

# **Brown Girl, Brownstones Study Guide**

**Brown Girl, Brownstones by Paule Marshall**

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## Plot Summary

Selina Boyce is the younger daughter of a family of immigrants from Barbados. In the 1930s, the Boyce family lives in a brownstone house in Brooklyn, which they share with several other tenants. Like other immigrants from the West Indies, the Boyces hope to someday buy a house as the ultimate status symbol that they have made it in America.

Ten-year-old Selina does not get along with her harsh, shrewish mother, Silla, who is always yelling and complaining about everyone. Instead, Selina enjoys spending time with her happy-go-lucky father, Deighton. Deighton is charming and fun-loving, and he is always half-heartedly training for some career, which never seems to work out. Silla works hard cleaning houses, complaining that her husband is a lazy adulterer, her daughter Ina is a sneak, and Selina is tomboyish, loud, and contrary. Years ago, they also had a baby boy who died, and Selina always feels that her mother wishes Selina were her son. One day, Deighton receives news that he has inherited a plot of land in Barbados. Silla immediately urges him to sell it so they can buy their house, but Deighton wants to hold on to the land. They argue for months, and finally, Silla vows that she will find a way to get that money.

When World War II breaks out, Silla goes to work in a defense factory. She forges Deighton's signature and sells the land behind his back. When the money comes from the sale of the land, Deighton blows all of it in a shopping spree for his family, buying fine clothes and toys. Silla is enraged.

One day, Deighton is in an accident at the factory where he works, and he loses the use of his arm. When he returns from the hospital, he seems detached from reality, and he only talks about Peace. Eventually, Selina discovers that her father has joined a cult called the Peace Movement, who worship a man named Father Peace as God. Deighton tells his family that he is moving out to live with the Peace Movement. Silla is so angry that she sends the police after him in order to deport him as an illegal alien and send him back to Barbados. On the way there, he jumps overboard and drowns.

Silla tries to get Selina to go to college, become a doctor, and join the Barbadian Association. Selina hates the hypocrisy and clannishness of the Association, but she meets a man there named Clive and loses her virginity to him. Selina decides that she will work hard for the Association's scholarship and will use the money to run away with Clive. Although she wins it, she refuses to accept, knowing she does not deserve it. Instead, she decides to let her dancing skill and her wits support her, and she embarks alone into the world as a young woman.



# Book 1, A Long Day and a Long Night, Chapters 1 & 2

## Book 1, A Long Day and a Long Night, Chapters 1 & 2 Summary

In 1939, there are streets of brownstone houses all over Brooklyn, New York. Although these brownstones used to be inhabited by upper-class white people, most of them are now rented or owned by immigrants from the West Indies. The Boyce family, who are from Barbados, rent part of one such house, which they share with several other people.

Ten-year-old Selina Boyce has no memory of Barbados, but wishes that she could be part of the wealthy white family who previously inhabited her house. She is bored one day, and wanders around the house. Selina argues with her older sister Ina, who is lying in bed with menstrual cramps. Selina does not understand these mysterious pains, but she has no patience for Ina. Selina finds her father on the sun porch, and he has happy news for her. Deighton Boyce, Selina's father, has just received a letter telling him that he has inherited two acres of land in Barbados. Since Selina does not understand the implications of this, Deighton explains that this must remain a secret for now, and that she can only tell her best friend, Beryl. He implies that the family will go back to Barbados and build a house there, and farm the land.

Selina hopes that their family will move to Barbados, although she will miss her friends. She goes to the candy shop and gets candy for herself and her father, to celebrate. When she gets home, she daydreams about Barbados, or "home," until she senses that her mother is on the way home from work. Selina's mother, Silla, is hard-working and long-suffering, and she is judgmental and chastising to all around her. Silla brings home cast-off clothing of the Jews that she works for, but Selina hates wearing the hand-me-downs, because she is ashamed of wearing what someone else does not want. Selina never feels like she can please her mother. Selina is not even in the family photograph. Instead, her mother sits posed, holding a baby boy who died, even while she was pregnant with Selina. Selina often feels that Silla wishes that Selina were that boy. Afraid of the woman that Selina thinks of as "the mother," she quickly changes into a clean dress and combs her hair.

The upstairs tenant, Suggie Skeete, is a voluptuous, vital woman from Barbados, and like most other immigrant woman from the West Indies, she cleans houses for a living. On Saturday nights, Suggie finally gets the chance to unwind and think about the warm, sunny island she misses so much. With a bottle of rum and a different lover every week, Suggie recreates the feelings of "home," and she tries to forget her ugly surroundings. Miss Mary is a white old lady who was the servant of the white family who used to live in the house. She can no longer care for herself, so her daughter, Maritze, takes care of her while Miss Mary endlessly reminisces, mostly about how much she loved her



employers. Maritze hates hearing about them, and she also complains about having to overhear Suggie's tryst. Maritze feels quite bitter about being illegitimate, and also about her family's low station, and having to live with people of color.

Deighton is used to his wife usually being in a bad mood, and he quickly falls into an argument with her, although he was planning to surprise her with his news. Instead, he blurts it out during the argument, and she does not believe him. Deighton leaves angry to go enjoy a Saturday night on the town. Soon Virgie, a neighbor, comes to visit Silla. Virgie is very pregnant, and they discuss her pregnancy, and the land that Deighton has inherited. Silla is bitter and resentful that Deighton is the one who is lucky enough to inherit land, because she thinks that he has no common sense. Silla supports the family financially, while Deighton tries his hand, half-heartedly, at one career after another, never sticking with anything long enough to make any money. Now that finally they have a chance to sell the land and make a down payment on the house, Deighton will hear nothing of it. He does not want to sell, because it makes him feel so good to know that he owns land. They have an unhappy marriage, and Silla does not even know if she still loves him. She remarks to Virgie that she does not even care if Deighton has a mistress, as long as he first takes care of his family, before spending money on "that concubine."

## **Book 1, A Long Day and a Long Night, Chapters 1 & 2 Analysis**

The first chapter of this book introduces the members of the Boyce family, while the second chapter introduces the other people who live with them. Selina's family faces a common issue for immigrants: how can they embrace life in a new country while still retaining their culture? Selina has been born and raised in the United States, so she does not miss Barbados, but instead sees it as a sort of fantasy, based on the recollections of others. One aspect of living in New York that the Boyces and other West Indians have to deal with is racism. For most of them, the only jobs they can get in the predominantly white society are menial jobs, regardless of their professional training. For this reason, the supreme goal for most of these characters is to buy a house, so that they will have something of value that gives them roots in New York.

It is interesting to see Silla's reactions to the events around her, because often they seem to be the opposite of what one would expect. Many wives would be overjoyed to hear that their husbands have inherited land, but instead Silla is seized with jealousy for the money that she fears she will never see. The fact that she does not care if Deighton has a mistress, as long as he first gives his money to his wife, also seems contrary, but the narrator implies that Silla is rarely willing to accept Deighton's sexual advances. Silla has gotten so used to the role of being a judgmental martyr, that she cannot let go of it, even to be kind to someone or to accept happiness.



# Book 1, A Long Day and a Long Night, Chapter 3

## Book 1, A Long Day and a Long Night, Chapter 3 Summary

Suggie's date arrives and they drink rum together, reminiscing about Barbados. Then they go to bed for a night of passionate remembrance, while Maritze listens in disgust from the next room. Maritze tries to convince her mother that they should move to Long Island, using Maritze's savings and a loan to buy a small house for themselves. Miss Mary laughs and tell her daughter that since she is past thirty, the only thing she should be worrying about is getting a husband.

Deighton walks along Fulton Street, which is where people go for entertainment on a Saturday night. He runs into a man named Yearwood, who asks if Deighton is still taking a correspondence course in accounting. This is just another of Deighton's confident career attempts, but this time, he is very sure that he will make a lot of money because he is good at math. In fact, Deighton is so confident that he does not bother with the preliminary forms, thinking they are for people who need more help. Yearwood tells Deighton that, regardless of his skill or the level of his degree, white people will never hire him. Deighton is annoyed and continues on his way to see his mistress. She is happy to see him and does not judge him or castigate him.

Back at home, Silla interrogates first Ina and then Selina. Ina has been eavesdropping, so she tells her mother that Deighton is thinking about moving to Barbados. Silla threatens Selina, demanding that Selina disclose the "plans" she and her father have been scheming. Selina does not know what to say to please her mother, so she admits that she thinks it would be nice to go back to the island. Silla angrily starts yelling at her about her own painful childhood, working in fields all day, being beaten, and getting up at night to sell fruit. Although Selina listens, she does not know what to say, and when Silla compares her to the dead baby brother, Selina shouts that she will never be a boy. After Selina goes out, Silla thinks about how Selina is the cross she must bear in life. She does not realize that Selina worries that her mother will become so stressed out and sad that she will die, and then Selina's world will end.

Miss Thompson is an old lady who runs a beauty shop nearby and also cleans an office building. She is dead tired, because she is just getting off from working twenty-four hours straight, first at one job, and then another. Miss Thompson is so poor that the only indulgence she spends money on is presents for the three little girls of her roommate. Miss Thompson has a painful ulcer on her foot, which keeps getting worse, but she does not have the money to see a doctor. When she gets home from work, looking forward to sleeping, she is instead confronted by three little girls who are hungry. They tell Miss Thompson that their mother has been out partying for two days. While Miss Thompson angrily tells the children what she thinks of their mother, she makes dinner,



feeds them, bathes them, and puts them to bed. When she finally gets to bed herself, they all crawl in with her, lonely for a parent.

## **Book 1, A Long Day and a Long Night, Chapter 3 Analysis**

Although Silla is a rather cruel, harsh mother, the scene at Miss Thompson's house shows that there are much worse mothers than Silla. Although Silla is emotionally abusive and unhappy, and sometimes beats her daughters, she does care about their welfare, and her primary motivation in life is to take care of her family. Miss Thompson's roommate does not even seem to care that she is a mother. Miss Thompson, who has already been poured out all the way, must reach inside herself to find hidden reserves of strength and love to bestow on these children. She and Silla are alike in the way that they can sacrifice everything to take care of the people around them, and they are so used to working long hours that they manage to work as though it is their breath. As long as they are still breathing, they are still working. One difference is the tenderness that Miss Thompson manages to show to her little girls.



## Book 2, Pastorale

### Book 2, Pastorale Summary

For several months, Selina's parents argue about whether or not to sell the land in Barbados. Selina hates listening to them fight, and instead she imagines that she is a child of the white family who used to live in her house. One Sunday morning in the spring, Selina sits with Miss Mary while Maritze is at Mass. Then Selina wanders into Suggie's room, where the woman is still recovering from a night of sex. Suggie gives Selina a little bit of rum, promising that it will make her a "summer woman." Selina makes tea for herself and her mother, and Silla tells her it is way too strong, although she drinks it anyway. Selina asks permission to go to Prospect Park with Beryl, and to her surprise, Silla says that she can go without Ina, because now Selina is more woman than Ina is. Selina does not stay long to examine this change of heart, wanting to be on her way.

At Beryl's house, Beryl and her five siblings are eating with their parents, Percy and Gert Challenor. Percy is an imposing man, and he starts asking Selina all kinds of questions about Deighton and his land. When Selina answers that Deighton has not sold his land, Percy concludes that her father is a disgrace, which fills Selina with hate. Her father is the only person in her family that Selina likes. Selina and Beryl skip off down the sidewalk to the trolley. They enjoy sightseeing on their way to the park.

When the girls are watching the animals at the zoo, they start talking about Virgie and how babies come out, and they argue about it, because Selina is sure that someone must chop loose the woman's stomach to get the baby out. Beryl laughs and insists that the baby just pops out, "underneath." As proof of her theory, Beryl tells Selina that she menstruates, and that Ina does too. Selina does not understand, but feels left out, especially when Beryl tells her that once she starts bleeding, she will no longer be a kid. Selina insists that she will never start bleeding, even if it causes her death. Inwardly, she feels betrayed because she knows that her mother has deceived her by not telling her this secret. Selina is fascinated by the lovers making out at the park, but she does not know why it makes her uncomfortable. To comfort her after their argument, Beryl holds her close while Selina recites poetry that she has written.

### Book 2, Pastorale Analysis

Both Selina and Beryl have quite a lot of misinformation about puberty and reproduction, which is typical of the sex education received on the playground. Beryl, as one of six children, and one year older than Selina, knows slightly more, but even she claims that Selina will die if she does not menstruate before the age of twenty, and she thinks that a baby "pops out" easily. Part of Selina's confusion is because Virgie has had a Cesarean section, which Selina thinks of as "chopping her stomach loose." In the 1930s children did not receive sex education as a part of school, but had to rely on





either their parents, or outside sources for the information. Many parents did not want to educate their children, especially daughters, in sex. Although Selina insists that she will never hit puberty, she is fascinated by many sensations, which she does not realize have to do with sex.



# Book 3, The War, Chapters 1-4

## Book 3, The War, Chapters 1-4 Summary

One Sunday, the family hears on the radio that war has been declared in Europe. They are horrified, and Silla thanks God that she does not have to send any of her children off to die in the war. Selina finally gets her period and she starts developing breasts. One weekend, Silla is making Barbados delicacies in the kitchen, which she sells for extra money. Her friends Florrie and Iris come over, and as they eat her cooking, they try to convince her to come back to church. Silla declares that she does not want to come back because there are too many hypocrites there. As if to prove her right, Florrie then begins encouraging Silla to turn to Obeah, an island religion practiced in Barbados. Florrie tells a creepy story about how her aunt used Obeah to curse the mistress of her husband and the girl died.

As Iris recites for Silla the list of people from Barbados who are buying their own houses, Silla's rage mounts until finally she loses her temper, and vows that she will find a way to take the land from her husband and sell it. She grabs Selina and tells her that she will kill her if she tells anyone what she'd said. Florrie answers that now Selina is a woman, she knows how to keep her mouth shut, and to emphasize her point, she reaches into Selina's blouse and touches her breast. Selina recoils in shame and anger and picks up a broken glass, dashing it to the floor, and she runs out of the house. That touch is the first sexual contact of any kind that Selina has ever had, and she knows that the sensation will stay with her for the rest of her life, no matter how hard she tries to rub away the feeling of Florrie's hand.

Silla gets a job in a defense factory, which pays better than cleaning houses. Suggie quits her cleaning job because she hates slaving away for a white family's snot-nosed brats. She asks Selina if she thinks Suggie can get a good factory job like Silla, and she points out that she likes to spend her money and have a good time, unlike Silla. Selina assures her that she can get the job. Selina is worried about what her mother is going to do to Deighton, but no matter whom she turns to for advice, no one listens to her concerns.

Deighton gets his accounting certificate, and then goes and applies to the three best available job openings. Silla points out to him that these jobs will certainly go to white men, but Deighton insists that, to live like a man, he must have the best, or none at all. He will not settle for the white man's crumbs. That evening, Deighton comes home dejected, having faced precisely the same racism that Silla predicted. Deighton decides that accounting is not really such a good career anyway, and takes up the trumpet, planning to have a wonderful, successful career as a famous trumpeter. Unfortunately, he knows nothing about the instrument, and he is terrible. The house resounds with his noisy, dissonant practicing. When Selina enters during a practice session, Deighton starts telling her about the house he plans to build in Barbados on his land. His plans



are grandiose and completely detached from reality, as though he has inherited a king's fortune.

Selina goes to Ina to tell her about the mother's vow to steal the land, but Ina will not even speak to her. No matter how hard Selina tries to be heard, her sister will not pay any attention, but instead showers her with insults. Ina tells Selina that she is going to go tell their father how bad he is at the trumpet, and that he will never have any skill. Selina jumps on her and beats her up, while Ina yells about how their parents love Ina the best and do not like Selina. Deighton breaks up the fight, very angry, and Selina gets up and runs out.

Selina runs to Miss Thompson's beauty parlor, where Miss Thompson listens to her fears. Miss Thompson comforts Selina and does her hair in curls, which makes Selina uncomfortable at first, since she is used to wearing her hair in braids. Selina decides that she will go see her mother at work and tell her not to sell the land out from under Deighton, although Miss Thompson flat-out orders her not to. Still, Selina sneaks off into the night, and gets on a trolley to Williamsburg, the factory district. The landscape is very dreary, but she finds the correct factory. The white receptionist allows Selina to go onto the factory floor and see the machines.

Selina is unprepared for how loud the factory is. The machines move with a kind of awesome, terrifying power, and when Selina sees her mother working a lathe, she realizes that her mother is the only force strong enough to counter the power of the machines. Silla works the lathe in exactly the same way that she stands at the stove at home and cooks. When the women arrive for the shift change, the machines do not even stop for a moment, but each woman slips in place, continuing the rhythm perfectly. When Silla sees that Selina has come to get her at work, she is outraged, thinking there is some emergency, and then angry that Selina has done something so dangerous. On the trolley home, Selina admits that she has told others about Silla's vow, and that no one would listen. Silla laughs all the way home.

One year later, an envelope comes in the mail from Barbados. Silla reads it, and informs Deighton that she has taught herself to forge his signature, and that she has been writing letters to his sister in Barbados, supposedly from him. She has asked the sister to sell the patch of land, and has gotten over \$900 for it. When Deighton hears this, he does not believe it at first. When he understands, he is utterly devastated, but a little relieved, as though he no longer has to even try to be a real man. He finally agrees that they will go to the bank on Monday to deposit the money from the sale.

### **Book 3, The War, Chapters 1-4 Analysis**

The controversy over what to do with Deighton's land is a metaphor for World War II, which was just starting. The Boyce house is stretched tight with tension for months, and finally, Silla declares war on her impractical husband. Their reactions to the war also reflect the differences in their characters. Silla takes advantage of the opportunity to get a good factory job, but Deighton does not do the same, even though it would be easier



for him to find work now. Instead, he reassures Selina that he will not be drafted because he is an illegal alien. He tells her that, as far as the government is concerned, he does not exist. This, and Silla's chilling outburst and vow, foreshadow the weak position into which Deighton will be thrust when Silla takes matters into her own hands. Selina recognizes this, but no one else realizes just how seriously Silla takes gaining respectability by owning a house.

What Silla does is against the law, and deceptive, and does not respect Deighton's right to his own property. Nonetheless, her motives are easy to understand, and seem almost justified, under the circumstances. Since Deighton only plays at starting a career, without ever willing to work hard, Silla knows that it is up to her alone to support the family and improve their living situation. He lives his life like a child, rather than assuming the responsibility of a father and husband. He fantasizes about taking care of his family like royalty, but in the meantime, he takes a nap.

When Suggie is talking with Selina about life back in Barbados, she talks about how hard times are there. No matter how hard a person works, they can never make enough money to really improve their situation, and the people get frustrated and beaten-down. Suggie says that people think that such shiftless folk are lazy, but that really, they have just given up, knowing that there is no point in working hard all the time. This defeat can also be seen in Deighton when he finds out that Silla has gone behind his back and betrayed him. He does not want to work his fingers to the bone for the crumbs of the white man, but only wants to have a career or an investment if he can live well. When reality hits him, and he understands that he has lost his castle in the sky, he also gives up and lets Silla take over.



## Book 3, The War, Chapters 5-7

### Book 3, The War, Chapters 5-7 Summary

On Monday morning, Deighton is in a great mood, and he dances around the kitchen in his fine clothes, entertaining the girls with his antics. Silla is not yet ready to go, and Deighton insists that she should believe that he is going to give her all the money. He points out that there is no way she can cash the check unless he goes along, and hints that the two of them have slept together the night before. Finally Silla sighs and tells him to come right back with the money, and he leaves after reminiscing about their courtship. Selina finds it hard to imagine her mother ever being a playful girl who danced, although it is easy enough to imagine Deighton as a youth. That evening, Selina finds Silla pacing alone in the kitchen, still waiting for Deighton to return from the bank. Silla curses herself for trusting Deighton, sure that he has run off and left her, taking all the money with him. Selina and Ina wait tensely.

Finally, Deighton arrives home, laden with many packages. He has spent the entire day buying presents for his family. At first, the girls hold back, not wanting to accept his gifts after the tension of the day. There are fur-trimmed coats for all of them, and fancy dresses for the girls. For Ina, he has a beautiful pink evening gown, which he tricks her into taking by throwing it into the air, so that she catches it. For Selina, he has a \$100 gift certificate for a bookstore. For himself, he has bought a beautiful gold trumpet. As he gives Silla her new coat, Deighton tells her that he has spent every penny of the money from the land. Silla is outraged, and grabs his trumpet, smashing it on the floor. He laughs and tells her that it is insured. They both know that their marriage is over now, even though they are still married. After he leaves the room, Silla vows that she will still find a way to buy the house. She also cries to herself that she would have bought lovely dresses for the girls, if she had the chance.

A few months later, the women are getting ready for the social event of the season, the wedding of 'Gatha Steed's daughter. Selina wears a new dress, but she feels very awkward in it, and is embarrassed about the huge yellow bow she has to wear on her head. Ina has a fragile, virginal beauty, while Silla looks beautiful and powerful in her gown. Deighton mentions that he might go to the wedding later, but Silla laughs and points out that now everyone calls him "Daffy-Deighton" because of his shopping spree. At the wedding, the other guests are very sympathetic to Silla, for putting up with such a foolish husband, and everyone admires her, because she has gone to a loan shark and started buying the house herself. Selina starts to imagine that the entire wedding has been put on solely for Silla, to celebrate her hollow triumph over Deighton, who now works at a mattress factory.

An old man convinces Silla to dance with him, and when a shy young man asks Ina to dance, Selina is left sitting alone, the only one not dancing. She feels quite alone, but then Beryl comes along. They dance together, and just when Selina is caught up in the



dance, she sees her father standing in a doorway. She is the only one at the wedding who is willing to greet him, and he retreats in shame and confusion.

On Selina's fifteenth birthday, her friends bring her cupcakes in the lunchroom. After they eat, another girl, who is from the wrong side of the tracks, tells the breathless girls how she has recently lost her virginity, and gotten "sort of engaged." Selina ponders the girl's audacity, and her maturity, and when she gets home, she makes her birthday wish, for a boyfriend. She does not want someone to have sex with, but a friend she can read books with at the library. Silla bursts into the room, and Selina asks her what is wrong. Silla reveals that Deighton has been in an accident at work. At the mattress factory, Deighton's arm has gotten caught in a machine and partially crushed, primarily because he did not bother to learn how to use the machine properly. Selina cries and wishes she had not wasted her birthday wish.

Finally, Deighton comes home from the hospital. His arm hangs limply in a sling, but he tells his family that if he works hard doing special exercises, he can get back some movement. Since he will never be able to play trumpet like Louis Armstrong, though, he does not see the point. He brings a stack of newspapers home with him from the hospital, and all he ever does is lie around and read the paper, called "The New Light." It is a religious publication, and eventually Deighton starts talking about Father Peace, a man whom Deighton claims is God incarnate, and who publishes "The New Light." One day, Selina angrily shakes the photo of Father Peace, and the glass breaks and cuts her. Deighton catches her at it, and tells her that this is a sign that Father Peace really is God and punishes those who mess with him. Selina cries, and asks Deighton to take her with him to his Sunday meetings to meet Father Peace.

## **Book 3, The War, Chapters 5-7 Analysis**

The clothes that the girls wear to the wedding symbolize their development into womanhood. The narrator points out that when Ina catches the pink dress that her father throws into the air, it is as though she is offering herself to him. The dress is feminine and pure, like a blooming flower, and Ina also behaves like a demure flower at the wedding, which earns her the attention of a young man. Selina, on the other hand, feels ungraceful and bound by her fancy clothes, and she mentally compares wearing the bow on her head to Atlas holding up the world. This suggests that she is too old for such a childish accessory, but that already, she is struggling under some of the burdens that come with growing up. In the Greek myth of Atlas, Atlas does not want to hold up the world, but does so because he has to, even though it is heavy and painful. Selina can see, from looking at the lives of women like her mother and Miss Thompson, that sometimes growing up to be a woman means taking the weight of the world onto one's shoulders.

In another reference to mythology, the narrator compares the bride, 'Gatha Steed's daughter, to Iphigenia. Iphigenia was sacrificed through marriage because she was a dutiful daughter, and this comparison points out how unhappy 'Gatha's daughter is to be getting married. She is dutifully marrying to please her mother, which gives Selina a



picture of what her life may be like if she ever submits to her own mother. In fact, Selina hates feeling empathy for the bride, when everyone else is dancing, and Selina also has no use for the gentle, ladylike young women who wait submissively for men to ask them to dance.

All his life, Deighton has played at working, assuming that his natural charisma and enthusiasm will take care of him. Whenever he starts something new, he assumes that he does not need to bother with the beginning steps, because he is too smart to need that. Until now, all this has cost him was a steady income, but now he has reaped the consequences of always having such an attitude. The factory machines do not respect Deighton's confidence, and his carelessness has cost him the use of his arm. He could use it again, if he had any willpower to perform physical therapy exercises, but he is defeated before he even begins, because his lazy mindset is stronger than his desire to live a full life and be a man. To Deighton, a big part of being a man is looking and acting like one deserves respect. Silla realizes that true maturity involves facing responsibility, and she understands that taking care of their family is more important than fine clothes. As a concrete example of this contrast, Silla gets a promotion at her factory, because she watches a machine so carefully that she is able to operate it perfectly on the first try, with no training. What Deighton mistakenly believes about his own ability is in fact true for Silla.



## Book 3, The War, Chapters 8-10

### Book 3, The War, Chapters 8-10 Summary

At her request, Deighton takes Selina to Harlem on Sunday to visit "the kingdom," where she can see Father Peace. A long banquet table is set up, with people of different races eating along it, and the crowd presses on those who are eating, with a new person filling each place that is given up. Many of the women remind Selina of brides in their white dresses, and there is a strange tension in the air, a sort of dark ecstasy. Finally, enough people move that Selina can see Father Peace sitting at the end of the table, and she is surprised to see that he is even smaller, milder, and less threatening in real life than in his picture.

A woman suddenly starts telling Father Peace about the wonderful vibrations she feels, which starts off a round of women around the table testifying to the wonderful spiritual power they feel coming from Father Peace, and people shout that they have been healed by him. As the crowd sings a long hymn, praising Father Peace, many testify that they know that he is God, and the little old man thanks them for their adoration, and gives some cryptic words of wisdom. Selina is horrified when she realizes that Father Peace is beckoning to Deighton, and has Deighton come up and sit with him. Selina tries to follow, but the crowd stops her, since she has not been called. Father Peace announces that Deighton is not really her daddy anymore, because his followers should forsake family obligations, and just let God be their family and sustenance. In fact, Father Peace says that "mother" is a filthy word. When Selina sees her father sitting there, ignoring her in his rapture to be next to Father Peace, she knows that her father is lost to her.

Since Ina has recently become Episcopalian, and Deighton goes to the Peace Movement each Sunday, the family eats breakfast together on Sunday mornings. When Selina forgets and calls him "Daddy," he corrects her, telling her to call him "Brother Boyce" now, because Father Peace has negated all of his family connections. This sets Silla off, and she starts saying all the things she has been storing up for so long. Silla says that life is not to be found in Father Peace, but in going out each day and struggling, so that one can hold one's head up. She is frustrated because now so many immigrants from Barbados are not just buying houses, but setting up successful businesses, turning their houses into rooming houses, and moving out of the neighborhood, leaving the Boyces behind. Silla thinks that Deighton does not belong in the United States, because he is too shiftless to make anything of himself. She is sure that he has always failed because he never really wanted to succeed at anything. Worst of all, she admits that she has always blamed him for the death of their son, because Deighton would always drive around fast with the boy in his broken-down car.

Deighton listens to the tirade, aware of the intense pain that prompts it. Selina desperately wants to leave the room, but feels glued to the spot. Deighton tells Silla that he has been chosen by Father Peace to come work for the movement, so he is going to





move out. Silla is floored, having never imagined that her husband would just leave her. Selina goes to church with Ina, just to get out of there, and then she wanders the streets until evening. When she gets home, her father is gone, but he has left behind all the fine clothes that have always meant so much to him.

Deighton manages and lives at the peace restaurant, which is owned by the Peace Movement. Selina comes to visit him on Saturdays. Once in a while, Ina comes too, but she usually finds some excuse not to come. Selina loves watching her father run the cash register and interact with customers. Silla tries not to ask about Deighton, but Selina can tell that she still is waiting for him to come back. Selina tells her that he is not coming back, and Silla starts working more hours at the factory. One Saturday, Selina is visiting her father, washing his socks for him, when she hears her mother's angry voice. Silla has turned Deighton in to the police for being an illegal immigrant. He submits, praising the will of Father Peace. For a moment, Deighton and Silla's eyes lock, and in that glance is all the love they still feel for one another.

One night, Selina starts chanting the name "Hitler," and her mother enters the room to see what the fuss is. Selina continues calling her "Hitler," screaming it, and starts hitting Silla, beating on her until Selina is too tired to do any more. Silla stands there and takes it, and when Selina sags, exhausted, Silla carries her to the couch, where she cradles her daughter protectively. She has the manner of someone who is finally glad to have something to herself. On the day that the war ends, the family receives news that Deighton has either jumped or fallen overboard within sight of Barbados, and drowned. Selina's father is truly lost forever.

## **Book 3, The War, Chapters 8-10 Analysis**

Selina's strange experience with the religious cult of the Peace Movement has some interesting symbolism. She mentally compares the women in white to brides, which reflects her earlier perception that a bride is only a side accessory at a wedding, since these women in white are certainly not the focus of attention. When 'Gatha Steed's daughter, who is not even important enough to be named, gets married, the wedding is really a big party for 'Gatha, who has picked the groom for her daughter. In the Peace Movement, Father Peace is denying the validity of any marriages, since they make his followers have priorities other than Peace. He wants nothing to do with mothers. His declaration that "mother" is a filthy word is reminiscent of the futuristic novel "Brave New World," by Aldous Huxley, published in 1932. In this imaginary future, everyone thinks that they are happy because someone tells them so, and the family unit has broken down to the point that "mother" is not just a filthy word, but the most obscene concept anyone can think of. This denial of the most basic values of our culture shows how revolutionary the ideas of the Peace Movement are, and also implies that the followers of Father Peace are perhaps not as joyful as they say they are. When Selina and Deighton leave the place, the narrator compares them to Antigone leading her blind father Oedipus. This reference to Greek mythology also undermines Deighton's supposed newfound joy, because Oedipus blinds himself, so that his daughter Antigone is left to try to pick up the pieces of their shattered family. Deighton has also blinded

himself, metaphorically, to his own failures in life. This also suggests a confusing sexual tension between Selina and the man she has always been closest to, since Oedipus also represents a sexual relationship between a mother and son.

The narrator foreshadows that Deighton leaves in the last summer of the war, emphasizing how major of a change it is. In fact, Deighton's death is intimately connected with the war, since Selina finds out about it on the same day the war ends, meaning that it is the end of an era for everyone. The narrator suggests that the reason for the tension between Selina and her mother is that Silla has always been jealous of Selina's love for Deighton. Nevertheless, Silla has chosen a cruel way of getting what she wants, although it is clearly an exaggeration to compare her to Adolf Hitler.



## Book 4, Selina, Chapters 1-3

### Book 4, Selina, Chapters 1-3 Summary

Selina grieves for her father for a full year. Although Ina criticizes her, she wears all black, as an outward expression of her inner condition. Overwhelmed by waves of grief, Selina wastes away to a stick figure, with old-looking eyes. She often dreams of boys, but in her dreams, her father reaches out from beyond the grave and intervenes. Edgar Innis, the boy who danced with Ina at the wedding, starts paying calls to her, and Silla warns Ina that if she gets pregnant, her mother will kick her out. She does not need to worry, because really all Ina cares about is going to church. Ina gets a job at the telephone company, while Selina is a senior in high school. Although she avoids going out or going to social occasions, Selina agrees to go to Beryl's party to show off her new bedroom, which is a gift from her father for getting good grades all year.

Selina shows up late, wanting to miss most of the party. Only a few guests are still there, and Beryl's parents are saddened when they see the transformation that grief has created in Selina. Beryl comes down the stairs, and Selina sees her as the picture of joyous good health in her sweater and petticoats, and suddenly Selina sees the extreme contrast between them. In Beryl's feminine, pink-and-white room, Selina stands out among the other girls in their party clothes. The girls talk about what they want to be when they grow up, and Beryl says that she wishes that the next four years would fly by, so she can get a car. Beryl's docile, compliant attitude bothers Selina, and she notices that Beryl seems to only say and do what her father wants her to. Selina asks Beryl if she has any thoughts or ideas of her own, and Beryl asks Selina what Selina's father is going to give her. As soon as she has spoken, Beryl feels terrible, and tries to take it back, following Selina into the hallway. Selina feels unable to explain that her father has already given her a magical sense that anything is possible. She tries not to feel jealous of Beryl, whose father gives her tangible things, and she tells Beryl that everything is all right, because she wants to preserve Beryl's happiness and innocence. Selina feels that as long as Beryl still seems untouched, there will still be some vestige of the carefree days of her childhood.

Since the defense factories close after the war ends, Silla gets a job working in a hospital. She also takes a course in nursing, and practically every night, she cleans and studies until she falls asleep in a chair. Silla never mentions the night that Selina hit her and called her "Hitler," and her only outward sign that it happened is that she seems a little nicer to Selina, as though she is trying to be reconciled with her. The only time Silla seems like herself again is when she cooks on Saturdays and her friends come over to visit. Then, Silla laughs like old times. She complains that Selina has no plans for college, and finally Selina agrees to take college classes, although she does not intend to be a doctor, as Silla hopes. Silla is part of the Barbadian Association of Businessmen and Homeowners, for she finally owns the house that they live in. She complains to her friends that she could make more money if she could convert the upstairs bedrooms



into multiple smaller rooms, and then she rails against her tenants, wishing she could get rid of them.

Sometimes, Selina goes into Miss Mary's room and sits with her. The old woman can barely talk anymore, but she has repeated her stories so many times that Selina can recite them for her. One day, Miss Mary looks up in terror, for Silla is glowering in the hallway. Silla demands to know why Selina wastes her time talking to Miss Mary and Suggie and Miss Thompson, and does not play with Beryl and other girls their age. Silla continues raging, coming into the room, and asks Miss Mary why she has not died yet. As Miss Mary clutches the sheets helplessly, Silla tears through the room, destroying things and screaming about all the dirt, and how Miss Mary thinks she is too good to speak to Silla, because Silla is black. Finally, Silla lunges at Miss Mary, almost grabbing her, and trying to suck the life force out of her. The old woman crumples in confused defeat. Selina is appalled that her mother can behave in such a way. Miss Mary dies a few months later. Seeing her body, it seems to Selina that nothing has changed, because the old woman has existed in a sort of living death for so long, in a room that has become a tomb. Selina worries that perhaps each person has to go through life in their own tomb.

After Miss Mary's death, Suggie tells Selina that they had better enjoy themselves while they can, because death keeps visiting their house. Suggie encourages Selina to drink rum and dance with her, and the rum makes it a little easier for her. Touching Suggie, Selina knows that Suggie has been with countless men, yet she somehow seems innocent and untouched. Selina asks Suggie if she thinks Selina will ever find a boy, and Suggie laughs and admits that she was wondering when Selina would get interested in boys. Suggie warns Selina that she will fall for a boy before she knows it, and tells an embarrassing story about losing her panties at the age of twelve. Suggie tells Selina to make sure she stays out of the Barbadian Association, because they will run her life for her. Suggie tells Selina that she could never go back to Barbados with her slutty reputation, and she suspects that this is the same reason that Deighton would rather jump ship than face his people as a failure. Suggie tells Selina that it is time to stop wearing black, because Deighton always liked to wear fine clothing. Selina decides that it is time to move on.

## **Book 4, Selina, Chapters 1-3 Analysis**

Ina thinks that Selina is parading her grief for others by wearing black clothes for a year after their father's death. Really, the black clothes symbolize how Selina feels on the inside, as though every moment is darkened by her sadness. Selina is aware of this symbolism, and when she realizes that she has been laughing and dancing in the black clothes, she feels guilty, because it is now a false symbolism. Even before she changes out of the black clothes, her laughter with Suggie is metaphorically colorful, letting her know that it is time to change into some bright-colored clothes.

When Selina goes to church with Ina, she sees a look of adoration and rapture, as powerful as lust, on Ina's face when she looks at a picture of Jesus. Ina's relationship



with the church is similar to Deighton's relationship with the Peace Movement, both in the level of commitment, and in the specific emotions they feel for their chosen leader. Selina and her mother both envy Deighton and Ina a little bit for their confident devotion and peace, but they both are dissatisfied with what is being offered, like it is hollow. Although religion helps Ina work through her grief, Silla and Selina need to look to the rest of life instead.

Suggie tells Selina that she has always been the sort of person who loves having a good time and never wants to stop. She identifies with Deighton in this way, because neither of them have an easy time saving for the future, or facing a future that is not bright with fun and adventure. In this, they are quite different from Silla and Miss Mary, who both spend their lives slaving away for others, without ever really enjoying the fruits of their labor. Both women, although they sacrifice so much, end up driving their own daughters away.



## Book 4, Selina, Chapters 4-6

### Book 4, Selina, Chapters 4-6 Summary

Silla convinces her new roomers to testify that Suggie has different men coming to see her every day and must be a prostitute, and so Silla is able to easily evict Suggie. Suggie is enraged, and swears to Selina that she is no whore. Selina tells Suggie that Silla just wants to get rid of anyone that Selina has for a friend. Upon leaving, Suggie does not give Selina her new address, but instead gives her a bottle of perfume to remember her by. Soon Selina starts college, but the semester flies by in a daze, and everything seems unreal to her. The only thing that Selina can care about or feel for is when she is walking in Times Square. She loves the busy lights and the loud music and noises coming from the bars.

Selina goes to see Miss Thompson, and tells the old woman about how Silla now lurks in the dark hallway, waiting to shout at her roomers. When Selina points out to Miss Thompson that she is not a child anymore, Miss Thompson agrees to tell her the origin of her foot ulcer. Many years before, Miss Thompson is a pretty young woman, full of life, who finds herself at a general store in the South. A big white man with a shovel takes a liking to her, and waits for her just up the road, to rape her. She fights back and avoids getting raped, but his shovel takes a chunk out of her foot, which never does completely heal. Miss Thompson cautions Selina to have good times while she can, and urges her to try going to the Association meetings, where she might meet a nice boy. Finally, Selina agrees to go to one meeting, just so she will know what she is criticizing.

Selina accompanies her mother to an Association meeting, and she is uncomfortable at the sense of solemn, severe solidarity she feels among the people there. A man who suggests that they could include all black people in their Association is scoffed at and called a Communist. When the young people there ask Selina what she thinks about their Association, she tells them that she thinks it is pathetic and useless. As she runs out, she asks a stranger in the doorway to open the door for her. The stranger, whose name is Clive, asks her what is the matter, and she reluctantly confesses the story, although now she is embarrassed for having made fun of their dreams like that. Clive offers to walk her home, but they stop and listen in the doorway of a jazz club first. They cut through the park on the way to Selina's house, and stop for a while in a pavilion, where Clive smokes. Selina surprises herself by giving in to Clive's urging, and they have sex in the pavilion. Clive is abashed when he realizes he has taken her virginity.

Selina and Clive start secretly dating. He occasionally paints, and he lives in a studio where Selina comes to visit him almost every day. Clive reminisces about his time in the war, cleaning up dead bodies, and his Bohemian time living in the Village in New York. Clive cautions Selina not to become Bohemian. One day, a white girl named Rachel Fine asks Selina to join their Modern Dance Club. Selina is happy to contribute, and really enjoys her first practice. Afterward, Clive chides her for becoming Bohemian, and he warns her not to accept the patronage of white people who just want to prove that



they are not racist by rubbing elbows with black people. Selina tells him she is doing it for herself, and then he has to go pick up his mother at the Association. Selina feels just as abandoned as his unfinished painting.

## Book 4, Selina, Chapters 4-6 Analysis

Clive tells Selina that, although she is a virgin the first time they sleep together, she seduced him, as though she is reaching out and grabbing life for the taking. Selina is horrified, because this type of behavior is the sort of thing her mother does, and she does not want to be anything like Silla. Selina does not seem to notice, in her rebellion, that she is following the same path as Silla, in some ways. For instance, Clive only plays at being an artist, not really caring if he succeeds, or finishes college, while Selina wants things from the world with a hungry intensity. This mimics Silla's ambition as she tries to get ahead in life while tied to Deighton, who is a slacker.

Many of the people at the Association meeting call the speaker a Communist because he wants to be more inclusive in their membership requirements. He hopes that, just as many people from Barbados can secure loans through the Barbadian Association, so also many black people can be helped, with the organization stronger for the greater numbers. This is not an especially Communist idea, especially since membership is strictly voluntary and members retain their own private property and their own businesses. Really this is the opposite of Communism, but in the late 1940s and early 1950s, people were just starting to suspect one another of anti-patriotic Communism, with the Cold War just starting. Everyone was so worried about Communism threatening freedom, that they did not realize that they were creating an atmosphere where people were afraid to speak out for fear they would be accused of being a Communist. This got very out of hand with the McCarthy trials in the 1950s.

When Clive talks about people being "Bohemian," he is not referring to the nationality, but to a mindset which was named after a group of artists and revolutionaries who emigrated from Bohemia to Paris. Bohemianism embraces artistic expression, nonconformity, and temporary relationships with a wide variety of people. Bohemians care more about discovering things about themselves, doing great art, and expanding people's minds, than about material wealth or respectability. When Clive tells Selina not to become too Bohemian, he is suggesting that she decide for herself what path she wants to take through life, rather than rejecting the status quo because it is cool to do so.



## Book 4, Selina, Chapters 7-9

### Book 4, Selina, Chapters 7-9 Summary

One of Silla's friends sees Selina going into Clive's house one day, but when she is confronted about it, Selina insists that she and Clive are just friends. Selina learns that when Clive's mother found out that he wanted to be an artist, she burned his paintings. Clive points out to her that mothers never want to cut the umbilical cord, but instead want to suck life out of their children throughout their lives. Selina thinks that if they could just get away, Clive's art career would take off and he would be able to make a masterpiece, so she schemes to win the Association scholarship and use the money to run away with Clive. She does not seem to notice that Clive is not as interested in her plans for him, or that her relationship with him is beginning to mirror that of her parents. Selina goes crawling back to the Association and begs their forgiveness. She becomes so involved with them that it seems sure that she will get the scholarship. Meanwhile, she gets so good at dancing that she is selected to dance a solo at the recital.

At the recital, Selina does a dance which presents the entire life cycle, from birth until death. The audience, which does not include Clive or her family, goes wild, and the other dancers, who are white, tell her how amazing she was. Afterward, they all frolic over to the house of Margaret Benton, one of the dancers. Margaret's mother wants to meet Selina, and talks with her condescendingly about how well-spoken she is for a Negro. The last straw is when Mrs. Benton asks her to do the West Indies accent, and Selina runs out in humiliation. She realizes that, to people like Mrs. Benton, she will never be anything but a black face.

### Book 4, Selina, Chapters 7-9 Analysis

There are several signs that foreshadow that Selina's relationship with Clive is about to end. When they are spending time together, the narrator points out that spring has ended and that the day is ended. This focus on endings symbolically points out the fact that Clive has made no long-term commitment to Selina, but keeps indicating that he would like to move on. Another red flag is the way Clive resembles Deighton, not just in his half-hearted, half-finished dreams, but also in his constant lounging on the sofa, half-asleep. Selina has such contempt for her mother for having no scruples about getting money from someone she loves, and yet Selina is doing just that, in pretending to care about the Association, so she can take the scholarship money. She is always annoyed at how the mothers project their own dreams of success onto their children, thinking that if they just slave away enough, they can provide that success to their children. Selina is doing this with Clive, not noticing that the only thing stopping him from painting is a lack of desire to do it.

Most parts of this book have taken place among only black characters, but now Selina is suddenly the only black person in an all-white dance troupe. Until this point, she has





been shielded from much of the racism in the world around her, but now she understands. Even though Mrs. Benton really is trying to be polite, she transparently makes it clear that she approves of her daughter's association with Selina only as a harmless phase, which will soon pass. Mrs. Benton also manages to slip in a few insults about Margaret's weight, showing that this parasitic relationship of mother to child is not limited to people from the West Indies.



## **Book 4, Selina, Chapters 10-11**

### **Book 4, Selina, Chapters 10-11 Summary**

Selina goes to Clive's apartment for comfort, but Clive's mother has just called with yet another feigned medical emergency. Selina begs Clive to stay with her just this once, but he goes anyway. Selina realizes that he is never going to have the guts to leave his mother behind, so she leaves her key in his apartment and goes home. She cries a lot, but will not tell her family what is the matter. For a week, she does not leave or talk to her friends. Ina announces that she and Edgar are getting married, and she is going to let Silla put on a big wedding, even though Ina does not want a fancy wedding. Ina does not seem excited to be getting married, and Selina wonders if this is what most women have to look forward to.

The night of the scholarship presentation, Selina sits nervously on the stage with her peers. Her name is called, and as she approaches the stage, she feels such love and connection with the people there that she knows she cannot take the money and run away. Instead, she announces that she cannot accept the scholarship, because she does not deserve it. Silla corners her and asks what is going on, and Selina tells her the truth about her plan with Clive. Selina tells her mother that, even without the scholarship, and without Clive, she is still leaving, because she is too much like her independent mother to stay put. After saying goodbye to Silla, Selina calls up Rachel Fine, who has a connection to get Selina a job dancing on a cruise ship, so that Selina can get far away, into the world.

### **Book 4, Selina, Chapters 10-11 Analysis**

Selina is able to break free of her mother's clutches only when she acknowledges that her mother is a part of her, and chooses not to give in to the destructive tendencies that they share. Clive's relationship with his mother helps Selina to see what she does not want, and helps her understand how important it is for her to be independent and stand on her own feet. The narrator foreshadows that she will face many trials and be worn down by life by saying that she feels like Miss Thompson. However, Selina is still enough of a child that many things are still new to her, and the world is waiting to be discovered.

Although Selina strongly recoils from the racist sentiments of people like Mrs. Benton, Selina is able to realize that not all white people are like that, and she shows this openness by calling up Rachel for help. If Selina decided that she hates all whites, she would be practicing the same stereotyping that she so loathes in bigots like Mrs. Benton. Selina understands that it is the person inside, and not the color of their skin, that matters. Her decision to go on the cruise alone shows that she is brave enough to face people's prejudice, and defy it, showing them that she is more than just her race.



# Characters

## Selina Boyce

Selina is the main character of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. She is the daughter of immigrants from Barbados, growing up in Brooklyn in the 1930s and 1940s. Selina does not like her mother or her sister Ina, getting along only with her father. Young Selina has eyes which look too old, as though she has already seen a lot of pain, even as a child.

Selina has a boisterous, bullying personality, and she often says cruel things to the people around her, or beats up Ina, even though Ina is several years older. Selina plays with her best friend Beryl and other little girls, but when she is trying to deal with confusing emotions, she tends to hang around with the other tenants in her house, or with Miss Thompson, an old beautician.

Selina feels ashamed and confused as she learns what it means to grow up, and she is not sure that she wants the same future that her parents want for her. When she gets to college, Selina discovers that she is a great dancer, and she uses this ability to make her way in the world. When she encounters racism against her dark skin, Selina begins to understand why so many women she knows are so bitter, and why the people from the West Indies feel the need to band together. Selina has enough of her mother in her that she is capable not just of hurting others with her eloquent, piercing words, but she can also easily deceive those around her, such as when Selina decides to win the Association scholarship so that she can run away with the money.

Much of Selina's adolescence is spent trying to reconcile the adult impulses and the childish impulses inside of herself. She shows, at the end, that she is capable of rejecting the parts of her personality which she hates so much in her mother, and Selina gives up the scholarship, even though she offends many of her family friends by doing so.

## Silla Boyce

Silla is Selina and Ina's mother and Deighton's wife. She is a strong, passionate woman who has seen too many disappointments in her hard life. As a child, Silla has to do back-breaking labor in the cane fields, enduring whippings, and she even sold fruit in her pre-dawn spare time. When Silla marries the cocky Deighton, they move to New York, where they lease a brownstone house in Brooklyn. Silla, like many immigrant women, works during almost every waking moment, with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of energy.

Just as Silla is hard on herself, so she is also hard on the people around her, as she tries to force the American dream to become a reality, even if she has to make everyone in her family miserable. Silla's children and husband are not able to appreciate just how hard she works to support them, so she unleashes her cruel tongue at every



opportunity, finding the most eloquent, succinct ways of hurting others with her words. Silla complains that her husband is too lazy and playful, and her daughters are naughty and ungrateful and not proper ladies.

One thing that drives Selina crazy is the way that Silla compares Selina to Silla's baby son, who died many years before. For years, Silla nurses bitterness about this son, and she blames Deighton for the child's death. This is part of the reason that Silla illegally sells Deighton's land without permission and why she has Deighton deported. Silla finally manages to buy her house and becomes heavily involved with the Barbadian Association, but she cannot enjoy it once she has it, but just lurks in the hallway so that she can yell at her tenants. Silla tries to run the lives of her daughters and is only successful with long-suffering Ina, who agrees to have a big wedding just to please her mother.

## **Deighton Boyce**

Deighton is Selina's confident, happy-go-lucky father. He likes to have a good time and look good, but he has no work ethic, and when his wife has him deported to Barbados, he jumps ship and drowns.

## **Ina Boyce**

Ina is Selina's older sister. She is gentle and submissive, and when she joins the Episcopal Church, it becomes the focus of her entire life.

## **Clive**

One night, Selina meets a stranger and loses her virginity to him. Later, she discovers that his name is Clive, and they secretly date for a year or two.

## **Beryl Challenor**

Beryl is Selina's best friend. Beryl is one of six children She tries to be a good daughter and do what her father wants.

## **Mrs. Benton**

Mrs. Benton is the white mother of one of the girls from Selina's dance troupe. When Selina talks with her, for the first time Selina understands that some people look down on her for being black.



## **Miss Thompson**

Miss Thompson is an old beautician with whom Selina is friends. She offers the motherly love and support that Silla is too angry to give.

## **Suggie Skeete**

Suggie is one of the tenants in the Boyces' brownstone house, and she has a different lover every weekend. Suggie helps Selina understand the excitement of drinking rum and talking about men.

## **Miss Mary**

Miss Mary is an old white lady who lives in the brownstone with the Boyces. She was previously the servant to the wealthy white family who used to live there.

## **Maritze**

Maritze is Miss Mary's grown daughter, who takes care of her bedridden mother. Maritze is a judgmental old maid.

## **Father Peace**

Father Peace is the religious leader of a cult called the Peace Movement. His followers believe that he is God incarnate.



## Objects/Places

### Williamsburg

Williamsburg is the factory district in New York City where Selina's mother works. It is a nasty, dark place.

### Fulton Street

Fulton Street is the fun party street in Brooklyn, where the night life is the best. Deighton likes to go to Fulton Street every Saturday night to visit his mistress.

### Obeah

Obeah is an island religion practiced in Barbados. It is similar to voodoo or santeria.

### Barbados

Most of the characters are immigrants from Barbados, which they call "home." Barbados is a lovely, sunny island, but many people there are very poor, have to work very hard, and can never get ahead.

### Prospect Park

Selina and Beryl like to go to Prospect Park, which has a zoo and lots of food vendors, as well as sports games.

### The Barbadian Association

The Barbadian immigrants form an Association to make loans to members, provide insurance, and grant a scholarship.

### The Modern Dance Club

Selina joins the Modern Dance Club at her college, although she is the only non-white member. Selina loves dancing, and she gets a solo at the recital.



## **Clive's Studio**

Clive lives and paints in a studio that is an old kitchen. It is decorated with old furniture from his childhood and half-finished oil paintings.

## **'Gatha Steed's Daughter's Wedding**

The wedding of 'Gatha Steed's daughter to the groom of her mother's choosing is the social event of the season. Silla goes without Deighton.

## **World War II**

Although the Boyce family do not need to worry about Deighton getting drafted, their lives are affected by World War II, like most people in the 1940s. Silla gets a job at a defense factory, because factory jobs are finally available to black women.

## **The Birth to Death Cycle Dance**

Selina dances a solo at her recital, in which she acts out all the cycles of life, from infancy to old age.



# Themes

## Mothers and Daughters

Most mothers want to see their children grow up to be happy and successful, but not all mothers want to let go of their children. Clive points out to Selina that he thinks that mothers never want to cut the umbilical cord, but instead want to get the most out of their investment, taking life to replace the life they have given. This antagonistic view reflects his own relationship with his mother, who is always calling him with supposed medical emergencies. Selina also feels bound to her mother, even when her parents are fighting. After a big family fight, when Ina flees, "Selina remained. Obscurely she knew that this was her place, that for some reason she would always remain behind with the mother" (Book 3, *The War*, chap. 5, p. 132). Selina can not truly grow up until she learns to walk away and let Silla be a martyr.

Not all mothers in the book are so clinging. Miss Mary taunts her daughter for not having found a husband and urges her to move out and get married. Miss Thompson is kind enough to become a surrogate mother to the daughters of her roommate, because their mother would rather party than take care of them. 'Gatha Steed uses her nameless daughter as a decoration and as a testament to Gatha's wealth and social standing, coercing her daughter to marry 'Gatha's chosen bridegroom at an opulent wedding where no one bothers to dance with the bride.

When Selina's mother dances at the wedding and reminisces about her wild days in Barbados, Selina is confronted with an idea of her mother that is diametrically different from the self-sacrificing, hard-working grouch that Selina knows. Feeling left out, Selina thinks that, "Years ago, on an island that was only a green node in a vast sea, the mother had been a girl who had danced till she had fainted once, and she, Selina, had been nothing to her" (Book 3, *The War*, chap. 6, p. 145). Selina does not yet realize that she takes after her mother and that she will repeat her mother's joyous dancing someday.

## Immigrants Making a New Life

Although the entire book takes place in New York, the characters often think back to the West Indies, where they came from, to try to achieve the American dream. One of their supreme goals is to buy a house, and they work themselves to the bones to get one, even an old one in a declining neighborhood. As the narrator establishes in the first chapter, "The West Indians, especially the Barbadians who had never owned anything perhaps but a few poor acres in a poor land, loved the houses with the same fierce idolatry as they had the land on their obscure islands" (Book 1, *A Long Day and a Long Night*, chap. 1, p. 4). These people face racism, poverty, lack of education, and a language barrier. Many of them form small communities, where they can feel at home among others who share their culture. They help one another through groups like the





Barbadian Association and cheer one another up with home-cooked Barbadian delicacies.

By working hard, many of the immigrants who come to America with no resources and no money can improve their situation, and a primary motivation is to make a better life for their children. As Cecil Osborne says to the other West Indians at the Association meeting, "Most of us did come to this man country with only the strength in we hand and a little learning in we head and had to make our way, but the young people have the opportunity to be professional and get out there and give these people big word for big word" (Book 4, Selina, chap. 5, p. 221).

Because the children of the immigrants have never experienced the hardships that their parents overcame, they do not appreciate the sacrifices their parents make for them. Not only that, but many of the children have a thoroughly "American" mindset, so that they do not want the same things for themselves that their parents hope for them. For instance, a professional career in painting or dance is horrifying to parents who imagine their child going to medical school or law school.

## Coming of Age

At the beginning of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Selina is a confused ten-year-old who has trouble finding her proper place in life. By the end of the book, she has faced the death of her father, and has decided to leave college to make her own way alone in the world as a dancer. She learns to face who she is, including admitting how much she is like her mother, and she makes the adult decision not to follow in her mother's unscrupulous footsteps. Immediately after Selina relinquishes the Association scholarship, she understands that she has set herself free and also that she has let go of her support network, so that she is on her own to succeed or fail. The narrator says, "And as the familiar faces fell away behind her, she was aware of the loneliness coiled fast around her freedom" (Book 4, Selina, chap. 11, p. 303).

When Selina is a child, puberty and sex are kept a secret from her, so such things have the tantalizing air of the forbidden. When Beryl tells Selina about menstruation, Selina thinks to herself that, "The mother had deceived her, saying that she was more of a woman than Ina yet never telling her the one important condition" (Book 2, Pastorale, p. 62). Selina does not yet realize that there is more to growing up than looking like an adult, but there are some ways in which Selina is old beyond her years, which is reflected in her old-looking eyes. Selina's sexual maturity creeps up on her for years, until she is mentally mature enough to handle sex, and then she just goes ahead and has sex with the first interesting man she meets. Selina comes to understand that, while sex is an important aspect of adulthood, there is much more to being grown up than having sex.



# Style

## Point of View

*Brown Girl, Brownstones* is told by a third-person narrator, who has access to the inner thoughts of a few characters. Most of the book is seen through Selina's eyes, but sometimes the view shifts to someone like Miss Thompson, or Suggie. Once in a while, the narrator foreshadows something that is going to happen by using symbolic imagery, such as emphasizing the end of spring and the end of the day, to show that Selina and Clive's relationship is nearing its end, but for the most part, the future is a mystery. Often Selina's point of view takes a fanciful turn, and she imagines herself as other people. For example, she identifies with Suggie after they drink rum together, as the narrator says, "On her way downstairs, the rum coiling hot in her stomach, she felt that she, like Suggie, carried the sun inside her" (Book 2, Pastoral, p. 52). Selina's imagination enlarges her viewpoint, allowing her to imagine being Suggie or containing the sun, but also it helps her identify with people from different walks of life, such as Miss Mary, or Miss Thompson.

Selina's point of view is an important combination of Barbadian immigrant and native-born American. Selina has grown up surrounded by people of her own race, and until she comes face to face with patronizing racism, she does not realize how many white people view her. When her point of view is suddenly expanded, she realizes that "their idea of her was only an illusion, yet so powerful that it would stalk her down the years, confront her in each mirror and from the safe circle of their eyes, surprise her even in the gleaming surface of a table" (Book 4, Selina, chap. 9, p. 291). On the other hand, Selina enjoys her West Indian heritage, taking delight in dancing to Barbadian calypso.

## Setting

The setting for *Brown Girl, Brownstones* is Brooklyn, New York, in the 1930s and 1940s. Selina's family, and many families like them, lease or own brownstone houses, having moved in after wealthy white people decided that the area was too rough. There are quiet areas, like the street where Selina lives, but the city is teeming with all different sorts of people engaging in all different sorts of activities. New York's urban juxtaposition of the beautiful and the ugly can be seen in descriptions like, "But despite the ruin, spring stirred and, undaunted, arrayed the trees, hung its mist curtain high and, despite the wine-stench, sweetened the air" (Book 4, Selina, chap. 11, p. 309). This also indicates the spiritual setting of the book, in that despair and pain come to the characters, but they can still grow in such harsh circumstances. The roughness of loud Fulton Street and its glittering appeal to youthful Selina is described as, "The whores were there, perched like painted birds on the high stools, their paste jewels glinting rose in the rose light, and the men in their brutal innocence lurched around them and, for the price of a drink, laid bold hands on their ravaged bodies" (Book 4, Selina, chap. 5, p. 232). This evocative language brings to mind Selina's view of the bar and of her



relationship with Clive, which could be described as "rose-colored," and the unexpected description of the men as "innocent" hints at Selina's behavior, in surprising Clive into deflowering her.

Although no one in Selina's family is directly involved with World War II, the war still affects their family, primarily for the better. Selina's mother is able to get a well-paying job in a defense factory so that she does not have to scrub people's floors anymore. When the war ends, the people celebrating in the streets create an ironic, poignant backdrop as Selina's family discovers that her father has died, probably from suicide.

## Language and Meaning

Most of the text in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* is written in straightforward prose, with richly metaphorical descriptions. The name suggests Selina's attempt to find her own identity, when so many people see her as either a generic girl with dark skin, while her mother sees her as just another step to gaining the ultimate respectability, symbolized by owning a brownstone house. Just as the brownstone houses look almost identical, so Selina must find her own individuality and reject the persona that others have created for her.

Although Selina, who was born in America, speaks English as her first language, most of the West Indian immigrants speak Bajan, which is a Caribbean dialect which combines British English with West African idioms. The characters use the term "Bajan" to refer not just to the language, but also to the type of person who exemplifies life in Barbados. Mr. Braithwaite, when convincing Silla to dance with him at the wedding, says to her, "In the midst of all this, we's in death. So le'we drink our little rum and have our little spree till it come" (Book 3, *The War*, chap. 6, p. 145). This suggestion not only demonstrates the colorful dialect of Bajan, but also sums up a popular Bajan mindset, that today should be enjoyed, despite of, and because of, the hardships in life. The exact opposite of this laid-back, unassuming way of talking is seen in the stilted language that Mrs. Benton, a white woman, uses when speaking with Selina. Mrs. Benton actually thinks she is complimenting Selina when she says, "You . . . well, dear . . . you don't even act colored. I mean, you speak so well and have such poise" (Book 4, chap. 9, p. 288). She is commenting on how Selina, who has been born and educated in New York, does not have an accent, and does not quite fit Mrs. Benton's narrow stereotype for a black person.

## Structure

*Brown Girl, Brownstones* is divided into four books, which each present a different development in the overall story, and in Selina. Book 1, "A Long Day and a Long Night," introduces Selina and her family in chapter one, and introduces several other main characters in chapter two. It also presents the first major conflict of the book, which is that Selina's father has inherited land, which his wife wants him to sell. Chapter three continues developing the relationships between the characters. The second book,



"Pastorale," is a short interlude, with no chapters, which follows Selina and Beryl to the park, where Selina learns some eye-opening ideas about sex and growing up. The title "Pastorale" implies a gentle, safe interlude, and suggests that Selina and Beryl are like sheep which need to be protected.

Book 3, "The War," begins with the advent of World War II in 1939. This title refers not just to the war in Europe, but also to the war raging in Selina's own home, between her parents. Their material greed escalates until, together, they have destroyed most of their financial resources, with very little to show for it. On the day the war ends, the war that is Silla and Deighton's marriage also ends, because Deighton jumps ship and drowns. This section has ten chapters, which follow Selina's development as a teenager, as well as the back-and-forth animosity and affection of her parents' turbulent marriage.

Book 4 is called "Selina," and this title reflects how Selina has become her own person by taking control of her life and refusing to be the person others want her to be. In the first three chapters, Selina has to come back to life after mourning her father's death for a year, but the people around her help her to understand that it is all right to move on. In chapters four through seven, Selina tries to be open-minded and attends the Association, only to realize that she does not belong there, and instead, she decides to become sexually active, and begins a secret affair with Clive. Chapters eight through ten show how Selina falls into the same selfish modes of deception practiced by her mother, but in chapter eleven, she realizes that she needs to let go of the faults she has inherited from her mother, and she leaves everything behind, to make her own way in the world as an adult.



## Quotes

"Think of your Catholic sinning, his exquisite guilt on his way to the confessional—only to rush from there to sin again and suffer."

Book 4, Selina, chap. 6, p. 245

"All the time I was down on his floor I was saying to myself: "Lord, lemme do better than this. Lemme rise!""

Book 4, Selina, chap. 5, p. 224

"A wide bar of light from the hall made a path for them and the rich colors of their laughter painted the darkness."

Book 4, Selina, chap. 3, p. 210

"Perhaps everyone had his tomb: the mother hunched over the table all night might be locked in hers, her father, stretched on the cot, might have been sealed his his, just as she was shut within the lonely region of herself."

Book 4, Selina, chap. 2, p. 204

"Beryl's life was planned, ordered, while her was as vague and formless as mist."

Book 4, Selina, chap. 1, p. 196

"If there had been stigmata which she could have had incised on her hands or forehead to mark her loss, she would have had them done, and not cared what the world said."

Book 4, Selina, chap. 1, p. 190

"The weight of their successes weakened her and she fumbled blindly for the overturned chair and sat down with her head bowed and the lines of her face down-curved in a bitter design."

Book 3, The War, chap. 9, p. 174

"At both ends of the bridal table a pair of lovebirds carved out of ice kissed and slowly melted."

Book 3, The War, chap. 6, p. 138

"But really he was watching the slow dissolution of his dream: the white house with Grecian columns and stained-glass bathroom windows crumbling before it was even built, the flamboyant tree withering before it could take root."

Book 3, The War, chap. 4, p. 115

"Only the mother's own formidable force could match that of the machines; only the mother could remain indifferent to the brutal noise."

Book 3, The War, chap. 3, p. 100

"And when Adolf Hitler pass along  
I would dash a lash in his . . .  
as' no question.'



From a Barbadian Folk Song"  
Book 3, The War, chap. 1, p. 65

"It seemed to Selina that her father carried those gay days in his irresponsible smile, while the mother's formidable aspect was the culmination of all that she had suffered."  
Book 1, A Long Day and a Long Night, chap. 3, p. 46

"Their resignation was frightening. It was as if, even before they had begun to live, they were defeated by life and knew it."  
Book 1, A Long Day and a Long Night, Chap. 3, p. 41



## Topics for Discussion

How would this book be different if it were set in modern times?

What are some of the lessons that Selina learns as she is growing up? From whom does she learn these lessons?

In what ways are Ina and Selina like their parents? In what ways are they different?

How does World War II affect the characters in the book? How would the story be different if the U.S.A. had not gotten involved in the war?

What are the different attitudes between the immigrants, and their children who are born in the U.S.A.? What causes these differences?

What things do Selina and Ina do that are considered rebellious? Do you think they should be allowed to do these things?

In what ways is Selina's relationship with Clive similar to her parents' marriage? How does Selina consciously make her relationship different?

Selina and Silla both resort to underhanded tactics to get what they want. Which acts do you think are justified? Why?

How does dancing transform Selina's life?

Why is it so important to many of the characters to buy a house? What does this mean to them? Do the houses make them happy?