimate abandonment of his child when he takes a shower instead of coming downstairs. She becomes desperate because she has already talked Fiona into coming home with her and so she searches Jesse's room for the cradle plans and the baby books. When she finds no trace of them she knows he has no intention of taking on the responsibility of father and husband for the long term. But she can't face the fact of what she has done and so she deludes herself as well as Fiona when she brings the dowel rods to Fiona. But they are enough for Fiona because she sees the cradle as evidence of Jesse's determination to provide for her and the baby. For Fiona, the cradle serves as a symbol of his love and dependability. This is what she means when she says she married Jesse because of the cradle.

Although she is broken by the loss of Leroy and Fiona as well as Jesse and Daisy, Maggie is comforted by the mere fact that she has a companion in her suffering. When she realizes Ira is suffering just as much as she is and for the same reason, she is finally able to move on. All she needs is to know she is not alone.

## Vocabulary

endearing, uproariously, deference, infallible, incongruous, tactful, rehash, counterfeit, strive, knotty, apprehension, intrusion, relinquish



## Part 3, Chapter 3

### Summary

Mrs. Stuckey's car sits behind Maggie and Ira's car in the driveway but neither of them want to ask Fiona's mother to move her car because she is so plainly against Fiona going to their house for the weekend. Ira tells Maggie to move the car and he will direct her, he says any imbecile could do it and Maggie doesn't like the sound of that. The seat is adjusted for Ira's longer legs but Maggie doesn't bother moving it because she will be in the passenger seat again in a moment. She begins to move the car back and then, she's not sure if the pedal was too far away or what happened, she accidentally hits the gas and the car rushes back to take out the mailbox. Fiona and Leroy sit quietly in the back seat while Maggie and Ira argue. They finally get underway and Maggie asks Fiona how her sister is. Fiona tells her that her sister was a widow now. She had been married for six weeks and then her husband was killed in an accident. The sad thing to Fiona is when you've only been married six weeks, everything is still perfect, implying things are not after that. Her acceptance of this fact makes Maggie sad. Ira tells Leroy how Maggie tried to teach her how to say "Daddy" but Maggie doesn't remember doing that. She wonders why she and Ira never share the same memories as if they lead a split life.

As they continue to drive, Maggie falls asleep and dreams she is back with Serena and they are waiting outside her father's house. Her father had never seen her and he was a wealthy man with a wife and children and a big house. Maggie and Serena crouch behind the bushes across the street and watch as her stepmother and father walk outside. Maggie wakes up crying after dreaming she is telling Serena how sorry she is for her. After Maggie wakes up they all decide to stop at the Might Value and get supplies for dinner. The song "Tonight You Belong to Me" is playing in the store and Maggie and Ira begin to sing along as a joke but then they begin to sing in earnest as Fiona and Leroy look on admiringly. Maggie notices an old woman also watching and thinks of the deception of this scene with her and Ira looking at each other romantically and singing in perfect harmony and she abruptly stops singing. They get home and Maggie begins to fix dinner while Fiona sits with her in the kitchen. Maggie shows Fiona a picture of Jesse and his band and Fiona's says it's funny they haven't changed at all. She thought they would have changed but they are still wearing the same old-fashioned Hell's Angels clothing. She says you could picture them at forty still playing the same music and wearing the same clothes. Maggie is bothered. Ira asks why Jesse still hasn't arrived because he gets off of work at five and he wouldn't go to his apartment first. Fiona is surprised to find Jesse has his own apartment.

Jesse finally arrives and says hello to Leroy and they begin to talk and get along. Just then Fiona comes downstairs and tells Jesse she was just looking for her soapbox. Jesse says he has no idea what she is talking about and Fiona tells him exactly what Maggie told her about how he kept her soapbox and smelled it occasionally when he was thinking of her. Suddenly things begin to fall apart. Fiona says she is not some



groupie and she wouldn't have come if Maggie hadn't told her about the soapbox. Jesse says he's not some kind of loser and denies all knowledge of the soapbox. Ira says all he's ever heard that he sleeps with is his girlfriend. Maggie says he just had to spoil things and Ira says it's the truth that's spoiling things. He says Jesse was never fit material for a husband and he passes from woman to woman and from job to job.

Jesse finally just leaves and Maggie tells Ira she'll never forgive him. Fiona tells them to stop and says she's tired to death of all of it. She's tired of Jesse and Maggie and Ira arguing all the time about the same things. Fiona goes over to comfort Leroy and Maggie walks back into the kitchen to prepare dinner. She calls herself stupid, fat, and clumsy and then tells herself to calm down. By the time she returns to the living room she can't find Leroy or Fiona. She asks Ira if they are upstairs with him but he says no. Maggie runs outside looking for them while Ira runs after her. She eventually comes back home to realize things will never change and everything will always repeat itself.

## Analysis

Fiona's story about her sister and her realistic, if somewhat cynical, implication that marriage doesn't remain perfect for long, have the same affect on Maggie as the girl's call on the radio. She is heartbroken to realize Fiona has been as disillusioned and disappointed as she has been. She wants to fight against this type of destruction. Just as the people at Max's funeral ignored the fact of his death because it made them face their own mortality, so Maggie convinces herself she can fix Fiona's problem because she can't face the sad reality of her own disillusionment. She wants to prevent all of the romance and possibility from dying out of Fiona's life as it did hers.

When Maggie recollects the events of the past, the reader learns her speech to Fiona about the soapbox is exactly like her speech about the cradle. Maggie is good at manipulating people and playing on their sentimentality but she always goes just a step too far. Once again she makes a bigger deal out of something than it really is. There might be some bit of truth to the story about the soapbox just as there was an element of truth in her story about the cradle, but ultimately she is basing the reunion of Jesse and Fiona on a lie and her efforts fail once again when the lie is revealed. For Fiona the soapbox becomes a symbol of Jesse's continued love just as the cradle was a symbol of his devotion and dependability. She returns with Maggie because of the soapbox just as she returned with her because of the cradle. Jesse ruins everything by denying his knowledge of the soapbox just as he did with the cradle and Ira ruins everything by being overly truthful. He almost goes out of his way to point out the fact Jesse is sleeping with another woman just as he purposefully added Jesse was unemployed and not looking for a new job during the argument at the race track. Maggie even repeats she will never forgive Ira for his role in the argument. The events of the past are simply repeated and Maggie runs out of the house looking for Leroy and Fiona and imagining they will return just as she did around seven years ago. Finally Maggie realizes the cycle of disappointment and disillusionment, of arguments and anger, and of death and isolation is a never ending loop.

## Vocabulary

bulky, unimpeded, meek, dovetail, spangled, eerily, collaborating, meticulous, dappled, bracing





## Part 3, Chapter 4

### Summary

Maggie recalls there was an old man in her nursing home who believed when he went to heaven all of the things he lost during his lifetime would be given back to him by St. Peter in a gunnysack. Maggie thinks about what she would find in her own gunnysack. She imagines all the compacts, earrings, and umbrellas she would find. She thinks about the kitten, Thistledown, that Ira gave her as her first present and the other cats they had later on. She remembers the key chain she had from her old boyfriend that she gave to Jesse when he learned to drive. She thinks about the brown beaded necklace she used to have that Daisy lost one day when she was playing dress up. And she thinks, why not have the summer evenings with the children smelling like sweat and fireflies and everybody out on their porches or in their living rooms with the windows open and talking.

She puts away dinner and goes upstairs and tells Daisy to let her know if she needs any help packing. She finds Ira on their bed playing Solitaire and she exchanges her dress for her comfy nightgown. She calls Serena to see if she is still mad but Serena says she isn't mad and she was glad to see her at the funeral. Serena says she is past the age where she can discard old friends without a thought. She thanks Maggie for calling and they hang up, friends once more. Maggie thinks about how sometimes after a trying day she feels an urge to burn everything she wore. She starts talking about how Baltimore schools have to be better than Cartwheel schools and how Leroy could live with them for a while so she could go to a good school. Ira tells her no very firmly and she goes over to look out the window and sees the young couple across the street. She thinks that they wouldn't be going to bed, they are probably planning some romantic night of dinner and dancing. She asks Ira what they're going to live for, for the rest of their lives and he hugs her and tells her "there now." He continues to play solitaire because he has passed the early, easy stages of his complicated version of the game and he now has to use real skill and judgment. Suddenly Maggie feels better and goes over to her side of the bed to get a good night's sleep before the long drive tomorrow.

### Analysis

Maggie starts out by imagining her heavenly gunnysack would be full of her lost possessions like her glasses and pocketbook. Then she moves onto more meaningful, sentimental possessions like her pets. And finally, she imagines receiving her past when she reaches the pearly gates. She imagines getting back those summer nights with children's laughter and fireflies and a sense of community. She imagines getting back the innocence of youth and the joy of family. She imagines getting back the time before her disappointment and disillusionment, the time before her dream castles crumbled under the stern gaze of reality. The reality is things can never change. Life is like a marriage, full of the same repeated joys and friendships as well as the same repeated



arguments and grudges. The progress of time cannot be stopped and the cycle cannot be broken or altered. At the end of the book Maggie and Ira are even going to bed in order to prepare for the long car ride they will face in the morning. The book ends with a long car ride, exactly as it begins.

But suddenly, just as Maggie was comforted by Ira's companion sorrow so many years ago, she is now comforted by Ira's companionship. Unlike Serena, she still has her partner who goes through every single experience right by her side. Ira may be quiet and solitary and they may fight and misunderstand each other but at least they are with one another. At least they are not actually alone. The fact is everybody understands at some point romance and the dreams of youth are just illusions. At some point everyone accepts the fact if they can't have a soul mate they can at least have a companion to go through the endless cycle of disappointment with them. Everyone realizes if they just have one thing they don't have to discard at the end of their life, if they just have one person or the memory of a partnership with one other person, then everything will be okay because they won't ever be completely alone.

## Vocabulary

intangibles, impassioned, fling, gunnysack, frowsy, unassuming, dirigibles, senile, hale, saunter, superficial



# Characters

## Maggie Moran

Maggie Moran is the female protagonist of the novel. Maggie feels an overwhelming need for connection with others and is always helping someone. Maggie can be somewhat scatterbrained and officious although she always has the best intentions.

## Ira Moran

Maggie's husband Ira Moran is the male protagonist of the novel and the complete opposite of Maggie. Like Maggie, Ira also yearns for human connection but he conceals his desire under a facade of no-nonsense placidity.

## Jesse Moran

The son of Maggie and Ira, Jesse Moran has inherited his mother's lack of concern about the future and his father's sense of pride. Jesse dropped out of high school to play in a band and continues to pursue a music career to the detriment of his development as an adult.

## Daisy Moran

The daughter of Maggie and Ira and the younger sister of Jesse, Daisy Moran is intense and intellectual. She is allergic to fun, takes life too seriously, and cannot wait to go off to college and pursue a career as a scientist.

## Leroy Moran

Leroy Moran is Jesse's daughter and Ira and Maggie's only grandchild. After her mother left Jesse, Leroy was raised by her mother and maternal grandmother. Ira and Maggie have not officially seen Leroy for several years and Leroy cannot remember her father, although Maggie makes secret, spy trips to watch her granddaughter's life.

## Fiona Moran

Fiona Moran is Leroy's mother and Jesse's ex-wife. She hasn't had much to do with her in-laws since her divorce from their son and resents Maggie's interference in her life as one of the causes of her divorce. When Maggie hears a woman she thinks is Fiona on the radio saying she is getting remarried, she decides she will somehow bring Fiona and Leroy back home.



## **Mrs. Stuckey**

Fiona's mother, Mrs. Stuckey is never without a cigarette and a sour attitude. Maggie resents her influential role in her granddaughter's life.

## **Sam Moran**

Ira's father, Sam Moran owns a framing shop but turned over the store to his son soon after his graduation from high school. Sam claims he has a weak heart and cannot work although Ira thinks he is simply burned out after being the sole caretaker of his family for many years.

## **Junie Moran**

Ira's older sister, Junie Moran has a debilitating fear of social interaction. For many years she will not even leave the family apartment above the store until Maggie buys her a wig and costume and she can go out in the world as someone else.

## **Dorrie Moran**

Dorrie Moran is also Ira's older sister and is mentally handicapped. Because of his sister's emotional and mental difficulties, Ira was never the baby of the family and was forced to take over the care of his family when his father resigned from life.

## **Max and Serena Gill**

The story begins with Max's death and funeral. Serena, his wife, has been Maggie's best friend since childhood although they are not as close as they used to be.

## **Mr. Daniel Otis**

Mr. Daniel Otis is kind old man that Maggie and Ira encounter on their return home after Max's funeral. Mr. Otis left his wife after she got mad at him for something he did in the dream. Like Maggie, Mr. Otis is also scatterbrained but kind and they immediately become fast friends.



## Objects/Places

### Deer Lick, Pennsylvania

Deer Lick, Pennsylvania is the latest residence of Maggie's friend Serena and her husband Max. Maggie and Ira have to travel to Deer Lick in order to attend Max's funeral. The proximity of Deer Lick to the home of her granddaughter gives Maggie an excuse for a visit.

### Cartwheel, Pennsylvania

Cartwheel, Pennsylvania, is the miniscule town where Fiona, Mrs. Stuckey, and Leroy live. Maggie is able to convince Ira to drive to Cartwheel because it is so close to Deer Lick.

### The Dodge

The Dodge is the car that Maggie and Ira take on their road trip to the funeral of Max Gill and to visit their granddaughter. They have just gotten their car from the body shop when Maggie smashes the fender, thinking she hears Fiona saying she is getting remarried on the radio.

### The Nursing Home

Maggie works at the local nursing home although she has no medical degree. She spends her time seeing to the patient's non-medical needs, listening to their stories, and simply caring and interacting with people.

### Sam's Frame Shop

Sam's Frame Shop is the shop that Ira inherited from his father and now runs. Ira always wanted to be a doctor, but when his father simply gave up on life he was forced to take on the support of his family and run the family business.

### Solitaire

When he has nothing else to do, Ira compulsively plays a complicated version of Solitaire. The game illustrates Ira's sense of isolation and his inability just to relax.



## Harborplace

Ira's sister Junie wants to visit the festival marketplace of Harborplace after she is given her disguise by Maggie. However, the day is overcast and foggy and the usual festival spirit is not present. The day is further ruined when Ira is overwhelmed by a sudden, smothering realization of his responsibilities.

## Spin the Cat

Spin the Cat is the name of Jesse's band that he formed in high school and continues to play in as an adult. Jesse and Fiona meet when Fiona becomes a groupie of the band. Jesse is consumed by the idea of becoming a musician and is never able to move past his dreams and establish a stable lifestyle.

## Cradle

When Jesse tells Maggie about Fiona's pregnancy he tells her he is going to build a cradle. The cradle serves as a symbol of his stability and dedication for both Maggie and Fiona. Jesse never builds the cradle and when Fiona discovers he never really intended on building it, it is the final straw in the destruction of their marriage.

## Soapbox

When Fiona leaves Jesse she leaves behind many of her belongings, including her soapbox. Maggie tells Fiona Jesse has always kept this soapbox and sometimes smells it to remember her. Fiona sees this as a sign Jesse still loves her and returns with Maggie and Ira to discover Maggie has just been telling her another story.

# Themes

## Identity

Maggie's identity is fluid, tenuous and uncertain. She finds it very difficult throughout the novel to establish and identify her own personality and identity. She believes everyone else sees her as silly, bumbling, and impractical Maggie and she longs for someone to see her as efficient, intelligent, and capable Maggie. So throughout the novel she vacillates between these two types of behavior and two views of herself. Maggie makes it clear even in her childhood she was attempting to forge an identity that was the opposite of her strict, straight laced mother, but in doing so she believes she has become her father. In Maggie's view of the old, she has only these two options and she vacillates between the two. When she is attempting to orchestrate the lives of others, she takes on her mother's characteristics intelligent, controlling, and determined characteristics. When she feels inadequate or silly she falls into her father's characteristics of extreme joviality, humility, and passivity.

Ira's identity is concrete and unshakable. It is defined and unchangeable. He sees himself as capable, dependable, unappreciated Ira and his view of himself and the world is never altered. He knows he is absolutely necessary to the sustained life of his father, sisters, wife and children but he wants to be appreciated and valued by someone. He spent much of his childhood being left out of the lives of his much older sisters and yet never being the baby because of his handicapped sister, Dorrie. He generally feels isolated and left-out and he perpetuates this feeling by putting a distance between himself and everyone around him with his stoicism. Ira and Maggie are both unable to get beyond the experiences of their childhood and see themselves in any kind of new perspective. They are unable to get beyond the cage of their own thoughts and feelings and see themselves as others see them and thus they are incapable of change.

## Marriage

There are examples of marriage throughout the novel: Maggie and Ira, Serena and Max, Mr. Otis and his wife, and Jesse and Fiona. Not a single marriage is fulfilling or even remotely perfect. Oddly enough, it is the marriage between Serena and Max that seems to have been the closest thing to being fulfilled. But, like all the marriage partners in the novel, there is a certain level of communication and connection Serena and Max simply cannot get past. After Max's death Serena mourns him as her life partner and companion but she also remembers how frustrating and difficult his illness was and how unpleasant it was to have to care for him. There is a sense that Max was just a companion to her, someone she never allowed to really understand her mind and soul and someone she never really understood at this soul-deep level. It is only after his death that she mourns his presence and realizes what she might have had.



Mr. Otis and his wife have been married for decades, but they are no closer to understanding one another than anyone else. Mrs. Otis kicks him out of her home because of something he did in her dream and he leaves because he is so annoyed by her. They make no real attempts to understand one another or communicate. Rather than seeing than recognizing and examining the frustration that motivated the dream, Mrs. Otis simply evicts her husband from their home and Mr. Otis just leaves. In the same way, Jesse and Fiona are always at cross purposes. They are never able to be open and honest with one another and instead they simply dance around their feelings and hold on to their pride. They are completely incapable of true communication and therefore, they are completely incapable of any true connection.

Ira and Maggie are no better. Ira never tells Maggie how important she is to him and he thinks of her as more than just a bumbling fool. Maggie never tells Ira she loves him and he sometimes makes her feel completely inadequate and disappointing. They live with each other day in and day out, Maggie understands Ira's thoughts through his whistling and Ira doesn't even attempt to understand Maggie's thoughts. They are totally incapable of communicating and really understanding one another. In the entire novel, marriage is never about connection, the most any marriage can hope to achieve is companionship.

## Death

Death plays a big role in the minds and actions of Ira and Maggie throughout the novel. Maggie is especially propelled by her fear of death her sense of its looming presence. On the way to Max's funeral, she thinks about how the concept of death is so difficult to apply to the people you know. In her mind she sees Max healthy and alive and she can't imagine him just simply gone. At his funeral she sees the people she grew up with and went to high school with and she realizes they have been growing older just as she has. They have been married, aged, had children, and had children grow up and now they all sense their own kind of impending doom and they all try to escape from it in different ways, whether that be denial, plastic surgery, or escape through memories.

Maggie's friend, Serena tries to find escape in the memory of her wedding and her youth. Instead of having a funeral for her husband she has a recreation of their wedding. She is completely incapable of recognizing and accepting the fact of death. Ira has been afraid of hospitals and death ever since he was a child and the only way he can escape from his fear his complete denial. He avoids sick people and hospitals and tries to ignore the fact he is at a funeral. But this only puts more distance between himself and others as he seems uninterested and uncaring about their welfare. In trying to escape from death he is unable to really live life. Maggie's fear of death is manifested in her continuous attempts to control the lives of others. She works at a nursing home and lives with stodgy old Ira and his aging family. She is constantly around death and knows it is inescapable. And so she tries to orchestrate the lives of others so they will be happy and she will know they are taken care of. She knows her time is limited and she just wants to take care of everyone she loves before she dies. But in her rush to fix



things before her imminent demise, she makes mistakes and unsuccessfully attempts to force understanding and healing where it doesn't exist.

# Style

## Point of View

Breathing Lessons is written in a third-person point of view and told in an alternating narrative shared by Maggie and Ira Moran. Because the story is told from both Maggie and Ira's points of view the reader is able to understand how their memories and perceptions conflict with one another. Some of the stories are told by both of them and reader sees how their different personalities and perspectives transform the events they both relate. This narrative method also allows the audience to understand the two very different views that Ira and Maggie have of their marriage and their consistent miscommunication with one another. Although the events of the novel are narrated by Ira and Maggie, the narrative is told in a third-person point of view and Ira and Maggie never refer to themselves as "I." This illustrates the theme of the novel that, ultimately, everyone is isolated. Everyone is trapped within their own personalities and psyche and while they interact with one another and connect in a friendly or emotional way, no one is ever able to truly know another person. The story is related by Ira's and Maggie's narrative voices, but the reader is never fully allowed inside of their heads.

## Setting

The main events of the novel are set mainly in Baltimore, Maryland and Deer Lick and Cartwheel, Pennsylvania. However, the story of the novel is developed around the journey of Maggie and Ira to their friend, Max Gill's funeral, their visit to their granddaughter's home, and their return to their own home. As the story is a story about a journey, the setting is less significant than the actual events and personal interactions that occur during the journey. Maggie and Ira's journey takes them back into the shadowy memories of their childhood and youth. They are reminded of their own mortality at the funeral of their friend Max Gill and they are reminded of the innocence of their childhood when they see all their old friends. Their meeting with Mr. Otis brings them back to the present and makes them confront the realities of their own difficult marriage and present circumstances. Mr. Otis's advanced age once again reminds them of their own mortality and vulnerability. As they drive to visit Fiona and Leroy, they look to the future and hope to develop the kind of close, happy family they have both always dreamed of. Finally, when they arrive home, they are confronted by the fact that life, like the arguments of marriage, is a vicious, eternal cycle that offers no hope of change.

## Language and Meaning

The language of Breathing Lessons is eloquent, introspective and observant. The portions of the book that are told from Maggie's perspective reveal she is actually quite observant and intelligent. Maggie talks far more than Ira and is able to connect with the people around her and understand what their behavioral habits indicate about their



private thoughts. She is able to do this to some extent with Ira as well, but in Ira's portion of the narrative it becomes clear Maggie totally misinterprets much of Ira's behavior and intentions. She has no idea how he really views her. She thinks he looks at her and sees a bumbling, inept, stupid, frustrating, and embarrassing individual and she is incapable of avoiding this role when she is in his presence. And he does see her this way at times but he also sees her as a gift. He sees her presence in his life as a gift of laughter, warmth, connection, and joy. At the same time, Ira is totally incapable of understanding Maggie's view of him. He doesn't realize that she views him as such a strict, oppressive kind of presence. He doesn't understand she feels constantly judged and found wanting. The narrative of the story reveals Maggie's ability to read and connect with everyone but her husband and it reveals Ira's inability to connect with anyone other than, he thinks, his wife. If, at some point, Ira and Maggie were able to actually talk to one another and understand one another, then things might change in their marriage and circumstances. But, as their introspective narrative illustrates, they are limited to an understanding of themselves. They can observe the actions of others but they can never understand the feelings, thoughts, and emotions that motivate those actions.

## Structure

The narrative of *Breathing Lessons* is divided into eight chapters and three parts. The first part of the novel is told from Maggie's point of view and includes Ira and Maggie's journey from Baltimore to Max Gill's funeral and their return to the road. The second part of the novel picks up just before they encounter Mr. Otis and is told from the perspective of Ira. The second part includes the entire encounter with Mr. Otis and is the shortest part of the book. As Ira doesn't speak very often and his conversation is generally overwhelmed by Maggie's, his section of the narrative is the smallest. This second section of the books plays a large role in the narrative, however, because it reveals that Ira and Maggie are often at cross purposes and it reveals how differently they see the world, the people around them, the circumstances they find themselves in, and their marriage. The third part of the novel begins with Maggie convincing Ira to go visit Fiona and Leroy and ends with the end of the novel when Fiona and Leroy leave once again. Each part of the novel follows a circular flow of storyline just as the entire novel illustrates the cyclical flow of life and time. Ira and Maggie begin the novel by leaving home and end the novel with their return. Maggie makes the exact same mistakes over again as she tries to orchestrate everyone's life to her satisfaction and for her benefit. Ira is completely incapable of going along with Maggie's plan and continues to insist on truth and realism even if that means pain and suffering. At the end of the novel, Maggie and Ira are right back where they started. There has been no change or development in them as individual characters and there has been no change or development in their relationship and insight into one another.



## Quotes

I feel like we're just flying apart! All my friends and relatives just flying off from me like the...expanding universe or something!

Several women stood next to a mailbox, talking. Maggie turned her head to watch them. She had a left-out, covetous feeling, as if they were people she knew.

But Maggie remembered, and sometimes, feeling the glassy sheet of Ira's disapproval, she grew numbly, wearily certain that there was no such thing on this earth as real change. You could change husbands, but not the situation. You could change who, but not what.

She glanced around and saw a semicircle of graying men and women, and there was something so worn down about them, so benign and unassuming, that she felt at that moment they were as close to her as family.

She seemed to believe it was a sort of practice life, something she could afford to play around with as if they offered second and third chances to get it right. She was always making clumsy, impetuous rushes toward nowhere in particular--side trips, random detours.

Sometimes--on a day like today, say, this long hot day in this dusty car--he experienced the most crushing kind of tiredness. It was an actual weight on his head, as if the ceiling had been lowered. But he supposed that everybody felt that way, now and again.

So the world was not as Ira had perceived it, evidently. It was more the way Maggie perceived it. She was the one who got along in it better, collecting strays who stuck to her like lint and falling into heart-to-heart talks with total strangers.

He had known then what the true waste was; Lord, yes. It was not his having to support these people but his failure to notice how he loved them.

Sifting through these layers of belongings while Ira stood mute behind her, Maggie has a sudden view of her life as circular. It forever repeated itself, and it was entirely lacking in hope.

What Maggie's mother said was true: The generations were sliding downhill in this family. They were descending in every respect, not just in their professions and their educations but in the way they reared their children and the way they ran their households.



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

What view of marriage does the novel present? Is it possible to have a close, fulfilling marriage? How are Maggie's and Ira's view of their marriage different?

## Topic 2

Discuss the various stages of Maggie and Ira's journey? How do the stages interact with one another or lead to one another? What do the various stages mean to Ira and to Maggie? How do they develop their characters?

## Topic 3

Discuss the childhood backgrounds of Maggie and Ira. How were their families different from one another? Similar? Compare their current family with Jesse and Daisy with the families of their childhood. Are there any major differences or similarities?

## Topic 4

What does the game of solitaire mean in the novel? Why is it specifically Ira's game? What does it suggest about Ira's character?

## Topic 5

The characters of the novel have a great deal of difficulty connecting with one another, why do you think this is? How do they have difficulty? Are these difficulties every resolved? Does anyone in the novel have more than a surface level knowledge of other people?

## Topic 6

What does the novel suggest about the flow of time and life? How are the different generations presented in the novel? How is childhood presented in the novel? Adulthood? Do the people in the novel ever actually move on from their childhood?



## Topic 7

Is Ira right in thinking that the world is more as Maggie sees it? How does Maggie see the world? How does Ira see the world? Is Maggie more successful in her interactions with the larger world as Ira suggests?

## Topic 8

Is there any change at the end of the novel? Why or why not? What does the ending of the novel suggest about change and about relationships? What does the end of the novel suggest about the individual?